

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHORBAIRT TUAITHE AGUS POBAIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 6 Samhain 2019

Wednesday, 6 November 2019

The Joint Committee met at 3 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Peter Burke,	Paudie Coffey,
Michael Collins,	John Dolan.
Michael Fitzmaurice,	
Niamh Smyth,	
Brian Stanley.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputies Danny Healy-Rae and Mattie McGrath.

Teachta / Deputy Joe Carey sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Grant Aid to Rural Towns and Villages: Discussion

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Deputy Eamon Ó Cuív. I will read some formal notices for the information of our witnesses.

I draw the witnesses' attention to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

I welcome Mr. Laurence Lord and Ms Miriam Delaney from the Free Market project; Mr. Denis McCarthy and Mr. Ollie Wilkinson from Cappoquin Community Development; Ms Annmarie McHugh and Mr. Gareth McMahon from Castleblayney Regeneration Committee; and Mr. Christy Leyden, Mr. Mike Foley and Mr. Gerry McMahon from Clarecastle Community Development. It is proposed that any opening statements, submissions or other documents supplied by witnesses or other bodies relating to the topic of this meeting be published on the committee website. Is that agreed? Agreed.

This is the first of two meetings on the topic of supporting rural towns and villages. Next week, we will hear from the Department of Rural and Community Development and six local authorities on progress so far with the pilot scheme. Today, we will hear from Free Market, which has interesting ideas on the character, history and future development of market towns in Ireland. We will also hear from three community development regeneration committees on their experience so far and their hopes for the future. The organisations are from Castleblayney, Cappoquin and Clarecastle. I invite the representatives of Free Market to make an opening statement.

Mr. Laurence Lord: On behalf of Free Market, I thank the Chairman and members for inviting us to address the committee. I am joined by my colleague, Miriam Delaney. We will briefly describe who we are, make observations on funding for towns and outline our recommendations for actions. Free Market is a group of six architects and designers: Jo Anne Butler, Jeffrey Bolhuis, Miriam Delaney, Tara Kennedy, Orla Murphy and me. We were selected by Culture Ireland, the Arts Council and the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to represent Ireland at the 2018 Venice architecture biennale. The subject of our exhibition, entitled Free Market, was Irish market towns. We described their character, history and future potential to an international design audience. Our exhibition focused on small towns and especially the market places that are typically central to Irish towns. We sought to highlight the diminishing quality of public spaces in most towns as vehicular transport and car parking have taken priority over all other considerations. The public space and marketplaces of our towns do not exist in isolation; they are a symptom and a product of the overall health and vitality of towns. In light of this our project addressed issues of vacancy, car parking, demographic change, housing and re-use. The research 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 four towns, Castleblayney in County Monaghan, Macroom in County Cork, Mountmellick in 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. We have engaged in debates, lectures, workshops and festivals all over Ireland. We have met volunteer community groups, business people, schoolchildren, 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 and 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. The diagram on screen is a snapshot of the dynamic funding system for towns. It illustrates the number of agencies involved in distributing and awarding funding.

Ms Miriam Delaney: Our research and ongoing conversations have led us to make several observations to the committee. First, Irish towns are unique. In media and public debate, a dichotomy is often drawn between urban and rural, with the significance of towns overlooked. Towns are not countryside nor are they mini-cities. One Irish person in three lives in a town. We tend to think of towns as centres of tourism but we need to shift the focus to make towns great places to live.

The second observation relates to all Departments and none. Control and decision making about towns fall between too many Departments and Government agencies. Navigating the extraordinary raft of policy that affects towns is a complex and frustrating business. Within these layers of policy there is insufficient holistic focus on towns. This is true of funding too. The various agencies and Departments do not always seem to be 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, with place-specific funding oversight often missing.

Our third observation is that the funding related to towns is often delivered annually on a case-by-case basis. This means significant time and energy is spent tendering small projects rather than coherently putting bigger strategy into action. Community groups face an uphill struggle to navigate complex funding applications to achieve any tangible success. Many community groups lack the skills to know which fund is appropriate for which project or how to successfully apply for funding.

Our fourth observation relates to the 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. This 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 rejuvenation. Moreover, there is no central point to access advice, research, case study projects or best practice models.

The fifth point relates to the lack of long-term vision. The annual funding cycles of local authorities and Departments make meaningful engagement with local communities 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.

There is a 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. Some towns suffer because of weak links with local authority employees and the 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.

There is a 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 and the Climate Action Plan 2019, will only happen in towns if we address vacancy. Adaptive reuse of empty buildings must be actively supported by local authorities. A vacant building tax is also needed to incentivise sale or reuse 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 buildings must be located within town centres. Local authorities and 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 and prioritising use of existing town centres at every opportunity. New schools and primary healthcare centres must be located in town centres but we see over and over again where this has not happened. We cannot expect others in the private sector to have confidence in towns, unless it is first demonstrated with consistency and ambition by those who are responsible for towns.

Building on our observations, we submit the following six proposals for consideration by this committee. Proposal 1 is for a multi-level town partnership. We need a cross-Departmental partnership with dedicated multi-annual funding to deliver a co-ordinated town-centre-first strategy to towns, that links Departments, local authorities, local communities and stakeholders. Scotland's towns partnership model could easily be translated to Ireland.

Proposal 2 is for an academic centre of research. The proposed town partnership group should be aligned to an academic centre of excellence, potentially in the newly emerging trans-disciplinary UCD centre for Irish towns. 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 is for 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 reuse of vacant buildings to build confidence that change is possible. For this we need implementation of clear and accessible, streamlined funding for exemplars.

Proposal 4 is 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 sees the need for the appointment of town architects. Architects are trained to provide a vision of what could be but very few towns have a long-term spatial vision. Local authority town architects would be responsible for good design, would provide funding guidance, and would implement public space design and adaptive re-use projects. Towns that are highlighted as successes, such as Westport and Clonakilty, have benefited from committed local authority architects. Some local authorities in Ireland still have no architects. The role of architects and urban designers in town rejuvenation is not sufficiently acknowledged and supported.

Proposal 6 is for each town to 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.

To summarise, we see the need for two levels of reform to maximise the benefit of public funding for towns and villages. The issue is not a lack of funding, but we see a clear need for more cohesion and clarity at national level between Departments and funding agencies, supported by a dedicated academic town research group. Stronger supports for participatory decision-making at grassroots level are also 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. Towns need structural reorganisation of funding for greater efficiency but they also, more critically, need a vision of what they could be.

We thank the committee for inviting us to speak. We welcome any questions on our observations and recommendations.

Chairman: I recognise the presence of Mr. Ollie Wilkinson, a former Member of the Dáil. He is welcome back.

Mr. Denis McCarthy: We wish to acknowledge and thank the committee for its invitation to us to attend and present today and we are delighted to share our journey and experiences with members. We are here to represent two voluntary community companies, namely, Cappoquin Community Development Company, CCDC, and Cappoquin Regeneration Company, CRC. These are sister companies with the same directors and members. I am joined here by Mr. Ollie Wilkinson, a former Deputy and now a director of both companies. I am a former county manager of Waterford County Council and I am currently director and secretary of both companies. In the Public Gallery is Mr. Tom Feerick, director, and Mr. John McGrath, treasurer of both companies.

I will begin with some details about Cappoquin. Cappoquin is a small town in west Waterford situated on the N72 Dungarvan to Killarney route. It is located 15 km from Dungarvan and 5 km from Lismore. It is almost equidistant from Cork and Waterford cities, at 65 km. It is situated on the River Blackwater where the river takes a 90° bend to the sea at Youghal. The population of Cappoquin town at the time of the 2016 census was 699. The corresponding population of the Cappoquin electoral district was 1,253. This represents a 15% decline in population since 1981, with seven of the eight censuses thereafter recording population declines. Indeed, the current population is at its lowest ever level since the initial formal census in 1821. This persistent pattern of depopulation has led to the inclusion of Cappoquin and its environs as part of the Government CLÁR initiative.

CCDC was established in 1993 so it is now in existence for 26 years. The company has had many achievements since its formation and I attach a copy of these achievements set out in a chronological order. I refer members to four of these achievements: the purchase of six acres for housing development; the construction of six small industrial units for start-up businesses; the construction of Cappoquin community centre at a cost of €3.2 million; and the hosting of the all-island pride of place awards ceremony attended by President McAleese in 2008. The company has four directors, an overall management committee and four sub-committees, namely, finance, childcare, hall and gym, and projects. The management committee of the company meets on the second Wednesday of every month with reports being provided by each of the sub-committees. An annual report with professionally audited accounts is formally presented at each AGM of the company. The turnover of the company in 2018 was €497,000.

In March 2018, CCDC carried out a survey of premises in the town of Cappoquin. This indicated that of the total of 505 premises in the town 86 were vacant, which is 17%, and of these 37 were derelict, at 7%. Most of the derelict premises were concentrated in the centre of the town. We also noted that there were 108 properties for rent in the town which, at 21%, is rather high and does not encourage permanent residents and impacts very much on our ambition to build a sustainable community. Many of the derelict properties in the town centre were formerly commercial with residential over the shop. We further noted that of the 80 or so properties on Main Street, all of which would have had an element of residential at some stage, only three contain families with schoolgoing children and this will be reduced to one in the next school year. In addition, of the 16 active businesses which remain on the Main Street, only five have active residential occupancy over the business. As a result of this survey and primarily due to the level of dereliction and vacancy, particularly in the centre of the town, Cappoquin Community Development Company, CCDC, decided to establish an additional company to deal directly with this issue. Thus, the Cappoquin Regeneration Company, CRC, was established in March of this year.

The Cappoquin Regeneration Company is now actively working with Waterford City and County Council, WCCC, Waterford Leader Partnership, WLP, and the Tomar Trust to address the issue of vacancy and dereliction in Cappoquin town. The Tomar Trust has assisted us both financially and otherwise in the past. In this matter of vacancy and dereliction, the Tomar Trust has given the company a letter of commitment to provide €1 for every €3 provided by Government up to an amount of €1 million. With this generous commitment in mind we have to make every effort to secure Government funding for our regeneration project.

