

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHORBAIRT TUAITHE AGUS POBAIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 13 Samhain 2019

Wednesday, 13 November 2019

The Joint Committee met at 10.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Michael Collins,	Paudie Coffey,
Michael Fitzmaurice,	Maura Hopkins.
Éamon Ó Cuív,	
Niamh Smyth,	
Brian Stanley.	

I láthair/In attendance: Deputy Dara Calleary and Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor.

Teachta/Deputy Joe Carey sa Chathaoir/in the Chair

Town Centre Living Initiative: Discussion

Chairman: I remind members, staff, witnesses and those in the Public Gallery to turn off their mobile phones. I ask that people check that is the case because they interfere with the sound system.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the joint committee. However, if they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to 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 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 Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

This is the second of two meetings on the topic of supporting rural towns and villages during which we will discuss the pilot town centre living initiative. Six rural towns have been invited to develop innovative proposals to encourage more people to live in rural town centres. The six towns that have been identified for the initial pilot are: Boyle, County Roscommon; Callan, County Kilkenny; Ballinrobe, County Mayo; Banagher, County Offaly; Castleblaney, County Monaghan; and Cappoquin, County Waterford. Last week we heard the bottom-up view from small towns and villages about what central and local government can do to help. We had speakers from Free Market, Cappoquin Community Development, Castleblaney Regeneration Committee and Clarecastle Community Development. Today, we will hear the top-down view from both central and local government. The committee believes that this is an important initiative and we look forward to hearing the views of witnesses. We will also look at information supplied by Free Market about Scotland's town partnership and the town-centre first principle.

I welcome the following witnesses: Mr. William Parnell, assistant secretary, and Mr. J.P. Mulherin, principal officer, rural development and regional affairs division, Department of Rural and Community Development; Mr. Peter Hynes, vice chairperson, County and City Management Association, CCMA; Mr. Peter Hynes, chief executive, Mayo County Council, who is wearing two hats today, and Ms Catherine McConnell, director of services with responsibility for planning, communications, human resources, information systems and corporate; Ms Mary Mulholland, director of services with responsibility for housing, community, library, arts, heritage and fire service, Kilkenny County Council; Mr. Paul Clifford, director of economic and community development, Monaghan County Council; Mr. Tom Shanahan, director of services with responsibility for planning, economic development, tourism, housing and Tullamore municipal district, Offaly County Council; Mr. Pat Murtagh, senior executive officer, community and enterprise, and Ms Nollaig Whyte, acting senior executive officer, regeneration team, Roscommon County Council; and Mr. Rupert Maddock, city and county architect, and Mr. Morris Conway, project architect, Waterford City & County Council.

It is proposed that any opening statements, submissions or other documents supplied by witnesses or other bodies to the committee relating to the topic of this meeting will be published on the committee's website. Is that agreed? Agreed. I invite Mr. Parnell to make his opening

statement.

Mr. William Parnell: I thank members for the opportunity to attend today's meeting to discuss the pilot town centre living initiative. The committee has taken a keen interest in this pilot since the outset and it has invited representatives from the local authorities participating in the pilot to the meeting to give a first-hand account of their engagement in the process. I propose to give a short background to the initiative and then to hand over to the local authority representatives.

The town centre living pilot was announced by the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Ring, in October 2018 to develop innovative proposals to encourage more people to live in rural town centres. The pilot complements the town and village renewal scheme and the rural regeneration and development fund, both of which are administered by the Department of Rural and Community Development.

The Chairman mentioned the six towns that were identified initially to test the pilot approach. The towns in question are Boyle, County Roscommon; Callan, County Kilkenny; Ballinrobe, County Mayo; Banagher, County Offaly; Castleblayney, County Monaghan; and Cappoquin, County Waterford. These towns are of different sizes and in different locations. We hope that the learnings from their involvement in the pilot will provide an indication as to what might work well for similar types of towns on a wider scale. The issue of residential occupancy in many rural towns is not necessarily a need for new houses, but, rather, it is a question of how to make best use of properties that are available and to encourage people to live in them even if they have to be renovated.

The reasons properties are not being used in town centres for residential purposes are complex. I am sure the committee will hear more about this from the local authority representatives today. Apart from issues that can arise relating to the property itself, other factors such as the availability of services, recreational facilities, civic space and a good retail mix all need to be part of the offering to encourage people to want to live in town centres. It is also important to recognise that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to rejuvenating small towns and villages. Each settlement is different, each with its own strengths, as well as issues that need to be addressed.

The pilot scheme was designed to allow the participating local authorities to examine the issues in their own particular towns and to develop blueprints to attract more people to live in the town centres. The Department is making technical assistance of up to €100,000 available to each local authority to support its work and to develop proposals to encourage town centre living. The committee will hear how the local authorities have been using this money to identify the issues and solutions that influence the number of people living in their town centres. It is envisaged that the lessons learned through this pilot will help to inform the approach to supporting and investing in towns and villages in the future.

The rural regeneration and development fund provides an opportunity to take forward the blueprints that emerge from this pilot by providing funding for strategic proposals that can rejuvenate towns and increase town centre living. It is encouraging that some of the towns involved in the pilot have applied for funding from the rural regeneration and development fund, while others have received funding through the town and village renewal scheme. I will leave my comments there for the moment to allow the representatives of local authorities to make their presentations. Of course, I will be happy to answer any questions the committee may have later on.

Chairman: I will now call on Mr. Peter Hynes to make a presentation on behalf of the County and City Management Association. I will then call on Ms Catherine McConnell on behalf of Mayo County Council.

Mr. Peter Hynes: I join in Mr. Parnell in thanking the committee for giving us the opportunity to be part of the discussion on a really important topic for all local authorities, particularly those in rural areas with many small towns and villages.

As the Chairman said at the outset, I am wearing two hats. I am chief executive of Mayo County Council. The Mayo story will come through not because we think it is the best or only way to do things, but because it is the one we are most familiar with. I will also attempt to make some remarks on behalf of the sector at large.

The problems of dereliction go back a long way. I do not know if anybody here remembers Galway in the 1980s. I am from Galway originally and my thesis was on the rejuvenation of Galway city centre in 1981. In 1981 the core of Galway - one third if not more - was completely derelict with surface car parks etc. Based on what it has become in 35 or 40 years, it is clearly possible to transform with the right effort and approach.

As every local authority chief executive and member will say, where one comes from and the local authority one works for or represents is the centre of the universe. Therefore, for the next five minutes or so, Mayo will be the centre of the universe.

Chairman: Mayo for Sam.

Mr. Peter Hynes: Le cúnamh Dé; we will get to that. I wonder if that could be described as harassment by the Chair.

We would suggest that the role of local government is about two things: making better places and making better communities. At the end of the day if we are not making better places and making better communities, we are not doing our job. How we do it is a question of detail and debate but that is the core job. Since 2014 we have been challenged by the Department in the main and central government to be a lead development agency. That is about enterprise, investment and jobs. We are also a delivery agency. A report to be published reasonably soon indicates that local authorities pick up funding from more than 30 agencies and Departments, which brings its own challenges in what we do and how we do it. We are definitely a delivery agency and see ourselves as such.

Regarding vision, when we talk about Mayo - those from other counties will have the same kinds of words - we talk about a county that is sustainable, inclusive, prosperous and proud. That is our goal, and towns and villages are a big part of that. Looking at the challenges that towns and villages pose, the first problem we have is the number of them. There are 460 settlements of more than 500 people spread across the island based on the 2016 census. They were developed for particular purposes. Some are market towns, some are crossing towns and some are creamery towns. By and large in most instances the purpose has moved on. As I keep saying to our own people, Mayo has approximately 30 settlements of that size - above 250. If we did not have them, we would not be building them. Therefore, the status is in question. Most of them are suffering decline and are under pressure. For some it is an existential threat; it is that serious.

This initiative on vacancy is welcome because if we do not crack the issue of people living in towns than we are at nothing. The challenges relate to commercial activity. Commercial

activity has moved to edge of town; it has moved to big box; it has moved to regional centres; it has moved to forecourts; and it has moved online. I do not know how much of it will come back. That change has led to environmental degradation and all the problems of anti-social behaviour that go with underpopulated streets that have no casual supervision. Many of our smaller towns and villages are stuck in such a continual downward spiral.

Regarding responses from the sector, there is considerable knowledge, information and experience in this area. The key response is about community engagement and empowerment. The second relates to having a vision-led and achievable plan for what can be done. The third relates to investment. There must be some balancing of the advantages of investing in small towns and villages. For residential purposes and every other purpose there must be incentives. There must be collaborative implementation with local authority leadership. We strongly contend that the local authority is the appropriate body to be challenged to provide that leadership and to provide the services to accompany it.