In conjunction with Waterford City and County Council a report on vacancy and dereliction in Cappoquin was commissioned and prepared by a specialist consultancy, Prescience Business and Management Development Limited in May 2018. This report has listed the following factors as the catalysts for vacancy and dereliction in the town: lack of scale and critical mass; loss of function and purpose; continued population decline; loss of social and economic infrastructure; age dependent population; greater choice of suitable employment elsewhere; poor standard of housing stock; property ownership in too few hands; uneconomic cost of refurbishment of buildings; the bypassing by traffic on the N72 of the urban core of the town; the creation by the N72 of a dislocation between the town centre and the River Blackwater, as well as between the town centre and the social, recreational and sporting activities hosted within the community centre; and no convenient parking available in the urban core.

The principal recommendations of the report on vacancy and dereliction are the redevelopment of strategic sites in the town centre as its symbolic heart and focal point which would

maximise visibility for the regeneration initiative, generate interest, appeal and impact which in turn could be expected to radiate to more peripheral locations in the town; improvement of the public realm in the town and providing easy access to the River Blackwater from the town centre with the provision of suitable car parking to support existing and new businesses; and the creation of tourism related projects which would have as a primary objective the capacity to increase visitor dwell-time and expenditure in Cappoquin.

The report concludes that with ambition and attention Cappoquin could reinvent itself in a similar fashion to the towns in the west of Ireland but to do so would require a catalyst of a significant financial investment from public and private funds. As I have said already we have at present the commitment of private funds.

An initial application under the Rural Regeneration Development Fund, RRDF, made by WCCC on behalf of Cappoquin town was unfortunately unsuccessful. It is proposed that when the next call for category 2 funding is announced, a further application will be made.

To date this company has purchased two vacant and derelict properties in the town centre which are visible on the slide before the committee at the moment, has contracts prepared for a third, and is actively pursuing four further properties. Our initial aim is to clean up these properties - make them secure, repair and paint externally - to at least make them presentable. Further refurbishment will have to await the decision of grant applications under the RRDF programme. We have also recently partnered with WLP and five other community groups in adjoining towns in making a joint application for RRDF funding as part of a Blackwater Valley Economic Development Zone. This involves complete refurbishment and conversion to modern offices of one of the vacant and derelict buildings which our company has purchased. This application is currently awaiting a decision.

As the committee is aware, Cappoquin is one of six towns selected by the Government to take part in a pilot programme to develop innovative proposals to encourage more centre-of-town living. Some €100,000 has been provided to WCCC for this purpose. To date a firm of architectural consultants has been appointed to come up with innovative solutions for Cappoquin. We have had several meetings with the consultants and architects from WCCC, draft proposals have been prepared, and these are being finalised at present for submission to Government.

Cappoquin is also subject to an application made by WCCC under the village and urban renewal programme. I am pleased to say that we have received word in the past number of days that this application has been successful and €100,000 has been provided to Waterford County Council for this purpose.

Cappoquin has been in decline for many years. This has been precipitated by the closure of the Cappoquin bacon and chicken factories with a loss of more than 200 jobs. The decline has been further exacerbated by the closure of Mount Melleray and Mercy Convent second level schools, the decline in the congregation of the Cistercian monks in Mount Melleray, the closure of the Convent of Mercy and the closure of the Bank of Ireland and AIB bank branches.

One additional factor which has come out of the survey and discussions is that of suitable local employment. It is clearly evident that the vast majority of students who receive second level education locally and in turn go on to third level education do not return to the locality. The simple reason for this is that there is no suitable local employment for college graduates available in the locality. Thus, we have a very significant brain drain which will also create a very much age-dependent population in the long term. This can only be addressed by the pro-

vision of suitable employment in the Cappoquin area. We do have an IDA industrial park just outside the town with a number of good employers but none of these provide employment for third level graduates.

This factor has to be addressed in conjunction with addressing the vacancy and dereliction and residential issues. It is outside our capacity to address the employment issue and we seek the committee's support in also addressing this matter.

As a community company in existence for 26 years and with many achievements to date, the committee can see that we are fully committed to our mission statements. We are now embarking on a very ambitious programme of regeneration in the town. Thus, we ask the committee to provide support by whatever means it can to assist us in achieving our goals. We thank the committee for taking the time to listen to our story and we will answer any questions which it may have and will forward additional details if necessary.

Chairman: I thank Mr. McCarthy and now call Castleblayney Regeneration Committee. I understand that slides need to be uploaded, so we will have a short pause for a few minutes.

Everybody is doing very well with fantastic, strong presentations. This is a very important, key issue for our committee as we try to address rural decline through redevelopment of communities, and their cores. We need to hear the ideas from those at the coalface in order to provide solutions. I call Ms Annmarie McHugh now to speak.

Ms Annmarie McHugh: I am afraid that I am probably going to spoil it because I am going off script.

I am born and bred in Castleblayney, so much so that I married the next-door neighbour. I do not think one can get much more born and bred than that.

Our plan today is to go down through a number of different areas. Like Cappoquin, we will give a brief background to the Castleblayney regeneration town team and we will show the funding that the Government has very kindly given us. We feel we have used it very well and we would like to show the committee some pictures as to how we did that. We have also identified a number of opportunities, some of which concur with what Mr. McCarthy, Ms Delaney and Mr. Lord have said, and I promise we did not look at their material at all. The similarities there are quite interesting and we have also identified a number of threats.

For those of the committee who know Castleblayney, they may know it from from the Big Tom country music connection, Paddy Cole and a number of different musical people. It is situated very much in the centre, between Belfast and Dublin. From Whitehall to Castleblayney is a one hour journey; we are 69 miles from Dublin and 65 miles from Belfast. There are 3,607 residents in the town and, interestingly for us, we have more than the national average of non-nationals. This creates a very strong cultural dynamic in our town. The picture I have chosen here shows the market house, which has been alluded to earlier, and also shows how close we are to Lough Muckno. We are very blessed in Castleblayney that when one drives down through Main Street, if one turns right, one is presented with a beautiful lake and castle. We know how lucky we are in that respect but unfortunately that is also where some of our dereliction is.

In the far distance, if any members of the committee are golfers, we have the award-winning Conra Wood Golf and Country Club.

In May 2015, a public meeting was called in the town which approximately 70 people attended. From that in June 2015, Castleblayney Regeneration Committee was formed. As the committee can see, it is made up of a number of different groups: Tidy Towns, traders, heritage, tourism, Monaghan County Council - two or three members of which would sit in on our meetings every single month and with whom we have a very strong relationship - education, business, a newly formed sustainable energy group and Castleblayney Enterprise Centre. Our group is in existence for approximately four years now.

I will show the committee now some of the ways in which we have spent some of the money that has come from the Department, which is greatly appreciated by us. We really wanted to put Castleblayney on the map. One of the first things we did was to put up a big sign with Castleblayney on it showing all of the fishing and different heritage aspects of the town, so that one cannot pass us by. We were also involved in the beautiful street initiative. We got some of the home owners to let us work with the different architects to come up with different colours for the buildings, and vintage colours are used. As members can see, it has really enhanced the outlook of the street. Our purpose in Castleblayney is to continue to make it a great place to live and to visit. It is a thriving town and we want to keep it like that. All our plans are aimed towards making it a town that is vibrant and full of energy.

In 2016, we were lucky to get €38,000, and with that money we tidied up the town by dealing with some things that were unsightly and we created some nice signs on the way into the town. On the five or six entrance roads to the town, there are double-sided signs telling people different things about the town that they may not know.

We got money for the public realm and economic plan as well. We have a full plan for what we could do and we are project ready. This is one way we spent money really well. We got a fantastic and very lifelike statue of Big Tom McBride. To his right is his son, who is the spitting image of him as members can see, and we also had President Higgins in our town and he unveiled that statue on 22 September. The picture on the right will show members all the people who came to the town. Some 4,000 people came that weekend, and the benefit from an economic point of view, which is where I know the committee wants us to be spending the money, because it wants it to drive all the towns economically, is that we used that to make sure all the bed and breakfast accommodation in the local area was completely full for that weekend. We built on from that, and on a further weekend we had another festival and we had the same impact. The money the Government is giving us is having a positive economic effect so we want to keep it coming. We had a great weekend that weekend.

We were also fortunate to get in excess of €2 million from a rural regeneration development fund for an enterprise centre. The benefit to the town is that it is not a quarter of a mile outside the town but is slap bang in the middle of the town in a derelict waste space that was contributing nothing to the town. Again, that will create jobs and energy and it will make the town look better.

By ourselves, we came up with the music wall of fame to keep people in the town so they do not just come and visit the Big Tom statue but also visit other places. This is a little walk and we also have a musical walk around the town. We have people like Anna McGoldrick and Paddy Cole etc., who all contributed to the musical heritage of our town. A month or two ago, we unveiled a wall mural to Paddy Cole. As members can see, Paddy is standing in front of it and it is a massive tribute to a great man from Castleblayney. It is directly opposite his house and it embraced an area of town that needed-----

Senator Paudie Coffey: The Castleblayney Regeneration Committee is playing to the town's strengths. Fair play.

Ms Annmarie McHugh: Then we were looking at the opportunities. To follow up on what Ms Delaney was saying, we are fortunate to be one of the six pilot towns and we also feel we need somebody on the ground who is a regeneration expert because, as a committee, we do not have the time or, more importantly, the knowledge to be able to find out about all the different supports available. I would also follow on from what Ms Delaney said about the graph of all the different initiatives that are available. How do we put all that together? If there was a regeneration expert based in the town who people could go and talk to and get to know who could see all the issues, that would be a good way of spending significant money, and while it would not have to be significant money, it would make a good impact.

We also feel more accessible funding could be made available. Again, we know there are many derelict buildings in all of our towns, unfortunately. We know the Government cannot fix them all, but in most towns there are probably one or two that would make a significant impact if they were repurposed. One of ours is Market House. In the picture I showed of it, it had a roof, but on 8 February that roof collapsed. That caused a lot of annoyance in the town because it cost a lot of money to make that building safe. We need some sort of funding and help to get that building back into use in the town. It is not like it is outside the town where people do not notice it. People drive past it every single day. Hope Castle is the other one. On the name, the Hope Diamond comes from Castleblayney and Castleblayney came from Hope Castle. That is another derelict building that has been sitting there idle for six or seven years. It could provide accommodation as it used to be a hotel. That would revive the town in a significant way.

Again, I concur with what Mr. Lord and Ms Delaney said in that we feel the Government should make the town centre the agenda. Everyone should think about how we can make the town centre more vibrant. For example, if the HSE is planning a new building, it should go in the town centre and not outside the town. Initiatives such as VAT refunds for any buildings that are happening in the town would be helpful. We have done a good bit of work with Age Friendly Ireland. We had a meeting with it yesterday and we have met senior people from the organisation. Everyone knows the population is living longer, but the good news is we are living more healthily. There are initiatives and best practice models throughout the country, but we would like to see that as an opportunity in Castleblayney to try to encourage all the people who want to sell their houses out the country to move into town once they have the services available to them.

The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, has many different streams of funding but it is not always the easiest to access. Again, this regeneration expert would encapsulate a lot of that information, particularly when it comes to a period house.

I concur with what Mr. McCarthy said about the importance of high-quality and highly paid jobs to the location. Please God we are all fortunate to have children who get to go to college, but we want them to come back and they want to come back. If there were high-quality jobs in rural areas, that would allow them to come back.

I refer to the threats. If we do nothing, the towns will go into disrepair. People will not want to live in a town that does not look right, does not feel right and does not have a good vibe about it. If the older generation is to live there, that would be fantastic, but we need younger people to come back to grow the community, to get the GAA clubs going, to get the schools going and all that kind of stuff. We need people to come back into the towns. In our town, there are two

sites that were used for accommodation and are now derelict. We could be doing everything in the area of tourism, but if we do not have places for people to stay, they will not come back to the town.

There is a strong possibility that the town realm and economic plan that exists could remain on the shelf because of funding restrictions or if funding for projects does not get to us or to other towns.

Last but not least, I refer to the burnout of volunteers. There is a group of us working at this, and while we have not been doing it for as long as Mr. McCarthy, we have been doing it for about five years. We enjoy what we do and everybody is passionate about the town, as we all are about our towns, but we need a bit of help. If there is anything the committee can do to help us, we would greatly appreciate it.

I thank members for their time and for listening today. I am happy to take any questions they have.

Chairman: Thanks very much. That was a good presentation. It gives me a great honour to call our next witnesses, Mr. Christy Leyden and Mr. Michael Foley of Clarecastle Community Development. I am a proud and privileged Clarecastle man and I am also chairman of this committee. I work closely with Mr. Leyden and Mr. Foley as well Mr. Gerry McMahon, who is in the Gallery. I call them to make their presentation.

Mr. Christy Leyden: On behalf of Clarecastle Community Development and its associated community groups, I thank the Chairman and members of the Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development for the invitation to meet them to discuss the co-ordination of grant aid to support rural towns and villages. I am chairman of Clarecastle Tidy Towns. I am accompanied today by Michael Foley, director of community development, and Gerry McMahon, who is in the Gallery.

Clarecastle is a village located just south of Ennis in County Clare. The village takes its name from a fortress settlement established at a strategic fording point on a small island in the River Fergus by the Normans way back in the middle of the 13th century. The castle that was built on the island was known as Caisleán Clár Átha an Dá Choradh, which means the castle at the bridge fording the two weirs. The reference to clár, or board in English, is significant as the county of Clare takes its name from this settlement. The current population of the greater Clarecastle area is just under 3,000 people. A look at the population statistics in the recent census will show the population has grown by almost 18% since 2002 and the trend is continuing with a major housing development still ongoing. The greater Clarecastle area is an ideal location to live in due to its facilities, natural amenities and close proximity to Ennis, Shannon and Limerick. It is also less than an hour away from Galway city.

I refer to community development. Like most towns and villages in the country, the downturn in the economy has had a negative effect on the village. It also coincided with the building of the Ennis and Clarecastle bypass. While the bypass removed thousands of cars from passing through the village every day, it left a dilapidated village in its wake as most of the heavy trucks used to build the bypass would carry their loads through the streets of the village. The new service roads to the bypass were targeted as dumping and fly-tipping sites, with the result that the both the village streetscape with derelict buildings and closed shops and the approach roads were in a poor state.

Clarecastle Tidy Towns was reformed in 2009, mainly to address the widespread dumping and fly-tipping sites. This generated a positive response from the community, with a sense of pride restored, and a new energy created to address the overall appearance of Clarecastle. There was a particular emphasis on addressing the streetscape, given the badly damaged footpaths and derelict buildings, and also on addressing specific needs such as the lack of a playground and other facilities. While the Tidy Towns team was happy to proceed with addressing the infrastructure challenges, it was obvious that a more comprehensive view of the needs of the community needed to be taken on board.

This led to the setting up of the Clarecastle community development CLG, CCDL, in 2012. After widespread consultation and a public meeting, a list of projects were identified, with streetscape enhancement, a new playground, a community garden, a village market, a village hub, the Gathering in 2013, signage and identity, and the promotion of local heritage and amenities among the priorities. I am glad to report to the committee there has been significant progress on most of the projects thus far. Once the projects were identified and subgroups established, the sourcing of funding became a priority and we quickly learned there is no such thing as a one-stop shop for funding. CCDL acted as co-ordinator, working with local authorities and various State agencies to source funding. It drafted a development plan that identified three pillars, namely, social, economic and physical, with Tidy Towns responsible for the physical pillar, which is our current primary focus for grant aid. Nevertheless, it is worth sharing the major achievements of the economic pillar in getting tourism and heritage studies and reports completed, and in positioning Clarecastle as an official destination stop on the Shannon Estuary Way. The setting-up of a successful men's shed was a major achievement under the social pillar.

The topic of the meeting is the co-ordination of grant aid to support rural towns and villages. There is a need for a co-ordinated and integrated approach among Departments, local authorities and State agencies to promote a sustainable model for rural towns and villages. In our presentation, we have tried to demonstrate what targeted aid can do to a village such as Clarecastle, based on our drafted community plan. Clarecastle will soon start working on a new community development plan that will now have to take into account the announced closure in March 2020 of a major employer - Roche Ireland - which has provided excellent employment in the area since 1974. Clarecastle is in an ideal position to pilot a co-ordinated and integrated approach to promote a sustainable village model. To avail of grant aid, the important starting point is having a project that falls in line with national and county strategic planning. In our streetscape rejuvenation project, we were fortunate to have the assistance of the Clare County Council rural development team to progress a streetscape plan that was drafted by the council in 2007 and was part of the Ennis and Environs Local Area Plan 2008-2014, but funding was not available to progress the project at the time. The plan was an ideal fit for the town and village renewal scheme. Without this funding stream, the plan would never have been realised. We have applied four times to the scheme for funding to progress the Clarecastle streetscape rejuvenation project. Perhaps, with the benefit of hindsight, a flag could have been raised in the initial town and village renewal scheme application in 2016 to indicate that significant funding was required to complete the streetscape project. A staged funding arrangement could have been agreed at the time, based on original applications, with agreed annual funding until project completion. This would have given clarity, for instance, to local business and residents as to staged phases of street disruption and so on. We fully understand, however, the limitations of funding in any given year and Clarecastle was happy to reapply each year to continue the project. We mention this only in the context of addressing the core topic of the meeting, namely, co-ordination.

I ask Mr. Foley to conclude our contribution with the section on volunteerism.

Mr. Michael Foley: We, too, have a Powerpoint presentation with a number of slides giving pictorial and graphic representation to much of what Mr. Leyden stated, which will be published on our website. Before we speak about volunteering, we take the opportunity to acknowledge the tremendous initiative by Clare County Council. Its new CEO introduced a rural development directorate as part of the senior management team, which is having a significant impact from which we benefit.

I will continue on the theme Ms McHugh addressed, namely, burnout. I emphasise the importance of building volunteering capacity in our communities and relating this capacity to community enhancements through the drawdown of funding. There is an absolute need to attract volunteers within our communities who have the necessary vision, skill sets and experience to grow our communities sustainably. This will require the individuals to engage with support structures that are more co-ordinated to ensure volunteer enthusiasm and retention, and a more innovative approach to administering the various funding streams, reducing workloads and time, and, where possible, adopting a medium-term timeline, with phased grant commitments for larger-scale projects.

The model of the funding drawdown process in the towns and villages renewal and outdoor recreation schemes is one that should be replicated elsewhere as it greatly reduces the voluntary administration input, aside from the initial project planning and funding application. We encourage a bold initiative in respect of a limited number of pilot sustainable projects, where agencies would combine in a focused and meaningful way to deliver specific projects in partnership with the communities involved. There may be national development plans, rural development strategies, enlightened local authorities and agencies, funding streams, and effective LEADER grant programmes and benefits, but unless there are capacities within volunteering community development organisations that can build and grow communities from within, perhaps in a smarter way than currently happens, we will always be restricted in our capability and what we can do.

I thank the Chairman and members for giving us the opportunity to attend and present at the meeting. We are happy to take any questions they may have.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Foley and Mr. Leyden, and call Senator Coffey.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I welcome all our guests. Many of us share the passion and ambition to improve the fabric and vibrancy of towns and villages, irrespective of where they are. The remit of the committee, as the Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development, is to identify opportunities and challenges. All our guests were invited to the meeting in order that we could hear, from their experience on the ground, how best policymakers, legislators and Departments can assist them, and people like them, throughout Ireland in delivering for communities. I have made many notes and listened carefully to the various contributions. The contribution on the free market was useful for us in planning the strategic development of towns and villages. I could argue local authorities, planning institutes and others have a remit but, in the light of what our guests have stated, it seems there is a disconnect and the system does not work in the way it should, on which I have a few questions.