In our case, we use a form of community engagement and planning, called “community futures.” It is a Scottish model that we have been using for more than a decade. Thirty communities have been through the process and we find it very good. Other local authorities use other community planning and engagement techniques. We follow that up with village design statements. They set out, albeit not in a formal planning context, what we are trying to achieve in physical terms in the towns and villages. That is delivered, in our case, by a municipal district, MD, team. We watched last week’s committee meeting and the suggestion from Free Market that there should be a town architect in every town. There are many towns and I do not believe the resources are available to do that.

Senator Paudie Coffey: It was every local authority.

Mr. Peter Hynes: No, the suggestion was per town at the time.

Senator Paudie Coffey: That was our understanding.

Mr. Peter Hynes: Okay. The suggestion from this side would be that we could certainly move to having one in every municipal district and that would be part of a MD team, which is what we have set up, so that the coalface is populated by a team including architect, engineer and planner working together.

There is dereliction everywhere. We can fix some of it with housing. Every local authority has done that and it is very beneficial. We cannot turn all our towns and villages into housing schemes and there needs to be a balance.

I will go through the exemplar of Westport, which is the one I know best. I am not saying it is the only one, but it is one that is reasonably well known as a town that has been turned around in 20 years. It had a very good location and an enviable layout. In the 1980s and early 1990s, however, one could have bought a big chunk of Westport for very little money. One third of Bridge Street was derelict. The town had its problems. The turnaround was the preparation of a master plan in the early 1990s which engaged all the community and commercial groups in the town. There were more than 90 such groups so it took a long time to put the master plan together. It was not just a planning exercise but looked at urban design, what would fit in the back lands and gave guidance, not binding but illustrative, on that. Then there was the seaside resort scheme. It invested €200 million, of which €150 million was in the private sector and €50 million in the public sector, including €40 million on a sewerage scheme. That kind of

money makes an impact and is necessary in some instances. Policies were developed on issues such as signage, quality materials in the public realm and public art.

When we summarise the project we show three illustrations. One is Westport in the “good old days” of the 1890s which were not necessarily as good as one might think unless one is looking through rose-tinted glasses. The picture shows a monument to a man named Glendenning, who was the landlord’s agent and a deeply unpopular person. The second image is a photograph of Westport as I remember it in the 1970s and early 1980s. Glendenning had been shot off the column, having been used for target practice during the War of Independence - I will not say by whom - and the column was empty. The whole of the Octagon, the central public space, served as a carpark. As a result of the master plan, community engagement, the collaborative approach and investment, we see in this photograph a different Westport today. The image shows the Octagon which includes a sculpture erected as part of the prize for winning the best place to live in Ireland competition in 2012.

We recommend that responsibility be examined as an issue. Responsibility for towns and villages is spread over at least four lead Departments as well as other agencies. That needs to be rationalised. The methodology is reasonably well known and there is no need to reinvent the wheel. There is definitely a need for residential incentives which is something that will emerge from the discussion later this morning. We support the suggestion of a centre of excellence. It should be located in a Department or another public body. There is a need for communication. We must change the narrative around small towns and villages. The more we spread the story that they are dying on their feet, the more that will happen. A little of the reality is about perception, and that needs to be addressed.

I will pass over to Ms Catherine McConnell who represents the residential scheme in Mayo.

Ms Catherine McConnell: I will begin with a brief summary on Ballinrobe, which was Mayo’s participant town in this pilot scheme. Mayo County Council has identified it as a key town. It is strategically located to the south of the county between Castlebar and Galway. It is a long established market town in this part of south Mayo. Ballinrobe has consistently functioned well as a market town and has a strong urban block of about 6 ha which is bounded and defined by a strong streetscape. Consistent building frontages and relatively narrow street proportions emphasise the unique urban geometry. It is rich in natural built and cultural heritage assets. This has been enhanced by the town’s success in attracting funding through various Departments under town and village renewal schemes, healthy town initiatives, the rural regeneration and development fund schemes and LEADER. Historic structures and projects include the Market House, the bower’s riverside walk and the library grounds, which have been enhanced.

When we engaged with the pilot project, our objective was to address the extent of dereliction and vacancy in the town centre because it has a major impact and affects perceptions and local confidence. Lack of investment has resulted in the built heritage losing some of its intrinsic value and attractiveness. Several areas are particularly affected and these are the ones we have focused on in the pilot.

The project looked at an adaptive reuse study of four different building typologies, three in private ownership and one recently purchased by Mayo County Council. Proposals for reuse, including commercial uses on ground floors and residential uses on upper floors, were developed. We examined how our approach to planning applications can affect these types of buildings. We also examined how the obligations to comply with building and energy efficiency regulations and to obtain fire safety certificates and disability access certificates combine to

impact on how a developer might approach the reuse of these buildings. Preliminary structural surveys were carried out. Comparative estimates were prepared for the reuse of three existing buildings compared with the cost of providing similar accommodation on greenfield sites. The proposed use of the existing buildings extended across retail, office and residential accommodation.

The report has been circulated among members. It found that in general the cost of refurbishing these buildings is higher and there are many more barriers to a developer engaging with the redevelopment of these buildings. “Cost in use” is a term that we have used. It means that if one were to build to current standards, no developer could economically achieve the refurbishment of the existing building and compete with the market. This has had a major influence on whether people will refurbish or choose to move to new greenfield sites and build new developments.

Using the four buildings as case studies, we have held a workshop with businesses, residents, town centre property owners and previous town centre owners and-or residents and will continue to engage with them. We looked at previous town centre residents who chose to move out and have engaged with people who recently moved in to establish what was behind the decision to move out or move back. The workshop will aim to raise awareness of the extent and type of vacancy in the town. It will consider the challenges of adapting vacant buildings for reuse for modern 21st century family accommodation or business, the options for the reuse of these buildings, and the proposed means of supports or resources that would make adaptation more achievable. A second workshop will be held with our staff in the local authority to consider these means of supports or the resources Mayo County Council has at its disposal or are available through access to national funding schemes that could make adaptation more achievable.

We have appointed a consultant who will do a much more detailed analysis, explore the issues surrounding residential use and vacancy – the economic, social, environmental and cultural factors – and help us shape policies locally in our development plans and approaches to town centre redevelopment, which might inform national policy, both fiscal and otherwise, to encourage town centre reuse, both residential and commercial, and identify opportunities to guide and prompt public and private investment.

I will outline some of our preliminary findings. While a wide variety of funding options is in place, all of them require significant skill and time, which can be confusing for potential applicants who are not professionals in the area. A variety of complex reasons have led to levels of vacancy and dereliction, including land value, ownership patterns and the health of the local economy. Ballinrobe is typical of many other Irish towns in terms of architecture and development. Therefore, the solutions we may propose as a result of this study will be equally applicable to other towns.

A key issue facing Ballinrobe and other towns is that patterns of dwelling in recent years have tended to favour newly constructed dwellings in suburban multi-unit developments, or in one-off houses in hinterlands. The three main reasons for this are statutory risk, cost, and changing patterns of how people live and work. Increasing traffic through towns of the scale and size of Ballinrobe is a key issue. While the issue is being proactively tackled by Mayo County Council, it remains a challenge. Of the five towns surveyed by the consultants in Mayo, Ballinrobe was found to have the highest overall proportion of derelict structures and among the highest proportion of vacant units. However, it should be noted that this finding does not distinguish between commercial and residential properties. We used the opportunity provided

by the pilot study to ask the consultants to develop a fully electronic geographic information system, GIS, database for each property which we have identified as vacant or derelict. The properties will be geolocated and contain a full record of vacancy-dereliction status along with survey photographs and comments. This will allow us to track the progress of buildings that we hope will be redeveloped through access to additional funding and changes to the regime under which towns must develop themselves. The initial consultations with the owners of such buildings have indicated that the barriers are preliminary costs, those being, of renovation and repair. They also raised the issue of anti-social behaviour that is associated with higher levels of vacancy and non-residential populations in town centres.

We were heartened by the willingness of the building owners to engage in bringing buildings back into appropriate use and back to life if appropriate supports are in place. These would be a mixture of fiscal and other partnership approaches with the local authority. We will continue to engage with the town team and the properties' owners to see where this project will end up.

Chairman: I thank Ms McConnell. I will next call Ms Mary Mulholland, Kilkenny County Council's director of services, housing, community, library, arts, heritage and fire service, to make her opening statement. We will suspend the meeting for a few minutes first.

The joint committee suspended at 11.12 a.m. and resumed at 11.18 a.m.

Chairman: We will resume now that we have resolved that technical glitch.

Ms Mary Mulholland: I thank the committee for the opportunity to appear before it. We have put a great deal of time and effort into this pilot and learned much, so it is great to be able to show it off on this end.