All the Cs are before us today, namely, Castleblayney, Clarecastle and Cappoquin. I compliment the volunteers on the work they do on the ground. I, along with colleagues, appreciate they are the motivators and drivers of development in their towns and villages, and such people

are to be found throughout Ireland. We selected people from various regions to get a feel for the challenges that exist. I welcome my former colleagues from Waterford, including the former Deputy, Mr. Wilkinson, with whom I served on Waterford County Council for many years and whom I welcome back to the House, and the former county manager, Mr. McCarthy. I take the opportunity to acknowledge Mr. McCarthy's role in chairing the mica committee, of which people might not be aware. He led the committee to examine the mica challenges in Donegal and Mayo, and I compliment him in that regard because he did the public a service. They continue to serve the public, as does everyone at the meeting, after their roles ended, whether in public representation or, like Mr. McCarthy and Mr. Wilkinson, in public service. I also acknowledge Mr. Tom Feerick and Mr. John McGrath from Cappoquin, who are sitting the Public Gallery.

We all know that funding streams are available. Our guests have mentioned the town and village renewal scheme, CLÁR, RED grants, LEADER programmes and local improvement schemes. Funding is available for local libraries, which the committee examines, and there is the elderly alert scheme. Much funding is available but I have heard better strategy and co-ordination are needed to manage efficiently how the funding will have an impact on the ground. I can understand the frustration of some local bodies when they make unsuccessful applications year after year, and I accept that has been the case in some of the examples we have heard during the meeting. Our guests will know as well as I that we have to continue knocking on the door to secure the funding. What I and this committee are interested in is knowing what the barriers are to accessing funding. I have heard about volunteers and burnout. Bureaucracy sometimes can get in the way. Who do we go to in the Department and which Department and which local authority do we go to? There is so much out there, and I understand that volunteers do not have the time to go around in circles, essentially trying to access support. We have noted what has been said and it has been recorded. We will have further meetings to learn from that and how we can better engage with the various Departments, local authorities and funding bodies to reach better and more impactful funding.

When one digs down and looks at the towns being spoken about, every town has a reason for being in existence. That is the first thing. I come from Portlaw, which some of the witnesses will know well. Portlaw is a former mill town and was built in the 1840s by a Quaker family, the Malcolmsons. It was studied by academics, and I would say some of the witnesses are very familiar with it. These people were well ahead of their time, because they had a strategy, plans, infrastructure and everything else. Funnily enough, it is sustaining itself into modern times because they put in that basic infrastructure. They put in wide streets, a marketplace, educational institutions, gas lighting and water infrastructure long before local authorities were doing that. It is sustaining itself and the houses are still lived in. There is a very low vacancy rate in the town. It is down to proper planning, a strategy and the things Free Market said. I am just mentioning that in passing.

We have been through three recessions in Portlaw. There were three industries there, including a mill and a tannery. There was the recession of 2007 to 2011 onwards. We have survived. I think the reason we have survived is because we are close enough to Waterford city, Dungarvan and Clonmel. It is a dormitory or satellite town. Families are still living there and travelling to their work. I want to recognise that.

As for other towns, we have market towns, harbour towns and coastal towns and villages. They were built at a time when country markets were strong, people lived in the core of the towns and people came into them to do business. Fortunately or unfortunately, as society progresses, the reasons of use change.

I looked at that lovely building in the middle of Castleblayney. It was a market building where the market was. Now it is derelict and vacant, which is unacceptable. I guess there are conservation issues there and other challenges. To achieve real sustainability and a future for our towns we must find new uses for places. I can give another example from my own town, and this is not a boast, rather it is luck. It is an argument that we, as a committee, and the witnesses can make. Woodlock House in Portlaw, a former Malcolmson house, was a nursing home. It was closed about ten years ago, and we were all worried about what would happen to it. The company that owned it went into receivership, but luckily a company called Agora took over the building. Agora is an American firm that wanted an old building. It did not want to be in a city. It wanted to be in a smaller town and it wanted an older building, purely because the owner of the business wanted that. There are 300 jobs operating out of that building in a small town. It flies in the face of IDA policy and all that rest of it. One will often hear that we have to go to the cities. These are graduate jobs and these are people dealing with international finance, web publishing and all of that type of thing.

There is a future for our towns and villages and we cannot give up hope, but I think we need to develop a strategy, going back to Free Market, to identify the priority areas in the town. Going back to what the witnesses said, we need to find an identified use that we can all buy into, which is coming from the grassroots and bought into by the local authority with funding streams to follow. Until we do that, we will not grasp the nettle because funds are spread too thinly. We should have a hierarchy of priorities within our towns and counties and even within the towns themselves on what we should develop first. I think Cappoquin is doing that and I think Clarecastle is doing it as well.

I would be interested to hear more detail on how we can achieve buy-in from stakeholders, communities, local authorities and Government to support what we want to achieve. Some people mentioned rural regeneration and there was an announcement today. I know it is positive for some and it is disappointing for others. Some people are disappointed that they did not receive funding, but there will be opportunities in the future. We need to co-ordinate how that funding is used in order to have a better impact in rural areas, and I think that is the key.

Remote working hubs seem to be working successfully. We, as a committee, have visited some of those around Leitrim and Sligo. Maybe that could be an opportunity for the marketplace in Castleblayney. I know Cappoquin is planning some as well. I think Clarecastle is looking at something around data centres as is Ennis.

The witnesses are doing the groundwork, but it is about how we can bring it to the next level. It is about how we, as a committee, can encapsulate the witnesses' experience on the ground, their frustrations and their challenges and maybe bring forward a report. We can bring in the officials and the Minister in the Department of Rural and Community Development, tell them what we have heard and tell them about the challenges for the people on the ground and what they recommend on how best the funds provided by whatever Government are used to address dereliction, vacancy, sustainability of use and to bring people back to live into our towns and villages.

I would like to know where the pilot programmes Castleblayney and Cappoquin were involved in are at. Are they achieving what they set out to achieve? Are they a bit slow? What is the next step in relation to those? Ministers and their officials come in here to go through the Estimates and we see money allocated for town renewal schemes, pilot schemes and this, that and the other, but I would like to hear from the witnesses how effective those funds are. Are there barriers to spending them once one is allocated or granted the funds?

I take the opportunity to recognise Tomar Trust, which was mentioned by those from Cappoquin. It is a philanthropic organisation contributing private funds seeking matching funds from local authorities and the Department. Tom Cavanagh is the man behind that. I publicly recognise what Tom Cavanagh is doing to develop communities and put his money where his mouth is. I know there is frustration that funds are not being matched sufficiently by Government. We need to look at community-led projects supported by private investment, rather than always take the lead from the councils. I say that with the greatest respect to the former county manager who is here, but the councils are not always right. They might have their own priorities and agendas, whereas people are living in the communities and they know what the priorities are. We need to address strategy properly, and maybe Free Market might talk about that. If councils have one agenda and communities have a different one, how can we bring them together to agree on a strategy that is beneficial for all? Sometimes that disconnect is there. The council wants to do one thing, and communities want to do a different thing. That is where some of the problems arise.

I thank the witnesses for their contributions. We will not get to every single word that was said, but they have all been noted and we will use them in compiling our strategy for improving how public engagement happens. I thank everyone for their work on behalf of their communities because that is one thing we all share. Public representatives, community activists and volunteers share a passion for our communities. We want to better the communities that we live in and to leave a better legacy for the people who are coming after us. I have a concern around volunteerism as well. Maybe younger people are busy with families or whatever, and I do not want to be ageist here, but it is becoming more difficult to recruit volunteers who have the witnesses' passion. I would have a concern that if we lose that aspect of community development, our towns could be even worse off.

Those are the general views that I have. If the witnesses could pick up on some of the points, or if they want to elaborate on them, I would appreciate it.

Chairman: I thank Senator Coffey. There are a number of questions there, particularly for Free Market and the people from Castleblayney and Cappoquin on the pilot scheme and how it is going and on town centre regeneration. I call Mr. McMahon from Castleblayney.

Mr. Gareth McMahon: I appreciate Senator Coffey's concern about the link between the county council and the community. I am an employee of Monaghan County Council. Maybe the fact that I am here alongside Ms McHugh shows that we are working, and we certainly try to work, very closely with local communities. We try to take the ideas from the local community, and then it is our role as council officials to try to source the funding to deliver the projects in association with the local groups. We try to do that and there are challenges with that.

Senator Paudie Coffey: Is it working well in Mr. McMahon's experience?

Mr. Gareth McMahon: I would share the view that the multi-annual approach to funding can create sort of a stop-start to large value projects that perhaps cannot be funded through one individual grant application or allocation. It is welcome and beneficial for the rural or urban regeneration fund to fund larger projects throughout their lifespan. The maximum funding for town and village renewal projects which may be €100,000, or €200,000 in exceptional cases, is restrictive in the types of projects we can deliver. There is the challenge of the public procurement procedure to be followed and the length of time it takes to be able to draw down funding.

Senator Paudie Coffey: Mr. McMahon mentioned funding for projects and the draw down

of funding. I understand the bureaucracy and the frustration that can be experienced with the various stages involved. Before getting to that point, I note one of the representatives of Free Market said that sometimes there is inadequate communication and there is a need for a bigger and better strategies. We know that councils have regional plans, county development plans and local area plans. If the academics who are the architects are saying there is a need for better communication, are those plans working as well as they should be? I am not being critical of councils. They are doing their best but there is a disconnect somewhere that we need to address before we get to the funding stage.