Kilkenny's town in the pilot scheme is Callan, which is one of five district towns in the county and located just 16 km south west of the city. The areas of scale in Kilkenny are Kilkenny city and smaller towns, all of the same population of approximately 2,000 to 2,500 people. The population in Callan is increasing. Similar to Ms McConnell's example from Mayo, it has been a market town for many years. Its centre was designed with narrow streets for horse-drawn carriages, though, and is not fit for today's needs. It has immense character and cultural significance, not just for Kilkenny but also for the south east. Working with the community in Callan under the framework for town centre renewal, Kilkenny County Council held a stakeholder engagement session and carried out a health check on the town. From that, we established a town team and a town plan, and the area of Bridge Street that the committee can see was identified as needing care, attention and change in particular. The pilot project came from that process. We wanted to get into the detail of the Bridge Street area and see what it would take to make it more attractive for investment, residential development and other forms of development.

The objectives that we set the pilot project were to identify the opportunities on Bridge Street, identify the owners and assess the individual properties to see where we could get engagement to bring forward worked examples of reuse, including adaptive reuse. We wanted to improve the image of the street and people's feelings about the street. To that end, a number of community arts projects have been located in Bridge Street, including a performance by the Abbey Theatre on the street during this year's Kilkenny Arts Festival. People are re-engaging with the space. We wanted to identify barriers to reuse and to develop proposals for specific properties to a high standard with detailed, worked-through design proposals for mixed typologies of buildings, including an energy-efficiency solution. Energy was a big part of our pilot

project. We wanted bring high-quality energy solutions to old conservation buildings. Our last objective was to identify financial supports that could bring those worked examples forward. The engagement and assessment was very intensive. Many of the buildings were found to be in particularly poor condition and to be deteriorating quickly. Some of them had not been structurally assessed, or assessed from an engineering point of view, for quite some time.

The slide that is being shown to the committee shows the Bridge Street area in the context of Callan as a whole. The bridge over the river is the centre of the town. Bridge Street is the area just below the bridge on the slide. Kilkenny County Council has secured funding under the town and village renewal scheme for some works to be done to improve the river. Under the rural regeneration and development fund, funding has been secured for the development of the Callan Motte field, which can be seen to the top of the slide currently on screen, as an amenity area. Both of those initiatives are seen as support measures for the attractiveness of Bridge Street. As members can see, Bridge Street is very compact. It will always be a challenge to provide open space for families and others who live there. We have addressed that with supporting measures under the funding structures I have mentioned.

A great deal of information on the individual properties and on the overall context of the street within the town has been considered as part of the pilot. We have assessed issues like traffic, access, sporting infrastructure, amenities and the public realm. It is a twofold pilot. It involves a detailed assessment of the actual street and the buildings within it, as well as completion and design proposals for three properties. It also involves an assessment of the broader context of how the street interacts within the town. An understanding of the barriers that exist has come out of all of those assessments. Why are these buildings not being reused? I will give a brief summary of the barriers we have identified. The first barrier is the age and general condition of the buildings. Some of these buildings are not suitable for adaptation. Some of them need to have pieces of them removed. The second barrier is the challenging space standards and general regulatory requirements. It is very difficult to meet modern building standards, fire regulations and private rented standards, while providing for high energy efficiency and good conservation practice, without compromising the integrity of the buildings or of the street. This challenge cannot be underestimated.

Another constraint is the size and shape of plots, many of which are in private ownership. There are parking and traffic issues at this location because of the narrowness of the street. This is not exclusive to Callan. There are many county towns and villages with very narrow streets that are a barrier to redevelopment. Another real issue is that many older residents are *in situ*, or own these properties and are in nursing homes or are living elsewhere. It can be difficult to get them to engage with this process and to buy in to our plans to change things dramatically. Many families who own properties in this area live elsewhere and find it difficult to engage with the prospect of redeveloping difficult buildings through a complex process at a high cost without any certainty of return on their investment. The high cost of these interventions is a major issue. As Ms McConnell said when she spoke about her town in County Mayo, the unit cost for the redevelopment or adaptive reuse of the properties we have looked at in particular detail is extremely high. The cost is more than the social housing cost ceilings from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. The interventions needed on the public side to turn these properties into public housing units would not be viable in this pilot. The cost established to achieve the desirable energy, conservation and design standards exceed the return that can potentially be achieved from rent or sale in the private market. We have found that the worked-through costs, which are there to be examined, cannot deliver a social or private outcome without an addition to the investment that is available.

We have learned an awful lot from our engagement with stakeholders and communities as part of this intensive pilot project. I will summarise those lessons. We have learned that engaging in singular interventions and piecemeal project development while meeting specific funding deadlines under a plethora of funding opportunities, all of which are welcome, will not deliver the strategic outcomes we want. A strategic long-term plan is required for town centre redevelopment. Plans must come from communities. Community and stakeholder engagement is paramount. The communities in towns are best placed to identify needs, barriers and opportunities and to put them in the order in which people want to see them delivered. We have seen in Callan that the town team approach works, but implementation must support such an approach. Public and private solutions are required. Local authorities cannot, and in my view should not, engage in the compulsory purchase of vast areas of streets in towns and villages for public housing solutions or other types of projects, such as museum projects, that are unsustainable. A mix of tenure is required in the interests of social sustainability. Conditions must attract private investment. There is a need for private and public solutions. In the absence of interventions, these types of areas will not meet population and social needs into the future. There is a social cost which is more difficult to quantify. These areas will become much bigger problems for local authorities and for the State if they become more dangerous or fall into a worse state of disrepair. Likewise, we cannot keep building new roads, sewers and footpaths to extend our villages and towns out into the countryside. Policy and funding alignment is essential if outcomes are to be supported by the market or, where they are not supported by the market, if an intervention that will make them deliver is to be designed.

Our towns and villages, in Kilkenny and in every other county in the country, have a significant value. They are our heritage. They are great places to live, work and do business. Callan, in particular, has a sizeable arts community. It is thriving. Many arts groups use vacant buildings from time to time, but they do not have the means to carry out capital works. Arts programmes support programmes rather than capital investment. Collectively, we have an opportunity to secure the vibrancy of towns like Callan. We are hearing about other such towns today. Current policy and market conditions cannot deliver what is needed and what each of these pilots is identifying as required. Inaction will have a greater financial and social cost into the future. We can use the information gathered from these pilots to inform policy in a coherent way while delivering real solutions. As Mr. Hynes has said, local authorities are best placed to lead that. We need a point of contact - an architect or a team - on the ground at municipal district level and at county level to tie all the different variables together in a way that communities can understand.

Chairman: I ask Mr. Paul Clifford, who is director of economic and community development with Monaghan County Council, to address the committee.

Mr. Paul Clifford: I thank the committee for this opportunity to make a presentation on what Monaghan County Council is trying to do in Castleblayney. My colleagues from the regeneration committee in Castleblayney were here last week. I would like to put our efforts in context. There are five towns and over 20 small villages in County Monaghan, which has a population of 61,000. The population of the county is split 70-30 between rural and urban areas. It is a heavily rural-based county. We liaise with four town teams and one chamber of commerce. We have a programme for the development of 40 community plans in each of the settlement areas over the next five years.

Castleblayney, which has a population of 3,600, is a former rural market town but it is becoming a commuter town. Although there has been a slight fall in the population of the town in

recent times, it has generally been stable. People commute from Castleblayney to work along the M1 corridor. The town has good schools, residential facilities and recreational facilities and offers a good lifestyle. As a Border town, it has suffered from being so close to the Border. There was a certain amount of vacancy after the recession. The commercial vacancy rate in the town centre is 22.5%. There are former shops, offices and workshops that are vacant along Main Street and one or two streets off that street. Following the abolition of the town council in 2014, we established town teams in each of the towns. Castleblayney Regeneration Committee is the town team for Castleblayney. The community engagement is high but the business participation in it is relatively low. There is a lack of business confidence there for all the factors set out by Mr. Hynes earlier. We had a particular challenge in Castleblayney as there are five derelict public buildings owned by Monaghan County Council. They include former courthouses and the Hope Castle estate. This is our challenge. We are resolving it through the rural regeneration and development fund. We have already tackled two of the buildings and are working on the other three. Over time, we can resolve those with resources but we are talking about resources of the order of €15 million to €20 million.

The challenge that the pilot town centre living initiative is attempting to address is the other side of the coin, namely, private residential development in the town. Like the other towns described here, there is an abundance of vacant, derelict and poor quality housing - narrow terraced housing that is difficult to develop. Some of it is over former shops. We concentrated on a tight and compact area in Castleblayney. The report is due at Christmas. We approached it by approaching each individual property and looked at site aggregation, which is a problem in towns and developing towns and is an excuse for people and State agencies to move out of town. I was conscious of last week's presentation where the "town first" policy was being advocated. That is something with which we would concur but it is quite difficult to bring the other State agencies in on that. We have identified owners and the status of each property within the area. We carry out a land use survey and are looking at the barriers to redeveloping that area. The report is expected next month. We reckon that one of the key requirements is that we would have a dedicated person to work with the owners on the ground. That is not necessarily an architect but somebody who would be familiar with the whole regime of building control, design, urban renewal and the economics of the town. That was successful in the mid-2000s with the tax renewal scheme. We engaged a person to deliver the tax renewal scheme in certain towns and it was pretty successful. That is becoming one of the other key recommendations from the report that is due next month. The good news is that we have another four towns in the county to deal with.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Clifford. I now call on Mr. Tom Shanahan to make his opening statement.