Mr. Gareth McMahon: I would agree council resources are spread thinly. It is possibly my job to be the liaison person with the community but that is only one of 100 different briefs that will drop on to my desk in any given week or month.

Senator Paudie Coffey: Okay.

Mr. Gareth McMahon: One of the representatives of Free Market raised the idea of having a dedicated town architect or town renewal expert, who would have a broad brief in terms of the findings of the pilot scheme. Senator Coffey asked a question about the pilot scheme. The challenge is how we can get people to live in properties that were once units with a small shop on the ground floor and a residential dwelling upstairs. Most of those properties are unoccupied. The challenge is how to get them occupied given the current planning and design restrictions and accessibility issues. How can we get people to occupy the upstairs unit of a property with a retail outlet operating on the ground floor? Those problems can be resolved but it may be beyond the ability of the average small shop owner who has such a property and does not know what to do with it. It would be helpful to have access to the level of expertise that was mentioned and for such an expert to carry some of load for that small shop owner. Two or three property holders on a block on a street could be brought together and they might be advised that individually they cannot do anything but together they could probably do something. Shaffrey Architects did some work on our behalf on our pilot project on a one-off basis. They identified a small number of clusters of properties adjacent to each other which, combined, could be worth developing into an space suitable for occupation or for some other use but individually there may be no merit in developing them. That is the type of expertise Mr. Laurence Lord reflected on which perhaps should be available permanently. That is the type of expertise needed, whether it be architectural-led or planning-led, to be managed by a person who has the time to do that and where such a job is not seen as one more job to add to a long list of other jobs the person has to do.

Chairman: I will bring in one of the representatives of Cappoquin Community Development to be followed by one of the representatives of Free Market.

Mr. Denis McCarthy: The pilot scheme was announced 12 months ago and the idea behind it was to bring forward innovative proposals for residents to return to town centres. Waterford County Council got funding of €100,000 and it appointed consultant architects for that purpose for Cappoquin. We have had several meetings with the consultants and with architects from Waterford City and County Council to date. They came up with innovative proposals to modernise a block of properties in the centre of the town to provide modern living in energy efficient houses. It is a unique proposal in the sense they are proposing demolishing them but refitting them to a great extent. They see that as being possible to replicate in several other towns.

At the start of the exercise we recognised that in small towns of our size, the other towns close by are slightly larger, the amount of commercial development in the future will be very

limited. Increasingly small towns tend to have one shop, one pharmacy and a few pubs and properties could become residential units. That is the reason we concentrated on residential development rather than moving in a small way towards commercial development, even though the pilot was for residential development only. In conjunction with that report, they have also developed a town plan with proposals for redeveloping the town. That plan will be available at the end of November, which is the date we have for its submission to Government. I am not saying this as a former member of the council but we have had great co-operation from the council for the pilot scheme. We met the council architects on several occasions in addition to the consultants who were appointed.

Senator Coffey mentioned the Agora model, which should be considered for towns. I said in my presentation that it is all good and well to provide residential units but where will we get people to occupy them if we do not have an industry nearby? Tallow, Lismore and Cappoquin are located quite close together in west Waterford but all the people in those towns are leaving to go to Cork or Waterford for jobs. They will live there also because it will not be economic for them to commute. Unless we attract an industry to those three towns in the area, we will probably be at a strong disadvantage in developing the residential side. As Senator Coffey said the Agora example was not IDA driven, rather it was very much locally driven but it should be IDA and Government driven to provide industry. The pilot scheme would be a failure if we do not attract an industry locally. It is essential that happens.

On the RDF application process, the Senator mentioned some people are disappointed and others are happy with the outcome. That is natural. We were very disappointed because we prepared the application in consultation with Waterford County Council. We hired architects to prepare a plan and also a professional writer. It cost us €25,000 to prepare the application but at the end of the day it is €25,000 lost to us. We as a group cannot afford to lose that amount of money to prepare a second application. We are pursuing Waterford County Council to do the application on our behalf the next time. It gives members an idea of the effort we put into preparing it but at the end of the day we got nothing out of it. I know everybody cannot get money but for us it was a severe disappointment, having spent that amount of money on the application. I believe I have covered all the points.

Chairman: Would Ms Miriam Delaney or Mr. Laurence Lord like to respond to the issues raised?

Ms Miriam Delaney: Hearing the direct experience of the other three parties is useful in illustrating some of the points we made about having a strategy. Some of the work and struggles in terms of the bigger issues resonate with us. One aspect we noted, and it relates to the Senator's comment about gaps in communications between community groups and local authorities, is the private commissioning of reports, feasibility studies and pilot studies, on which in many cases town volunteer groups are taking direct action. They are spending quite a significant amount of money and raising funds to do this. We see that as a problem because the reports commissioned by private consultants are not consistent. Their data and the methods they use to gather the data are not consistent. We get patchy analysis from town after town and they are not collated in any meaningful way across a country, region or the country. What we get are people doing the same work in many places without having the opportunity to learn from other places. A shared resource would be useful where one could access high level advice, best practice and particularly best international practice. We are aware that we are one of many countries thinking about towns, particularly small towns. One example of which we are aware, and with which we have a good connection, is the Scottish town partnership, which is a very

good initiative. The Scottish Government has brought in direct actions to affect town centres. We do not believe that knowledge is common and how could it be known among community groups? Lack of knowledge of these international examples is a big downfall. People then start from scratch again. They try to innovate. There is another pilot project or study, but not enough is learned from it. A town partnership would collate these projects and ensure that data are consistent and that consistent methods are applied. In looking at the issue of vacancy, the first step is to get consistent vacancy data for every town in Ireland. That is something Scotland's Towns Partnership has done quite effectively. It carried out a town audit. Every town is mapped in the context of vacancy levels, commuting data, and population. These are census statistics so much of it is already available. We then need to start looking at the commonalities between towns. What towns can be grouped together as facing the same issues? What towns have the same demographics? We do not have a central point of support for that in Ireland. That is a straightforward first step. After that, anything we talk about in respect of strategy must be grounded in a common methodology and a common level of analysis, rather than everybody trying to reinvent the wheel from scratch, which is a problem at present.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: May I interject with a quick question? I see exactly where Ms Delaney is coming from, but how long does she see the work to map these issues out nationwide taking?

Ms Miriam Delaney: We are talking about the Scottish example. The town centre action plan was commissioned by the Scottish Government in 2012. The Scottish Government formed Scotland's Towns Partnership the following year. It took a year to form that body. Two years later, the principle of putting town centres first was brought in. This obliges Departments and local authorities to consider town centre properties first. Vacant town centre properties therefore become the first port of call for new health centres, schools, Department or local authority buildings.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: They are forced to consider these properties first.

Senator Paudie Coffey: They are obliged to follow that principle.

Ms Miriam Delaney: They are obliged to follow it. That is a really good strong model.

Senator Paudie Coffey: Where is the headquarters of Scotland's Towns Partnership? Where does it sit in officialdom?

Ms Miriam Delaney: It is a cross-party, cross-disciplinary group. It is not under the responsibility of any one Minister or Department. This is also critical because we see very good work being done by the Department of Rural and Community Development through programmes such as the town and village renewal scheme but that this can sometimes be contradicted by, for example, a new secondary school being built two miles outside the town. Despite all the effort put into public realm design and vacancies in town centres, another Department can do something which counters this work. That lack of cross-departmental cohesion is a big problem.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I get Ms Delaney's point.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: To drill down further, is Ms Delaney saying that this body should be a Department in itself? I believe that is the point Senator Coffey was coming towards.

Ms Miriam Delaney: No, it is not a Department but a cross-departmental Government body. There is buy-in across political parties, and also across Departments, for the proposition

that we need to prioritise town cores.

Senator Paudie Coffey: Under the Scottish model, can towns and villages interact with that agency for direction and help?

Ms Miriam Delaney: Yes, absolutely.

Senator Paudie Coffey: The partnership, in turn, interacts with the local authority.

Ms Miriam Delaney: It is a point of support for local community groups.

Senator Paudie Coffey: Instead of going around with pilot projects, there is a shared resource with expertise----

Ms Miriam Delaney: It is a shared resource, yes.

Senator Paudie Coffey: ----that any town or village prioritised by a local authority----

Ms Miriam Delaney: No.

Mr. Laurence Lord: It takes interdepartmental competition out of the equation. The diagram at which I am looking, which I assume is also on Members' screens, shows nine sources of potential funding. A partnership allows this to be managed in a much more strategic way.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I do not want to delay the meeting any further. Could our guests send us that model for further detailed consideration?

Ms Miriam Delaney: Yes.

Chairman: To finish this off, I will bring in our guests from Clarecastle. I will then bring in Deputy Stanley and Senator Dolan together.

Mr. Christy Leyden: I am really impressed by what Free Market is saying. It makes so much sense. To return to our own situation, we were extremely lucky. Coincidentally, the Chair of this committee, Deputy Carey, in his time as a councillor in Clare, brought in a plan in Clarecastle for 2007, just before the bypass was developed. We have stuck with that plan. I have specifically mentioned that we need to stick with strategic plans at all times rather than going in different directions. Several different groups have given us different options. We have tried to keep to strategic plans. Free Market's ideas make a great deal of sense to those of us on the ground. We are doing stuff from the ground up without a full knowledge of what is happening elsewhere. We would love to see areas with similar demographics coming together with standard data collected. That would make a lot of sense to those of us involved in this area.

An architect designed our plan in 2007. I am 100% behind Ms Delaney and Mr. Lord; we need architects for creative design in order to start building sustainable villages. We need to start using sites differently. I agree with what Senator Coffey is saying in that regard. We can reuse stuff. There is a massive gap in Clarecastle as a result of the loss of Roche. We are talking about hubs, and I am glad they were mentioned. We may not get another Roche but a Roche somewhere else may allow the people of Clarecastle to work remotely. We have six or seven brown buildings - I believe that is the classification - in the middle of our small village. That is unbelievable. They are all derelict. All their doors have been closed for ten or 15 years. We must go back to town centres, as our colleagues from Free Market mentioned. They made so much sense to those of who try to do community planning from the ground up. I am delighted

that we are present to listen to that information.