Mr. Tom Shanahan: I thank the Chairman and the members for the opportunity to present to them today. Banagher is a historic town located on the banks of the River Shannon in west Offaly with a population of 1,760 based on the 2016 census. Two cruiser hire companies operate from the marina, which is located on the edge of the town centre, so many people begin and end their cruise of the Shannon in Banagher. One of the objectives of the community involves trying to get these people to spend some time in Banagher. A primary school and secondary school together with the amenity of the Shannon and other services, including an open library, are located in or adjacent to the town centre making it potentially a very good town to live in with all services within easy access. However, significant residential and commercial vacancies exist within the town centre.

The primary focus of this project was to investigate the reason for residential vacancy in particular and how it could be reversed. The study focused on the town centre. Among other things, we engaged in extensive consultation with the community and individual property owners. We began with a survey to determine how much of the property in the town centre was vacant. While there are 156 properties in the study area, we determined that more than 22 of these properties were vacant. The community was very enthusiastic about the project and helped to find the owners. The community helped to develop its town plan identifying the public realm and items that need addressing in the town. Of the 22 properties that were vacant, we engaged with the owners of 16 of these properties to find out the reasons for the vacancy and what might motivate the owners to bring the properties back into use. The reasons were predominantly financial and to a large extent, that revolved around technical issues as well. On average, these properties were vacant for about eight years. This varied from quite a long-term vacancy to a relatively recent one. Many owners found the cost of refurbishment and modernisation, which has already been mentioned, to be prohibitive notwithstanding that the reason they became vacant in the first place may not have been financial. This is complicated by the fact that the value of the properties are very low. When one looked at the cost of buying such a property in the town centre with the cost of refurbishment and modernisation, one could see that it was much more expensive than buying a comparable property outside the town. Of all the people we spoke to, none was prepared to take up the repair and leasing scheme for public housing as they felt it would not be viable for them or their properties.

Essentially, all the property owners required an incentive to consider spending money on the properties and bringing them back into use. Among the things we did was to engage one property owner to look at options for refurbishing a vacant unit; these are now in a detailed design process, which is visible on screen. The unit was a shop with living accommodation and access to a large rear garden through an arch. The design, which was done by our own in-house architect, demonstrated how a modern spacious family home could be created from a streetside property. That said, the owner still considers it too expensive to move on with the project at this stage. Nonetheless it showed that the particular reason for this was to demonstrate that a modern spacious property could be created from these vacant units. Another vacant unit in the town centre was a multi-unit commercial premises that is for sale. We are negotiating the purchase of that premises and hope to progress that project, which will convert it into a remote working unit with office space and possibly community facilities. It could also allow us to extend our own library, which is adjacent, into it. At an early stage in the project, we are fortuitous in that we worked with an approved housing body to bring a 14-unit vacant development into use that is now tenanted. We work with the community to see if we can develop a model to investigate if another unit with ten accommodation units could be purchased to provide a community-operated tourist accommodation facility. Again, this is to try to address the fact that many tourists come to Banagher for Shannon cruises but we do not necessarily get them to stay there.

Essentially, the outcomes of this project have very much focused on what would motivate people to bring their vacant units into use again. The big issues, as outlined here, are the cost and technical factors involved in bringing these units up to a standard that is fit for purpose for rental, sale or living in. We feel that the financial incentives should be targeted at a designated town centre area to ensure the focus of these incentives is very much on bringing life back into the town centres. We have further plans for the public realm to avail of the current funding streams. We will continue the example used where we looked at the design of a vacant unit to bring it into use as a modern home. We have a number of other units where we will engage with the owners in a similar exercise with possibly a less ambitious design to, again, demonstrate the options regarding how people can bring these properties back into use.

Chairman: I call on Ms Whyte to make her opening statement.

Ms Nollaig Whyte: I will start with a description of Boyle. Many members might associate it with Lough Key Forest Park, which is outside the town. We are very lucky in the sense that it is renowned for outdoor adventure tourism and its historical assets. Lough Key Forest Park gets approximately 270,000 visitors each year. As one comes in towards Boyle Abbey, that number drops to around 20,000. In the heart of our project, which is just at the end of the picture on the screen, members can see that approximately 11,000 people visit King House.

We are probably in a different position from most of the other towns in the sense that we had already done the framework plan for the town through Boyle 2040. That looked at the urban core of the town, where there was a serious level of vacancy. There was interaction with people in the town and the town team while reimagining the lands behind, as shown on the screen. We have been very lucky in getting funding through a number of schemes of the Department of Rural and Community Development, including funding under the rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, to redevelop the old Royal Hotel site, which is a very obvious derelict site in the middle of town. We also have funding to develop a cycle corridor with a link to Lough Key.

We were very grateful to be announced as part of this scheme and at the time we also applied for the historic towns initiative. The first slide on the screen shows a very dull street and on the right side of the street there was a serious level of dereliction. On the opposite side, there are a number of shops and it is quite a vibrant side of the street. We used the historic towns initiative to work on the right side of the street and we can see a difference in the next picture, taken a number of months later after the historic towns funding kicked in. That funding was €140,000 and it was matched by both contributions from owners and Roscommon County Council. It gave us a great opportunity, probably more than would have been available if we did not have this scheme. We traced the owners and met them as a group. We did a condition survey of the front-facing facade, looking at the roof, chimney and the street face of each building. From there we identified what was achievable. Unfortunately, €140,000 for 19 properties could not cover the entirety of what was needed. Of the property owners, 17 from the 19 engaged with us and we ended up with 11 continuing with the scheme. They were asked for 30% of the funding available.

This has been a massive transformation and it is conservation-led architecture and regeneration. We can see how some of the original features were brought back to doorways that had been previously painted over. I got to know everybody on the street in the course of the project and there are only four residents on that side of the street. The youngest couple are in their 60s with children in college. All of the others live on their own. There is no sense of succession, even for the one family left with a home on that street. Many of the other premises are in probate. In one case we had a house with seven siblings and they did not get involved with the scheme initially because they could not agree on what they were going to do. It is difficult if the property is not left to one person. Others who bought a property as an investment are in negative equity. The costs of repairs are very high as this is an area of architectural significance. There is much work to be done so it is not like going into an ordinary house. We need to protect the existing structures and the street was set out at the same time King House was developed. We found that one person had bought a house but was not living in the area. His response was that he did not know where to start.

Ideally, we would like families to move here but some of the houses on the corner have no back gardens. Others have significant back gardens but there is encroachment from other properties. It is fortunate for anybody owning a house on the street to look over the Boyle river. On

the far side of that is the new Royal Hotel site currently being developed under the RRDF, so it will give them dual aspect. We are working with a conservation architect to reimagine one of the houses where the person has the potential to invest. As Mr. Clifford mentioned earlier, we agree it is not the role of the county council to buy a number of these properties. We are developing a significant property at the Royal Hotel into an enterprise centre but it is not feasible to buy properties on the street. We are lucky as a private person is willing to put in the investment.

We cannot overstate how important the historic towns initiative's small level of funding has been in our engagement. It meant that people met us as we had something concrete. It built confidence in the broader town. We have had people from other towns in the county say they have looked at the work done on the Boyle's main street and it is influencing the work being done in Strokestown, for example. It will carry through in the town and village projects we are working on elsewhere.

The barriers include a lack of capital. Even 30% of what is a small sum of money was a challenge for some people. Property succession was also a problem, as I mentioned. Somebody mentioned earlier that properties are old, and that is also the case for us. Equally, we do not have young people or families living on that street. There are challenges arising with interior restructuring because of conservation aspects. A much bigger issue is the lack of jobs in the area. In order to get young people back in, we must get jobs of a certain level. There is a high level of graduate transfer from secondary school to third level in County Roscommon but a very poor retention rate when it comes to graduates getting a first job. It is the elephant in the room for many of these towns.

We need people to want to live in these locations so we must sell the potential of the time. I am thankful that the Boyle 2040 framework and the investment we have been successful in drawing down so far has started to create a sort of hipster cool image for Boyle town centre. People have started to buy on the streets adjacent to this site and two of the owners will put their properties for sale as a result of the work that has been done. We need to realise the potential of the lands behind the area. As we can see from the image on the screen, there is much potential for restaurants looking on to the river, especially when the far side of the river is developed into a very attractive public space. We need a joined-up approach with a tailored grant scheme to cover essential repairs. We were not able to repair the roofs under the historic towns initiative and these, along with the chimneys, are a major problem. People cannot do this on their own. Many of the people do not know each other so we must work with them even to facilitate the hiring of a cherry-picker once a year for essential maintenance. As others have stated, we must also come up with an affordable design that is fit for purpose when it comes to modern living.