Senator John Dolan: I have enjoyed listening to the presentations, even though some of it has related to the challenges we face and so on. I come from the town of Tipperary. It is a small town which has been ruined, primarily by the N24. There is massively heavy traffic. One could nearly walk across the tops of the trucks parked along the main street. I say this to point out that I have a sense of the issues.

I have a particular interest in with disabilities. In some of the contributions, I heard phrases such as “public realm”, “cross-departmental” - I will come back to Scotland’s Towns Partnership - and “participatory design”. We then moved on from that. The public realm is key to putting heart back into towns and villages. We need a public space which allows equal access for everybody. That is vital. I ask the contributors to make some comments on the following point. There is a particular challenge for people with disabilities. A lot of work has been done over recent decades in terms of their emancipation and not keeping them away from everything. We do not need a big building outside of town. The very fact that someone cannot live in a house that is accessible is the very core of the issue, but there is also a problem if they cannot thread from that house into a community. There are many elements to this. Some of it relates to traffic, some to planning, and some to services and so on. As the witnesses will be aware, the Dáil decided unanimously almost two years ago to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Ireland will now implement that convention. The impact of this on our discussion today could be summed up in two words, namely, “public realm”.

Our guests from Free Market also mentioned cross-departmental measures. The local authority is at the epicentre of pulling in many other public bodies. It does not replicate the work of An Garda or the educational authorities. Local authorities are in pole position to pull all of these bodies into conversations with regard to public planning and so on. The work of our guests and their organisations also comes into play. In what ways can they ensure that conversation features in the work they do? That is a particular question and challenge.

Ms McHugh made a point on burnout. I was in a place called Newcastle, which is on the Tipperary-Waterford boundary, on Sunday. I am still reeling from the positive work of that community. It identified a number of young people with severe disabilities and decided to do something. I admit it needs the HSE and service providers to play ball. The hall was full before the meeting started. We could look down from the stage and see people outside the door. Those of us involved in politics or voluntary organisations do not see that too often. I give that example to set up my question. It has struck me over the years that some towns and communities have a certain inherent quality while others are like dead ducks. We could throw buckets of money at them but it might not be spent well. Do we need to look at a community’s sense of get up and go, its capacity to get on with things?

Senator Coffey mentioned the pressures on young families. There are not enough hours in the day, especially between Monday and Friday. At weekends, these parents are carting kids to all sorts of things left, right and centre. Do some communities need pre-development work to build their capacity? The groups represented here have initiatives up and running. I do not think this concern applies to them. I am talking about pre-development work that gives people the self-confidence and the skills to do things for themselves. Local authorities and other bodies would then have fertile ground for their work.

Finally I note that the Scottish Government has a different system to ours. Our system of government is interdepartmental. The Scottish structure is closer to being more cohesive. Are

the Scots in a better position to do things more cohesively? I think they are. Do we have a problem? Are we waiting for Basil Chubb's advice from 1968 about 15 different Governments in Ireland? Are we wasting time? Do we need to fix our structures in order to put real oomph into this and many other issues?

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome Free Market, Cappoquin Community Development, the Castleblayney Regeneration Committee and Clarecastle Community Development. It has been interesting to hear their insights. I have a couple of questions. A lot has already been said about these issues. A couple of things stand out. The picture our guests paint does not surprise me. They referred to funding from various sources, volunteers' time being spent on various pieces of administration and some of it not having a meaningful effect. Speaking as a former town and county councillor, it strikes me that many of these issues are handled in other countries by strong local government. In Ireland, local government is the nominal concern of part of one Department. I am not saying this to have a go. Functional democracy needs a Department with no remit other than that relating to local government. It must be totally committed to that without being dragged in any other direction. We need strong local authorities to address many of these issues.

Local government has been weakened. I refer to the creation of municipal districts. In principle, the party I represent supports that kind of municipal structure but the districts should be more focused around the nuclei of larger towns with smaller towns feeding into them. This would give local government more of a presence. The witnesses from Free Market mentioned Mountmellick. There is now one county councillor in that area, where previously there was a town council. Granted, the town council did not have enough power and there were other problems. One could say that the abolition of the rates system in 1977 destroyed local government, but we are where we are. A lot of these questions can be answered through the reinstatement of strong local government. When the legislation passed in 2014, a door was still open to the then Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Phil Hogan, to strengthen local authorities. As well as politicians, groups like those represented here must talk about that. It comes through very obviously. I would like Free Market's views on that.

I find the different streams of funding difficult to follow. Many other areas were not mentioned today. Many new bodies have been set up under local authorities, including local area groups and planning inspectors. One almost has to keep a list in one's pocket to remember what each one stands for. That is another problem. I would like our guests' views on that.

Turning to Cappoquin Community Development, Mr. McCarthy mentioned that too much property is concentrated in too few hands. Should compulsory purchase orders, CPOs, be used more? Empty buildings are found in every town. My home town is Mountrath. About two years ago, I did a quick survey while walking around and counted 44 empty buildings, including houses and shops, in three small streets at the core of the town. That is very typical. One can see it driving through country towns. Mountmellick is the same. Since Free Market last visited in the town, the post office, the last remaining outpost of the State in the middle of Mountmellick, has moved to the shopping centre on the outskirts. We raised this with the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton, at the time but everyone seems to be powerless. I argued in the Dáil that the Minister is the sole shareholder on behalf of the public. We own An Post. It does not belong to Tesco, Lidl or anyone else, it is ours. We own the post office and the network. We need a more hands-on approach to that. Should CPOs be used more to address the concentration of property in too few hands?

My other question is for Mr. McCarthy and Mr. Wilson from Cappoquin Community Devel-

opment and it relates to derelict sites. We have to be realistic about a lot of towns and villages. One of our guests said that there will not be that much commercial activity. We have an inside-out approach to planning. Houses are built all over the place, while the centres of towns and villages are hollowed out. There are old premises in the centres of towns, including several in Mountmellick, Mountrath, Rathdowney, etc. If those buildings were hit with the back bucket of a JCB they would come tumbling down. They are hundreds of years old. Ridiculously, some of them are listed structures. I am all for the conservation of what is worth conserving, but these structures cannot be conserved. Nobody will ever live in them again. Retrofitting them would cost twice as much as constructing a new building. Moreover, a lot of them have an acre of back garden behind them. Walking along the backs of streets in those towns one can see that those houses have an acre of space behind them in traditional long walled gardens. Surely we should get people living there again. We should build on those gardens. The Senator beside me mentioned disabilities. People with disabilities are living in bungalows five miles down the road. We need to put people in accessible places. People with families and children could live on those new streets and walk to the local school.

My final question is for the Castleblayney Regeneration Committee. The witnesses from Clarecastle Community Development may also wish to comment. I welcome any funding for the redevelopment of towns and villages. I am not here to criticise the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Ring. He has done a lot of work on this. It is a big priority for him. For the first time, the Government has set up a Department with responsibility for rural and community development. Those are welcome developments. I acknowledge that. I am not having a go; I am on the other side of the House and I am concerned with how we can do a bit better. Disbursing €30,000 here, €40,000 there and €70,000 somewhere 20 miles down the road has very little impact. A person who wants to convert his or her attic is looking at €40,000, and if he or she wants to add a kitchen or build a 100 yd. footpath, the money is gone. Realistically, should we not be looking more at an overall plan in terms of stronger local government so that we could put in new short streets with ten townhouses or bungalows in some of those towns so that instead of everywhere getting a few bob and one for everybody in the audience, a couple of hundred thousand euro could be provided to ensure that the overall streetscape could be enhanced? We could be a bit more directive with the likes of the HSE and An Post and tell them it is Government policy and that the HSE must try to put a new health centre in the town centre. Government and local government could be stronger and a bit more hands-on.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. I had the pleasure of meeting Free Market in Castleblayney. I am really blown away with the research the witnesses have presented here today because that is the foundation of something really great for this island, not just one town. If we were to implement some of the recommendations made by the witnesses, it would have significant potential. Perhaps this is the place where this starts and we can see something like this rolled out. I think it would be well worth our while looking at the Scottish model. I agree with everything said by Ms Delaney. We see right across the board here volunteers in towns exhausted and exasperated from going after funding and doing the same thing over and over again whereas we could have an organisation like the one mentioned by the witnesses. What Castleblayney is doing is working wonderfully. People in a town in Cork, Waterford or somewhere else that has the same profile and population could replicate what Castleblayney has done instead of exhausting themselves trying to start from scratch. We now have the research saying that this will work. I really appreciate what the witnesses have done.

I thank everybody from Cappoquin Community Development, Clarecastle Community Development and, obviously, Castleblayney Regeneration Committee for coming here today. I

do not think the Chairman will mind if I congratulate Ms Annmarie McHugh, the chairperson of Castleblayney Regeneration Committee, and Mr. Gareth McMahon. Without being biased, I can say that they do phenomenal work in a Border town that has every sort of challenge set against it. There is no doubt that towns across the Border region have an extra set of challenges that do not necessarily present in other towns. They do phenomenal work. It involves embracing all the community groups in the town to ensure they are involved in the work being done.

Senator Dolan spoke about access, disability and working with various community groups. I know this is something Ms McHugh is very mindful of. I have seen it on the ground in Castleblayney, on which she should be complimented. I also compliment Monaghan County Council. Senator Coffey spoke about local authorities. Local authorities can come in for significant criticism for various things, but I know from my work as a Deputy in the area that Monaghan County Council is very responsive and is out there on the ground working with community groups like that of Ms McHugh, which is to be applauded because it does not happen everywhere.