Chairman: That was very comprehensive. I thank Ms Whyte.

Mr. Rupert Maddock: I thank the committee for the opportunity to speak a little about Cappoquin. The town probably does not have the profile it may have had at one stage in the county and we would love to address that. It is one of the larger settlements in west Waterford and it was once an important economic and social centre. It serves a rich agricultural hinterland that required many services and on the main street there are signs of that. There are buildings that were banks and hotels and there is still some retail spaces. Many properties are now vacant. It had quite a strong engineering and light industry sector, as well as food processing. It was an important location for religious and educational institutions, and Mount Melleray and the Cistercian abbey are still there. Along with that is Cappoquin House and gardens, an important estate house that has had a long association with Cappoquin. This has resulted in a rich urban fabric, and to date over 70 buildings are listed on the national inventory of architectural

heritage and 32 protected structures. It is all set within a fantastic rural landscape containing the Blackwater river, which has a very unusual bend as it turns west at Cappoquin. The town has been marked by population decline over the course of about 150 years. The population in the mid-19th century was 2,000. It is down to approximately 700 now. Married with that, there has been an economic decline and the loss of local employment. We had the closure of Cappoquin Chickens, which many people will know about, and the Cappoquin bacon factory also closed with the loss of 200 jobs. However, the community has reacted by coming together and building a thriving community centre, the Cappoquin Community Development Company, which has many assets, including a childcare provider, a vocational education centre and a sports hall. It is also an umbrella group for other community companies. The town still has a primary school, which is active, whereas the two secondary schools have closed. The exception in Cappoquin is that there is a lot of rental accommodation. There is a desire to see more people living in the town, particularly families.

We found many causes of vacancy. It is primarily caused by a loss of jobs, wealth and capital. This has resulted in buildings not being maintained for a protracted period. There has, therefore, been no improvement and this creates a vicious cycle in which it becomes more and more expensive to try to bring them back up to a habitable condition. These buildings are unsuitable for modern living. As mentioned earlier, the cost of refurbishment, that is, the soft costs of design, meeting building regulations, planning requirements, certification and so forth, added to the construction costs makes it uneconomic in terms of the final value of the building. As such, there would be a negative return on investment.

We found there are many personal reasons for individual owners and properties not coming into the market. The market in Cappoquin is not functioning. There are very few properties coming to the market. We discovered there is a vacancy rate of approximately 17% in Cappoquin. It is much higher in the core of the town, at 40%, which compares with a county average of between 10% and 11%.

In terms of our approach to the project, we have included a number of phases. In the start-up phase we collaborated with local stakeholders, including the community group I mentioned. We have a philanthropic trust, Tomar Trust, which has committed to matching any public funding on a one to three basis. We have the Waterford Leader Partnership. As part of the start-up, we also assembled a design team to look intensively at some of the physical problems in the town.

We then engaged in a research and analysis stage. A company, Prescience, was commissioned to produce a report on vacancy in the town. The community company did an intensive survey of 500 properties in the town and we established a baseline of vacancy and dereliction. We found that out of 505 properties, 108 are vacant or derelict. Based on this, we looked at suitable sites for further investigation. We established two or three sites but finally agreed, as outlined in red on the screen, on one particular block that had a very high vacancy rate, at 40%, and a great deal of dereliction. It was in the heart of the town and we believed that aspects of it were challenging and would merit further investigation. We then put a design team to work. Our aspiration was always to try to develop principles that had broader application and a transferable model. We did an inspection of the buildings and started to examine the constraints that would apply.

In terms of the next phase, once we had some designs we looked at delivery models. We considered the idea of having a long-term horizon and a plan. We have developed a pipeline of projects in Tramore that would have, say, a 20-year horizon. In this case, in Cappoquin, we

started to look at that, essentially looking at how it could connect with the natural hinterland. We also looked at active recreation because we need to bring new activities and a new purpose to Cappoquin.

The next phase was to look at the built environment and the public realm, with the long-term aim of trying to bring people back into Cappoquin to live in the town. We looked at some models of setting up a local regeneration entity that would simply focus on looking at regeneration projects. That would have local knowledge and could then look for clients. It would have knowledge of nitty-gritty areas such as title issues.

We looked at the concept of assembling properties. That is a major issue because many properties would have serious constraints. We would need to create proper and saleable properties to be assembled into something that is bigger. We looked at the idea of a rolling scheme whereby, as properties could be done up, that could feed into a pipeline of new projects, and that could be adaptable. We looked at efficient delivery models and value engineering to try to reduce costs on the supply side. We approached the local credit union and an estate agent to try to evaluate what the market would be and find a price point for properties if we were to try to sell them. As mentioned, we also needed to find the affordability gap between the price point the market would bear when a property was being sold and the cost of acquiring, designing, constructing and bringing the property up to standard. We had to identify what might be needed to address the affordability gap, in other words, what type of incentive or support scheme would be needed, whether on the tax side or the supply side, for example, something similar to the affordable housing model. In our phasing, we were very keen on doing a pilot to test the proposition. The community group have been looking to acquire a site to try to test that out.

The slide on the screen shows the block we chose. Members will see it is a very tight urban block. What should be noted is that, over time, people have filled in the gap, the interstices, between the streets because the houses were inadequate in terms of their internal layout.

There is a slide missing but on the next slide members will see that there are typical constraints within those blocks, with the sites being very narrow and the layout unsuitable. The standard of the property was very poor. The aspect and the way it addressed the sun was poor and the gardens were in poor condition. The overall area was too low for modern needs and for family living.

In terms of what our architects came up with to address that, we have amalgamated properties to make something that is more suitable. Our estate agent told us that we need an area of 1,300, 1,400 or 1,500 sq. ft to attract families. We also needed some sort of hook. Our hook was that we provided a space attached to the property which has a flexible use. It could be used as a workshop, summer rental or garage. It is a space that could be used as a studio or for some kind of income generation. Members can see from the section on the drawing that what we have now is a property that has space, light, flexible living and is highly insulated, warm and suitable for modern living, with a suitable open space.

The other point about this model is that we tried to deal with the different typologies in the block so that one or two designs could be applicable across the block. That reduces the soft costs. It also allows flexibility in delivery so that one, three or, in the most ambitious case, the entire block could be altered and brought up to a high standard. That is the position.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Maddock. I will now call members as they have indicated, the first of whom is Deputy Smyth, who will be followed by Senators Coffey and Hopkins. We will club

the three questioners together.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Department and all the local authorities represented here. The witnesses have given such eloquent presentations with some fantastic ideas. I am hugely supportive of the town centre living initiative. It is a great idea and one way of really getting a handle on the nub of the problem, which is the vacancy rates on our main streets and the lack of people living on them. On the main street of my town of Bailieborough I think there may be three residents left. It was once an old market town. Three people live over their premises now, and the rest of the premises are lying vacant apart from perhaps business units on the ground floors of the buildings. People are not living upstairs any more.

I have a few questions as much as observations. Will the witnesses give us an idea as to how the six towns were selected? I am really interested to know this because hundreds of towns could have been picked. That would be very interesting to know.

My next question is general, and anyone who would like to answer it can do so. Perhaps Mr. Hynes might have the insight into this. Do the witnesses feel town teams are as effective as town councils? I know that that was kind of the idea of the town teams and their introduction. Are they as effective? Are the local authorities able to deliver as much as they may have delivered with the town councils? Do the witnesses think the town teams are a good replacement of the town councils?

Ms Mulholland talked a little about her observations of the disjointedness of all the various funding streams coming at the council. Free Market and all the community groups we had before the committee last week made the same comment. Free Market, which is a research-based group, said there are lots of funding opportunities, but local authorities are scrambling to try to meet the criteria and the deadlines and find suitable and appropriate projects. Is there a better way? Free Market's observation was that there should be a coherence and a better synergy between various Departments or various funding agencies or funding streams in order that people are not scrambling around. Perhaps a more jointed approach could be taken in availing of the funding coming on stream and being able to make long-term plans. The biggest problem for local authorities is firefighting almost to have the plan ready, to be able to draw down the funding and then to meet the deadline for it. Is this prohibiting any long-term vision and strategic planning that local authorities may be trying to carry out for their towns?

Again, I think it was Ms Mulholland who talked about the arts community in her town and said it is a thriving aspect in the town. As someone who has come from that background, I know the usefulness of vacant properties to community arts groups that may be looking for venues, including temporary ones. Insurance is a massive problem for all sorts of industries, but how are community groups getting around that issue by using vacant buildings? Is this becoming a problem? Is it diminishing the ability of community groups to use vacant buildings? All local authorities could learn from this and the extent to which the arts are intrinsic to town centres.

Mr. Hynes talked about Galway 30 years ago. One third of it was vacant and derelict. We see it today as one of the European Capitals of Culture for 2020. The arts, particularly Galway International Arts Festival, have played a huge role in all that. Is there something in that model that we can use to ensure we deliver for all the towns doing magnificent work in trying to bring people back to live in them?

It would be remiss of me not to refer to the terrific work Mr. Clifford does for Monaghan County Council. He seems to know every aspect of what goes on within our local authorities

and has been intrinsic in delivering for all our towns. As he knows, I see this on the ground in Castleblayney, having a constituency office in the town itself. I refer to Hope Castle, the Market House, the gate lodges - all these historically important buildings in our towns. They have been lying vacant, and local authorities have not had the resources to be able to maintain them and their functions. We must look at all these historical buildings, including courthouses and gate lodges. Hope Castle was once a hotel. It is another magnificent building in a town that could be a huge tourist attraction. Mr. Clifford talked about the millions in funding it will take to have them as functioning buildings again. We must ask, certainly in cases such as these, from where will the funding become available to allow us to carry out the strategic planning needed to see these buildings come alive again and be the attraction they could be to our main streets? There is huge potential here, particularly in Castleblayney. Mr. Clifford talked about businesses and their engagement, which perhaps has been difficult or, to use the word he used, "low". Does he see a way of overcoming that challenge, particularly with this scheme, to try to bring people back into our towns to live in them?

Mr. Shanahan's visual aid was very impressive in terms of contemporary living. Looking at the Dermot Bannons of the world today, I think that is where young people and perhaps the not-so-young are looking in that they want homes that are easy to maintain and that can be heated and convenient. Mr. Shanahan provided something that all of us could look at: a visual aid and a plan that could be implemented in towns across the country.

I could say something about all the presentations but I will not. I would like all the witnesses to comment on something Free Market said, which was that everyone is trying to do so much, and in many ways repetitively, because we are looking at towns individually and asking what the challenges are, what the populations are and where the opportunities are. If we had one overall organisation or research team in place, we could perhaps replicate what has been done in various towns instead of trying to redo and rehash things. We could look at models that work, that are strategic and that do what they set out to achieve, that is, bringing people back into our towns. Is there an argument for having an organisation that has a national function such that if, for example, Monaghan County Council were to come out and ask for an example or model of something that has worked in a town the size of Ballybay, we could just do it rather than having to research it and to come up with a plan?

I am afraid I will have to leave because I am due to speak in the Dáil on promised legislation. I will try to get back.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I thank all the witnesses for attending and bringing with them their experience and evidence regarding the town centre living initiative and their wider experience as key stakeholders in trying to regenerate our towns in the various local authorities around the country. I also thank the Department for its input in assisting people.

One recurring theme that came up from all the evidence was the cost and viability of the regeneration of town centres. Identifying these barriers is the first step, but the biggest challenge we all face is how we actually address them to move beyond that. We should work with the witnesses as key stakeholders, the voluntary committees, representatives of which attended last week and gave very substantial evidence to the committee, and this committee, which is trying to assist in providing recommendations on what is working and not working and how best we can move on regeneration of our towns and villages around the country. I am conscious we are talking only about a pilot scheme today, but in the back of my mind I am considering all the towns around the country that need help and assistance. I have some notes made. If the committee can bear with me, I have some general questions and then some more specific ones.

The Department is represented today by two officials, Mr. Parnell and Mr. Mulherin. I acknowledge the work of the Department and the Minister, Deputy Ring, in taking the lead on the regeneration of many of our towns and villages. I am conscious it is a new Department and that it had to get up and running from a standing start only a short few years ago. I acknowledge the substantial funds coming through the Department to assist towns and villages around the country. Having said that, and this is partly the purpose of this meeting, we still need to identify how best those funds can be targeted to get the best outcomes for the various towns. Whether it is rural regeneration, town renewal, town centre living initiatives, CLÁR areas or otherwise, substantial funds are coming through the Department, which I acknowledge. Is it intended to extend the town centre living initiative beyond the pilot or is there more work to be done in it is reshaped, given the evidence we heard evidence from the voluntary committees last week, which I presume today's witnesses have read? It is important information coming from the ground up. There is also information from the local authorities today on how best we can retune that initiative and perhaps extend it for local authorities and towns throughout the country.

Local authorities have specific regeneration teams. Where does the priority on regeneration lie within the local authority system? I have specific questions on how that manifests itself. For example, two quotes from the local authorities stood out. The first was that councils are not responsible for buying properties, which I accept. However, it depends on why properties are lying vacant and derelict, and there has to be a reason that is happening. Who will take the lead with regard to moving on those properties? Is it the council or is it somebody else? The somebody else is the private investor and if it is not viable, private investors will not come in.

It is the responsibility of the local authority to buy the property. Local authorities have good tools and mechanisms available to them, and I refer to three in particular. The derelict sites legislation gives local authorities good functions and powers to address dereliction on main streets. The vacant sites levy, which was introduced only a short few years ago, is another important tool that local authorities can use if properties are not being moved on. Of course, the long-standing powers under CPO are another. I understand local authorities can be cash strapped and that funding is an issue. However, if there is strategic thinking and priority thinking, and if we mean what we are saying about prioritising our town centres, then we need to put funds into them and that needs to be matched by State funds to move everything on, using the levers and the tools that are available.

I have a question for the CCMA and perhaps for the departmental officials. Is there a measurement of the success among local authorities in how those tools are used to move on sites that are vacant or derelict in our town centres? If there is a measurement, how does the performance of local authorities compare? While understanding the barriers and costs, we do not want inactive local authorities. I want to qualify this in that all of the voluntary committees that contributed last week spoke highly of the local authorities in respect of their action and support. However, there are many reasons these properties are lying vacant, for example, economic reasons and the very reasons towns were formed in the first place, such as to be market towns and so on. Society has changed and the economy has changed, and the need for jobs to keep people living in towns is important. However, we need to measure what is working and what is not, and that is one way of doing this in respect of local authorities.

The statement that commercial activity has moved to the outer areas of towns was attributed to Mr. Hynes. That did not happen by chance; development plans and planning policy allowed it to happen. I will not blame local authority officials as the elected members of councils who adopted development plans have a significant responsibility in that regard. However, if that has

happened and it is negatively affecting our town centres, surely we need to learn from that and change that mindset. This is going back to the strategy that was proposed last week in that we need to have improved priority thinking and strategic thinking for our town centres. We need to point to where mistakes have been made and to good examples. I gave one good example last week and, luckily, it is Dungarvan in my county of Waterford, where the planning authority insisted that a new supermarket be established in the heart of the town, which has rejuvenated the town centre as a result. There are good and bad examples. Are we going to move on and learn from our mistakes to bring vibrancy back to the centre of our towns? I am practical enough to understand we cannot put supermarkets where we have streetscapes. However, there are opportunities where brownfield sites present themselves in towns and that should be the priority.

The third issue of concern regarding local authorities, which I presume is down to financing and funding, is the location of social housing. I have seen this in Waterford, where the easy option is taken, and the greenfield site at the edge of town is taken by the council as well as by private developers, because the more difficult option of addressing dereliction, ownership issues or CPO is not tackled. It is easy to parcel up a greenfield site at the edge of town and make a submission to the Department for funding, and build the ten or 12 houses there, whereas it might take much more hard work to acquire the properties on a streetscape, regenerate them, and make the argument for additional funding to get those houses lived in again. Mistakes have been made in that regard. I believe there are opportunities for local authorities, the Department and elected representatives to address that anomaly. There are bad examples of this around the country but there are opportunities to correct that. What are the views of the councils on that issue?

I have listened carefully regarding the cost element, in particular that it is more costly to regenerate properties due to conservation, legal and ownership issues and the building standards of older properties. On the other hand, there are savings to be made where existing services are available such as where sewerage, water, roads and lighting are in place and we have vacant properties sitting beside them. We need to square that one off. This is why we need to focus on these areas and see what we can do better to make regeneration happen.

With regard to Cappoquin, which I know well, it is a problem when one block of the main street has a vacancy rate of more than 40%. There have been difficulties in the town in terms of employment and change of use, which is recognised. I welcome the fact this pilot initiative has focused on residential areas and Mr. Maddock outlined what he hopes to happen. He said a philanthropic organisation, Tomar Trust, is supporting the community in Cappoquin and it has stated publicly that, where it provides funding, if the Government matches that, it will provide more funding, although I stand to be corrected on that.

I have a question for the departmental officials in this regard. Philanthropy contributions are noted specifically in the rural regeneration fund model and, where such funds exist, we are all agreed it would be very beneficial to match them with State funds because there would be a better outcome. What is the Department's position on such contributions? Perhaps they should be prioritised in order that additional funds could be accessed to make these projects happen. That might sound like a loaded question but it is not; it is a genuine question. Where private investment and philanthropy steps up to invest in community initiatives, the State should stand by to support them. Cappoquin is a perfect example of that. The town was supported under the town renewal programme, which is welcome, but it was not successful under the rural regeneration programme and I hope it will be in the future.