I concur with everything said here today. I am very relieved because it is something I have passionately believed for the past ten years. In a former life, I ran an independent arts base in Bailieborough in County Cavan. I will never forget how, ten years ago, an application came into Cavan County Council for a branch of Tesco. I watched a lot of editions of "Dispatches" and did many studies in the National College of Art and Design, NCAD. The real difficulty for me was the impact of these huge corporate buildings, although I do not know if one could call them buildings because they should be called sheds in many cases, on small towns like Bailieborough. It is so important.

The crux of maintaining and growing the integrity of main streets is planning. It involves making sure that whoever is coming to town, be it a school, a branch of Tesco or SuperValu, and our SuperValu is on the main street, the main street is key. All of them should be forced to have an open door for footfall so that pedestrians can access the building on a main street. We are talking about people being pushed out to greenfield sites because parking attendants are going around and there is insufficient parking in the first place. How would any main street survive that? This compromises the integrity of our main streets, which has been happening for the past ten or 15 years.

I also think that real consideration should be given to the type of buildings that are put into these places. We have seen massive companies coming into town, and because they have a certain name, they are allowed to do what they want and can literally build a shed with one glass facade. They can build a monstrosity of a building that sucks the life out of every other business on the main street. All of the other business people must consider their shopfronts, facades, whether a building is listed, what it is beside, and that the same rules should apply to everybody. We must be serious about pulling all these buildings into the core of our towns. Instead of these corporate companies coming along and forcing their model on local authorities, local authorities should take command of this and tell the companies what they expect for their towns and that companies will abide by their rules rather than local authorities following the companies' rules. I feel very passionate about that, so much so that I curated an exhibition many moons ago on the theme of place, displace and replace because I really felt that these greenfield sites were displacing businesses and people and taking people off our main streets.

What the witnesses have presented here today is certainly the reverse of all that. Much of what they have said is to be very much welcomed. I take my hat off to the witnesses for everything they do because it involves volunteerism and takes significant energy and enthusiasm and they need the support of their local authorities. We will do anything we can do as a committee

to support that work. There is great value in what the witnesses have presented here today to feed into the work people in our towns throughout the country are trying to do. We will not be found wanting in doing our bit at an Oireachtas committee level.

Chairman: This has been a very important meeting and we will produce a report on it. Another meeting on this topic is scheduled next week that will be attended by an assistant secretary at the Department of Rural and Community Development. It involves the various pilot towns, which will all be represented. This is a core issue for us, which is why we got the co-operation of all the members. There were proposals that the various different towns and villages would be represented here. It is so important that we get to hear from those at the coalface - communities and volunteers. This is exactly what we have heard today. We have heard from people who are committed to and have pride in their communities. If they sit back, their communities are lost.

I was very taken with the contribution of Free Market. We need a strategy that can be rolled out across the State so that every community will be lifted in a co-ordinated fashion. That is why this committee needs to build on this work. It is a key issue. I would be familiar with Tipperary town, which would have got a lot of negative publicity in the past about dereliction and abandoned shop units. We are trying to eke out solutions and solutions are being put forward that need to be embraced.

There is a significant amount of money across the board. Over the past two years, County Clare has received €9.5 million from the rural regeneration and development fund, €900,000 of which has gone to the community of Tulla. I congratulate it on that. It is about co-ordination. I compliment the contingent from Clarecastle. They are truly inspirational people who work in the community and put in hours of voluntary effort for its benefit. I was a founder member of Clarecastle Community Development Group. It makes me immensely proud to see the progress that has been made. Its success is replicated in Castleblayney and Cappoquin. I see the money they have drawn down, the strategic plans they have put in place, and the challenges that exist. They are almost the same. We need to learn from each other, which is exactly what Ms Delaney said.

There needs to be co-ordination. Based on the Scottish experience, we need a recommendation across Departments. Perhaps this has been touched on already. We must get away from the silo mentality and broaden our thinking because we need a cross-departmental effort to address the decline in our main streets. I want to know how to get that ball rolling and get that conversation started because it is a key issue for communities.

The burnout of volunteers is also a major issue. It comes back to the same people time and again. We need to get that buy-in. There is a volunteer centre in County Clare. Maybe we need to fund such centres even more to get more volunteers and benefit the community. It would be money well spent. Mr. Foley is part of that movement in Clare, so I ask him to address that matter. Many of the issues have been gone over already so I will not labour any longer. I again thank the witnesses. Senator Dolan, Deputy Stanley, Deputy Smyth, and I have all asked questions. Deputy Fitzmaurice has just joined us. I do not know whether he is following this on the monitor.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Apologies.

Chairman: A vote has been called in the Dáil. We will have to suspend the meeting. Does Deputy Fitzmaurice want to come in?

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I apologise. I was discussing amendments at the finance committee meeting. I have looked at some of the paperwork already and it is interesting to see how some communities work. There are incentives there. Voluntary work is being done by amazing people around the country. Handing on the baton is another part of it. We need to get more young people involved, because no one lives forever. We have been at another committee nearby fighting for rural areas and incentives. Perhaps in some towns with vacant buildings, the stamp duty could be reduced for whoever opened the doors. There are many ways to go about it. As the Chairman said, we need a whole-of-government approach. I have said time and again, not only about small towns and villages but also rural farming communities, that we need to make sure that everything is rural-proofed and that it does not kick something when we make decisions here in Dublin.

I will not delay any further. I know there is a vote on. I am sorry I could not get into this discussion in detail, but we had a meeting with the Minister about the Cuisle centre in Donamon, which is under threat of closing, and Deputy Mattie McGrath and I also had to attend the committee meeting on the Finance Bill. My apologies.

Chairman: I propose that we suspend the meeting because we cannot be in two places at once when there is a vote in the Chamber. We are waiting for the witnesses to come back. I am sorry, but this is outside our control.

Sitting suspended at 4.54 p.m and resumed at 5.18 p.m.

Chairman: I thank the witnesses for their patience. A number of questions have been asked by Deputies Stanley and Smyth, Senator Dolan and me, which I will summarise. I ask Free Market to answer the questions about the Scottish experience. Senator Dolan and I both asked questions about community and volunteerism, which Mr. Foley might answer. Deputy Stanley asked about strong local government, which Free Market mentioned in its contribution. We also discussed the various streams of funding. Deputy Stanley asked about the use of compulsory purchase orders in town centres to bring buildings back to life. Deputy Smyth put a number of questions to the witnesses individually. My questions focused on volunteerism and the need for a co-ordinated approach. I ask the representatives from Free Market to respond.

Ms Miriam Delaney: I will first respond to the Chairman's question about the Scottish model of cross-departmental agreement and cohesion. It ties into Deputy Stanley's point about local authorities in that the two have to go hand in hand. It should not be a matter of making a choice between one level and another. Stronger local governance and stronger supports for active participation with local governance are what is needed. A person who decides to renovate a vacant town centre property or wants to bring it back into use needs access to a one-stop shop within the local authority such that he or she can meet a planning officer, heritage officer and the person responsible for dealing with fire regulations and agree on how work will be done on the house or how they will deal with it. The private landowner should not have sole responsibility for commissioning reports, hiring conservation architects and going through all of the checklists. Agreement should be reached directly with the local authority.

Our tour of four towns very much brought to the fore that shop owners in small towns who are competing against out-of-town developments are losing the battle not just in terms of scale but also because they have overheads such as insurance and may be in a listed building that they have an onus to maintain. An out-of-town development does not experience those pressures. When they are in direct competition, it is an impossible battle for the small shop owner to win. They need more support from local authorities, to include financial support and more direct

support of the renovation or maintenance of properties. Such support is lacking because local authorities are stretched and trying to do a lot of work in towns.

A direct focus on vacancy is missing. It is the number one issue. We agree that public consultation on design, retail and other such matters are important, but if vacancy is allowed to take hold such that there is a doughnut effect whereby the town centre is vacant and all development is on the periphery, the town will be beyond saving. Vacancy is the number one issue that needs to be tackled. Vacancy levels have risen from 12% to 20% and, in some towns, more than 40%. Once a critical point is reached, the town will not survive. We need to focus on putting money, expertise and cross-departmental support into vacancy.

Chairman: That is a strong point. A survey was carried out in Cappoquin relating to vacancies. Part of the pilot programme also focused on that issue.

Mr. Denis McCarthy: It did. The vacancy level in the town is 17%, which is significant, given the population and the number of properties. In a larger town, 17% might not be as much, but in our situation 86 properties out of 505 are vacant.

Senator Dolan referred to disabilities. We became involved with a local fishing club and purchased a Wheelyboat which allows disabled people to go onto the River Blackwater to fish.

Volunteerism is not a difficulty for us. I am not blowing our trumpet in that regard. Our organisation formed in 1993 with 16 people, ten of whom are still involved. There are 14 people currently involved in total. We probably had no choice other than to stay involved because we spent €3.2 million on a community centre and had to repay the loan. It is almost paid off, with only €80,000 outstanding. We raised money through various means. The community centre houses community childcare, the education and training board, a gymnasium, a sports hall, a theatre and a commercial kitchen. We must stay with it. None of us will be leaving the organisation at this stage. Burnout is an issue for many people because they do not get the support or moneys they require, which makes them despondent.

Senator Dolan raised an issue regarding training for new groups. I do not know whether it is still available, but in 1993 we did two years of community education training modules that were run by the Waterford Leader Partnership. I do not know whether they are still available for new entrants. FÁS may have been involved in running them.

Deputy Stanley raised several issues regarding property being concentrated in too few hands in our situation. There is a historical element as there are significant ground issues in Cappoquin. Much of the property is still owned by landlords. That creates a problem as 108 of the 505 properties in the town are rental properties. That leads to a revolving door situation whereby people come to the town, get a rental property, get on the housing ladder, get a council house and then more people come in. There are too many rental properties. I know that people must get on the housing ladder and get housing, but the number of rental properties in the town militates against having permanent residents. I do not know how to address that issue. Some of the rental properties are vacant and derelict. We are purchasing a share of those properties.