I have touched on many questions. I compliment the local authority officials who are pres-

ent and who are working on regeneration. I know it is not easy. There are many aspects to it, including legal, ownership, cost and viability aspects. However, we need to come up with a model that works so we can convince officialdom and whatever Government is in place at the time that it is worth investing in our towns and villages in a co-ordinated way. I support Deputy Smyth in that we should consider the establishment of a national centre of excellence for town renewal. We do not want an architect or an engineer with specialties and expertise in every town. However, we want it to be possible for local authorities to go to such a centre and get that expertise to assist them in regenerating towns. I know every town is unique and has its own selling points and assets. Something like that would certainly help local authorities where they are stretched for funds or resources. It might be something at which the committee would look in making recommendations to the Departments. I mention incentives. I have heard about the cost and viability of regenerating old properties in towns, even of the architectural work involve, for example. Even if the work of the assigned certifier in signing off on the regeneration of those properties was provided and funded by the State or local authorities, it might make it attractive for young couples to develop a property because it would take out a lot of the cost element. We will have engage in that type of thinking and initiative because the private market will not do it. I have heard today that the local authorities state it is not their responsibility to do it. That means that it will never happen if something does not change. I would like these angles to be addressed, if possible.

Senator Maura Hopkins: I thank the officials from the Department and all officials within the local authorities who are involved in the town centre living initiative. This morning's session has been really informative. I also acknowledge the local public representatives from Roscommon who are in the Visitors Gallery and familiar with the initiative in Boyle and the challenges and opportunities that arise in the rejuvenation of the town centre.

I have a number of questions, some of which have been asked. It is evident that all of the local authorities involved in the initiative have tried to be proactive, constructive and practical in trying to deal with the issues surrounding vacancies, dereliction and the regeneration of town centres. As others mentioned, the cost of redeveloping houses in town centres is a major, fundamental and core issue. The other point alongside it concerns employment. Ms Whyte gave the good statistic that 65% of young people attended third level education. However, the challenge in places such as Roscommon is to attract them back. The cost of redevelopment for the purposes of providing housing and employment is for me the core issue. It is important that there be a vision-led plan that is both realistic and practical, but I am getting the message from the presentations made that cost and employment are two of the issues involved. Mr. Hynes mentioned the need for incentives to encourage investment. I imagine they focus on the two key issues of incentivising employers to set up in rural areas and providing incentives to encourage the regeneration of residential properties. I would like to hear more about that matter because they are the two core issues.

This is an informative discussion. However, it is evident that there are a lot of common issues. Have the six local authorities been working together on this initiative? How has that process worked? I ask the officials from the Department where we go from here. Information and evidence gathering, working across communities and gathering and building a bank of evidence can only take us so far. Where do we go from here to provide support in dealing with the core issues of employment and the redevelopment of residential properties?

I am most familiar with Boyle, County Roscommon. No more than in the example of Westport given by Mr. Hynes, we need to try to build on the assets within local communities. Lough

Key is located on the edge of Boyle and a positive for the area. The long awaited cycleway between Boyle and Lough Key will be important in trying to bring people from the outskirts to the town centre, King House and Boyle Abbey. For a lot of communities, the core issue is building on their strengths and assets, but at the end of the day it all comes down to two fundamental points, on which I am interested in hearing the comments of the delegates. We need to be practical and realistic in how we deliver the initiative, but significant investment will be required. We must invest to encourage people to live in town centres, but it has to be linked with employment creation.

I am very involved in the team in Ballaghaderreen. It is positive that there are town and village rural regeneration schemes coming into play. Part of the initiative in Ballaghaderreen which has the same challenges emphasised by the delegates involves a painting scheme, but that can only do so much. We want people to have confidence in their towns which we want to look well. We want people to have pride in their areas, but we also want them to have the option of living in a town centre should they so wish and in so doing being able to access employment.

They are my thoughts which I share with the delegates. As I said, I am also involved at local level. I thank them for their presentations which have been really helpful. I hope that as a committee we can take them on board.

Chairman: I will bring in Deputy Fitzmaurice in the first round of questions. I will then go back to the officials before taking the next batch of questions.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I will get straight to the point. I welcome my colleagues from Roscommon County Council. Mr. Hynes talked about incentives. Providing money is one incentive to encourage regeneration, be it for footpaths or to make a town look well, but private property is owned by someone. Is Mr. Hynes talking about providing tax incentives to encourage people to live in certain areas? That was the model used by Seán Lemass many years ago in the case of Shannon Airport. It was also the mode used in the case of Knock airport in Mr. Hynes' county. Is he talking about the provision of similar incentives to encourage people to move back to the middle of towns?

My second question is for all of the delegates. I knew Ms McConnell in a previous life in Galway through her work in the planning process. At the planning end, there might have been five pubs in a town, two of which are now closed. Efforts might be made to turn them into something else without having to jump through all of the hoops in the planning process. I know that legislation was passed to help in that regard. Have its effects yet been felt, or are there still problems in implementing it to make the planning process easier?

What we call change of use is living over the local shop, but I am talking about a situation where someone wants to live where the shop was to be found in order to keep the town alive. Ms Whyte talked about employment opportunities. She is 100% right in that in a lot of places throughout the country, including Boyle, the lack of bed spaces is a problem. For the purposes of tourism, more bed spaces are needed. Are incentives needed in that sense? They would help kick on and provide employment.

Mr. Hynes spoke about more than 470 towns with 400 or 500 people in them. In many areas where the bigger towns have no housing available, people will rent in the small towns and villages nearby. Creggs and Athleague took part in the Pride of Place competition, which showed how a town can be brought up when a few quid is put into it. That is the nub of the issue. Three new businesses have now opened in Creggs. At the end of the day, private people are the ones

who open businesses and provide employment.

I will say one thing to the people from the Department. I do not know whether or not they would agree with this. There are many different funding streams available for politicians and council staff. It is like going through a maze trying to work out when one thing or another is coming. Could we put a calendar together showing the different schemes coming up from January to December? That way, we would know when everything was coming. There are volunteers in many of these towns trying to do their best, aided by their liaisons with councils around the country. Some of these people are working every day and are liaising with councils. They need something like this, starting at the beginning of the year. Either the local representatives or the Department could announce the schemes, after which there might be a window of opportunity of a month or two to apply. Is there something we can do to help communities and councils in that regard? They would then know what was coming in January, what to apply for in February, and so on. It is nearly like an explosion at the moment, and people could miss out on something if two different schemes are announced at the same time. We are hearing that a lot from ordinary people.

Much great work is being done in many areas. We have to provide incentives, such as giving people living in rural Ireland bigger tax breaks, for example.

My last question is for Mr. Hynes and the county managers. Is there a danger that under the 2040 housing strategy, which emphasises larger urban areas, the smaller towns might be left behind when one crunches the numbers on the number of houses allowed in certain areas?

Chairman: A number of questions have been asked together and were addressed across the board. Senator Coffey and Deputy Smyth asked about the town teams, which either Ms McConnell or Mr. Hynes referenced. Someone also asked about visual aids and County Offaly. Senator Coffey asked the Department's views on what will happen beyond this pilot. Mr. Hynes was asked about the city and county managers and the responsibility of buying property, which must be led by them as they have those powers. Senator Hopkins asked about the cost and what kind of incentives might help, which Deputy Fitzmaurice also mentioned. Senator Hopkins also asked where we go from here. Deputy Fitzmaurice asked Ms Whyte, the Department and Mr. Hynes some very targeted questions about planning. I ask the witnesses to try to avoid repetition when answering those questions. I call Mr. Parnell from the Department.

Mr. William Parnell: I will start with Deputy Smyth's questions. She asked how the towns were selected for the pilot. At the beginning of 2018, the Minister established a steering group to examine the most effective way to encourage increased residential occupancy in our towns and villages. Some schemes operated by the local authorities, for example, had not generated the levels of uptake necessary to have any real effect. That steering group included the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the Department of Finance, and a representative from the County and City Management Association, CCMA. The steering group suggested that the best way to proceed was through the development of a small number of well-planned pilot schemes that could be delivered relatively quickly by the local authority, working with the Department and other agencies. Arising from that process, those six towns were identified on the basis of a number of factors. First, we wanted some spread in the size and populations of the towns, as well as their locations. Towns from the west, the south east, the Border region and the midlands are all represented here. It is a mix of towns, some of which we would have worked with previously through other schemes such as the town and village renewal scheme. This was building on that scheme to some extent. Boyle is a good example, as it has its 2040 plan in place. These towns also had

their own particular challenges, which would enable us to test them or give them an opportunity to identify challenges and solutions. It is also a mix of historic towns, market towns and towns that might be attractive to tourists.