Reference was made to the compulsory purchase order, CPO, process. Waterford County Council has begun a CPO process in respect of four properties in Cappoquin. It has been successful in respect of two of the properties and the other two will go to oral hearings in the next couple of weeks. In addition, the council has issued derelict site notices. We need that process to continue. We know there is an issue in terms of conservation.

Deputy Stanley referred to retrofitting costs. We have found that the cost of retrofitting is a multiple of ten of the purchase cost of the building. That means the value of the building when completed is less than the cost of its renovation. Without significant grant assistance, such renovation is impossible. There is no way around that. That is where assistance must come in.

Deputy Niamh Smyth raised the issue of the centre of a town being key. In Dungarvan, the town council took the view that it would not allow development outside the ring road in the town. That has maintained all development inside the ring road and that has been very beneficial for Dungarvan. The greenway has also been a big assistance to the town. It probably rivals Kinsale as a food destination and town shopping area and that is solely because of the decision taken. The town council no longer exists. Deputy Stanley raised the possibility of the re-establishment of town councils. It is not for us to deal with that. It is an issue for politicians.

Chairman: I have visited the greenway in Waterford. It is spectacular and a great success. On volunteerism-----

Senator Paudie Coffey: Briefly, Dungarvan is a perfect example of what can be done. Concerns have been raised regarding shed-type development on the outskirts of towns. One often hears criticism of local authorities, but Mr. McCarthy is correct that Waterford County Council and Dungarvan Town Council insisted that the Dunnes Stores shopping centre be established on the former Waterford Foods site in the heart of the town. That has brought footfall into the town centre, and other shops and businesses have benefited as a result. It is great that a town in Waterford took those steps. It shows what proper planning and strategy does in terms of bringing footfall into a town. We should learn from it.

Chairman: It ties into the comments of the Free Market representatives regarding co-ordination of Departments and planning.

Senator Paudie Coffey: There was pressure while those decisions were being made. Tesco and other companies were trying to set up outside the ring road and there was significant pressure on the town council, but it held its view and insisted on development in the town centre, and that has benefited the town.

Mr. Gareth McMahon: Monaghan County Council has a similar planning approach whereby it tries to protect the core of towns. It has been quite successful in that regard but came up against significant pressure from corporate entities and received political representations that certain developments would bring jobs or economic activity and should be supported, even though they would be outside the town core and would not support the town core policy. The county council probably arrived at the correct solution 99% of the time and that was to force new developments to come into the town centre. On some occasions, that has worked very well. The challenge lies in finding the correct brownfield site for developing the type of retail outlet that businesses wish to locate on the outskirts of a town. It works very well if the town centre has scope to be developed in that regard. Significant pressure is placed on councils.

Chairman: In Ennis, County Clare, one of the first tranches of the urban regeneration fund was handed down to Parnell Street. It involved an investment of €5 million in an upgrade of that main thoroughfare. All the bow ways were going to be done up. It was about retaining the character of Ennis and that architectural feature and trying to bolster commercial activity on the street, which had many vacant properties. It was a very good project. In fairness to Clare County Council, it has a rural directorate and Mr. Foley and Ms Leyden made reference to that. They co-ordinate all the different voluntary groups in Clare and help them out in making appli-

cations for rural regeneration, town and village renewal, outdoor recreational grant applications or CLÁR grants. The directorate does a huge amount of work, as does the Clare local development company. It works hand in hand with the various different organisations on the ground. We are bearing fruit in the county. The banner county is leading the way, as it always tends to do, in trying to draw down funding.

I want to bring in Mr. Foley on the question of volunteerism and continue on that particular topic.

Mr. Michael Foley: I concur with everything the Chairman said about the banner county. Volunteerism is certainly an issue for us in Clarecastle. Looking at our own community development company, as directors, we have been there for almost nine or ten years at this stage. We are a group of well-intentioned conservative men. We do not have our gender balance or inclusivity right and we are not at all reflective of our community in this century. Those are internal issues for us to address but they are important because we certainly will not meet the governance test of the charities regulator's governance code that is coming down the tracks next year, for compliance in 2021. That is going to be an issue for quite a number of community and voluntary organisations.

That leads me nicely to the role of volunteer centres. Volunteer Ireland is the national agency for developing volunteerism. There are over 30 affiliated volunteer centres around the country at this time, the most recent addition is in Waterford and is now progressing from a volunteer information centre to an actual volunteer centre. The primary work of these centres is to build databases of organisations and organisational contacts and also a database of volunteerism, people who have some time on their hands, and to effectively act as an honest broker. It is a tremendous concept and works very well. Centres in different counties have different challenges but, on balance, it is something that works very well.

There is not a huge element of Exchequer funding going in there, although it is increasing. Those centres have tremendous capability within them and provide volunteer management training, volunteer management programmes and advisory services for organisations about how to attract, retain and reward volunteers. Much of it comes down to that.

The volunteer centre in Ennis works closely with the local authority, the Clare local development company that the Chairman mentioned and the public participation network, PPN, and the local community development committee, LCDC, in terms of making itself relevant and building capacities within different community and voluntary organisations. Deputy Fitzmaurice mentioned the whole-of-government approach to what we are trying to do here. There is also a whole-of-Department approach that has to be looked at and there will perhaps be an opportunity at next week's session with the assistant secretary for the committee to broach the subject of how the work of those volunteer centres and their capabilities can be brought to bear in a structured way to support communities in the space that we are talking about here. There are definitely opportunities to build volunteering capacity within organisations in a structured way utilising the capability of volunteer centres. That would be the strong message I would like to leave with the members of the committee this evening.

Chairman: Ms McHugh might be able to address the following. I noted that the Castleblayney Regeneration Committee bought two old buildings. Where did the committee get the money to buy those?

Ms Annmarie McHugh: We did not buy them.

Chairman: Were they given to the committee?

Ms Annmarie McHugh: There are two derelict buildings in the town that used to be accommodation, Hope Castle and the Annex. They are both owned by the county council and are in dereliction. We do not have any funds, unfortunately. That said, Clarecastle's representatives were talking about having great funds and we were just awarded €2.6 million today.

Chairman: Congratulations.

Ms Annmarie McHugh: I thought I would share that. I thank the Chairman. I was the one who coined the phrase "volunteer burnout" and what has been interesting for me today has been to meet all the different people who, like myself, are passionate about the towns. There is a fantastic range of expertise and interest in the room and the good thing is that we are all on the same page, we all want to try to make our towns better. That is a very positive start.

What I have taken from today is the newly-coined phrase "town centre first". That should be copied and pasted. It is working for Scotland and if that became the agenda for every Department, that would be a big plus.

I am concerned about burnout for volunteers. If we want to continue making our towns better in the future, we will have to come up with all these different funds and ideas. It would be a big plus if we were to get the solution of having a town centre expert positioned in the town. All the different schemes are out there are fantastic but there are so many of them. We have talked about people reinventing the wheel. Those schemes should be gathered together to make it simpler for people. The town centre expert could then guide us to help us go for that funding and that would significantly reduce burnout.

Mr. Christy Leyden: I compliment the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Ring. I mentioned in my report that the current model for the role of his Department in the towns, villages and outdoors is to be replicated. The volunteers put all the effort in with the local authorities at the beginning and then the money comes to the county council, or wherever it is, and the volunteers are taken out of the loop. Compare that to what has to be done with a LEADER fund. The money has to be put upfront and one has to get the money, get a loan from Clann Credo or somewhere else and then work one's way through. My compliments to the Department because its model needs to be replicated right down to the county councils. That is where one finds good volunteers who are interested. Their interest is in achieving something for their own community and the work is in the beginning, working with the planning and that.

I love the town centre model that is there if we all can work together on it. The beauty about it from the point of view of a volunteer is that once the decision is made and the money is allocated, the volunteer sees the project working. He or she does not have to go back and start counting receipts and sending in stuff. That is where burnout happens. The burnout is caused by the considerable amount of bureaucracy at the back end. We could get volunteers who believe they are involved in building and achieving things. My compliments to the Department. Those two particular funding streams I am talking about are particularly useful in the way they are managed, particularly for us. We get the streetscape, decide on a portion of it, do it, and see the end result. We work with the council on the end result but we do not have to go worrying about the funding. That is a huge plus. We compliment the group and the Department. That way of working needs to go back down into the county councils to cut out the amount of bureaucracy at the back end of managing projects.

Chairman: Are all the questions answered? Is everyone happy?

Senator Paudie Coffey: We will store some questions for next week.

Mr. Denis McCarthy: On behalf of the groups here, I would like to compliment the Chairman, the members of the committee and the clerical people here for making this a core issue. The Chairman said himself this is a core issue. We really appreciate the invitation to come before the committee to give us the opportunity to give our own experiences and hopefully it will be of some assistance to the committee in bringing forward policy.

Chairman: I thank Mr. McCarthy for his kind words. It certainly is a core issue for us. Today has been very useful and we have had great, positive engagement and solutions proposed. We have heard from people at the coalface, the pros and cons, the ups and downs and the faults and failings of community development. We are predominantly coming from the right place. Ms McHugh encapsulated it when she said we are all proud of where we come from and want to make it a better place to live in, work in and to visit. That template is there and we heard it from the representatives of Free Market.

We need to incorporate what our guests have said within Government policy. We will certainly be recommending that as a committee. Deputy Niamh Smyth recommended that our guests come in so I compliment her for that. Senator Coffey put forward the rationale to bring up Cappoquin and it makes a lot of sense. Wearing my Clare hat, I invited the good people from Clare. It was a very worthwhile meeting. We will follow up next week when we will have more interaction on this particular subject. It is an issue that needs to be solved by the Government across Departments. We will take note of exactly what the witnesses said today. I thank them again.

The joint committee suspended at 5.40 p.m., went into private session at 5.55 p.m. and adjourned at 6.20 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 13 November 2019.