Deputy Smyth also asked about how to achieve replication. The objective was to use these six towns as a pilot to identify the common threads. We are now seeing some of those common threads and themes coming through very clearly, and we hope we will see solutions coming out of it as well. We hope to use the learning from this pilot to advise us in designing schemes or policies around town centre rejuvenation. This touches a bit on where we go from here, about which Senator Hopkins and others asked. The intention is to put together a final composite report, and we have commissioned someone to help us with that. By the end of the year, a draft composite report will be put together and presented to the Minister. It will summarise all the key issues, including those we have heard about today and more. It will also look at international experience to see whether there are any learnings from other countries that could be applicable here. If committee members would like to make any suggestions to the Department on that, based on these meetings, we would be very happy to receive them.

Senator Coffey asked whether we intend to extend the scheme. Ultimately, that is the Minister's prerogative. We are seeing many similar themes which are probably applicable right across the board. The question is how to take learnings from this scheme to help other towns and develop master plans. The importance of having a master plan and stakeholder engagement was one of the strong messages I heard today. It is interesting that a number of these towns are looking at clusters of houses. When we started this initiative, we thought it would be about renovating single properties. Based on our engagement and what we have heard today, it is very interesting to hear about the potential to have clusters of houses. That is an important message. There is a great amount of learning that will prove very valuable. As I stated in my opening remarks, the intention was always that the RRDF would provide an opportunity not just for these towns but also other towns to come up with proposals and develop plans to support town centre regeneration, including residential occupancy of vacant buildings. In fact, in the announcements made by the Minister last week on the RRDF, it was quite interesting to see that a number of towns were addressing the issue of vacant properties and premises. Towns such as Tulla, Virginia and Loughrea come to mind, where a vacant property, probably a public property, is being taken to try to create a civic space, community-based attraction or facility. I am very encouraged to see that happen, not just in the towns mentioned but in others that are recognising that the RRDF is a vehicle that can be used to provide multi-annual support, rather than simply an annualised pot of money.

Senator Coffey also asked about philanthropic contributions. We deliberately wrote into the terms of the fund that there would be an opportunity to provide philanthropic funds to contribute to projects. Without naming any, we have had conversations with a number of philanthropic organisations about what the Department is doing to try to revitalise rural towns. I am aware that some organisations were involved with the LEADER programme in the past in providing funding for local development companies. As a Department, we are keen to explore the development of the philanthropic sector. We are aware that there are organisations that are, and have been, willing to contribute. This is something on which we are also working.

Senator Hopkins asked about the extent to which local authorities had been working together. The Department has chaired a group involving representatives of all of the towns represented here. It has met regularly, on five or six occasions, since this initiative was established last October, including at a facilitated workshop in September that drew a wider group of inter-

ests, including some of the people the committee may have met last week. The local authorities have been working together and we will continue to try to facilitate engagement to learn lessons from it.

The Senator's comment about employment is apt and important because from what we have heard in the presentations today, there is a need for an holistic approach. Ultimately, we are trying to renovate properties and encourage people to come back to live in town centres. To do this, facilities need to be in place, as well as employment opportunities. Ms Mulholland gave a good example of how Kilkenny County Council has used other sources of funding, including the town and village renewal scheme, to build facilities to support families who might eventually move in, including recreational spaces, but the employment issue is also important. It is important to remember that funds such the RRDF and schemes such as the town and village renewal scheme have placed a focus on stimulating economic activity in rural towns. Some practical examples include investment in digital, enterprise and food hubs. Within the Department, we engage closely with the enterprise development agencies, including Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland, as well as the local enterprise offices. We are increasingly engaging in such work. The Atlantic economic corridor is a good example of an initiative where we are all working closely together, with a view to attracting investment and jobs. The point has been well made point and it is important to keep an eye on it.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I offer my apologies to the committee as I have to leave to chair the next session of the Seanad. I would appreciate it if my questions could be answered. I will read the responses later. I also apologise to the delegates, but there is nothing I can do, as I have to take the Chair.

Chairman: That is perfect. I thank the Senator.

Mr. William Parnell: I was going to finish by answering-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: A couple of points have been made. I thank Mr. Parnell for addressing the questions on the list to ascertain how we could help communities and councils.

Mr. William Parnell: I was going to finish by answering that question. At the beginning of the year, the Minister drew up a calendar of schemes, which he shared with the local authorities. He also met the chief executive officers to discuss it. We may need to think about how we can go a step further in order that local communities will have access to the calendar at an early stage. We recognised the need for the local authorities to be able to cope with schemes throughout the year.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Does it list all of the schemes available from the Department, outlining the opening and closing dates of all of the funding models in place? Would it be possible - this can also apply to the county councils - for community groups everywhere to have an email sent to them? Let the best horse then jump the fence.

Mr. William Parnell: It is exactly as outlined by the Deputy. It gives an indicative date for each of the schemes.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: That is good.

Mr. William Parnell: We will talk to our colleagues in the CCMA to see how the information can be filtered down.

Mr. Peter Hynes: I am sorry Senator Coffey is not present because I wanted to address his question about responsibility.

Chairman: Mr. Hynes's answer will be available to be read; nonetheless, as Senator Coffey said, he had to leave to chair the Seanad.

Mr. Peter Hynes: I understand that, but I wanted to see the colour of his eyes. I will talk to him directly about it because the issue is hugely important. Responsibility for delivering on the renewal of smaller towns and villages lies, unequivocally, with local authorities, about which there is no question. We need Departments, agencies and a great many people to be involved with funding, but in the heel of the hunt, it is a matter for the local authorities to deliver. We accept this and absolutely prioritise the matter, although some have it higher on their list of priorities. The position in each county and local authority is different. Priorities vary across local authorities. That is why, as the committee will be aware, they are independent, but we absolutely accept that the responsibility to deliver on the renewal of towns and villages is ours.

The second point I wish to make, about which I will also speak to Senator Coffey directly, is that there is a model in place. We are suggesting there is enough learning and that the scheme will provide further learning. We do not need to look outside the country or at other places as much as we think we might need to do. The CCMA suggests the following elements, which I have included on a slide are essential to the model in place: community engagement at the start which must include everyone in the town or village; a vision or plan, that is, some notion as to where one wants to go, as otherwise it will be haphazard opportunism; and investment, which is related to the point I was making about the description of Westport, which was transformed under the seaside resort scheme. The scheme receives a lot of bad press, which is sometimes deserved, but in the case of Westport, partly because there was a plan before the scheme was put in place, partly because there was engagement with stakeholders and partly because there was a very good town council - I will come to the question about town councils - to oversee it, transformed the town. It is about implementation and leadership given by the local authority. This is a common theme which should come across in all of the submissions made.

I believe Deputy Smyth asked about town councils. It is fairly clear that it is better to have a small number of councils with local representation, local control and local resources than if that is spread. Having said that, we had three town councils. We have 30 towns that are of magnitude. Deputy Fitzmaurice talked about towns with a population of less than 500. We have 800 settlements with a population of more than 250, each of which is important. The flip side of the town council amalgamation into the municipal district model is that more towns are getting a fairer share of the cake and places such as Newport and Mulrany in our case - there are others throughout the country - are doing far better than they would have done in the old system and I think that is recognised. There are balances in it.

On setting up a central agency or a centre of excellence, there was a centre of excellence under the National Building Agency, NBA, back in the 1980s. It dealt with urban design and its first CEO was Derek Tynan. That worked very well for some time. I am not sure why it moved on. There is certainly a case to be made for having a centre of shared knowledge and shared expertise. We suggested in the presentation that that should reside in a public body or a Department. There are pros and cons over which Department it might sit in. The learning from this scheme might influence where it might sit. I would strongly argue that a base level of skills is required in each local authority to be able to deliver for all of those 400 or 800 settlements. Whether it is located in Athlone, Castlebar, Westport or Dublin, the whole of the country cannot be tripping to one place for guidance. They must have the capacity to do some of their own and

that is about capacity building.

I am aware of time and I do not want to hog this but I want to deal with some of the questions put. I think I speak for all local authorities in saying that having incentives to guide investment back into the core towns and villages is crucial. I am not from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform but I would guess that with 800 settlements, 400 of them reasonably large, and the kind of investment needed, it will be very hard to find the resources from the public purse. The only other option is some kind of tax-driven private investment scheme. That debate will arise from the findings of the pilot scheme.

On out-of-town shopping, would we do it again? Perhaps we would do it differently. It was not all about planning. Many small towns and villages just cannot accommodate the size of unit that consumers are demanding. In some towns we have been successful in keeping that focus in the centre of town and in others less so. The move to online shopping will change all that radically anyway. Perhaps in the not-too-distant future, we will be looking to repurpose edge-of-town, big-box shopping outlets because of where Amazon, Google and the drone world have taken us. That may be a question for another day.

On the question of the arts and creativity, that is an extremely important point that we would all take on board. Not all cheap space is bad space. Sometimes it is an advantage to have space that is slightly less used and slightly less in demand because it can accommodate fringe activities and it can accommodate an arts and creativity aspect to towns and villages, which is really important.

When saying that it is not our responsibility to deal with dereliction, I believe the point being made is that it is not our responsibility to deal with all dereliction and there is a balance. Every local authority has used CPO and derelict sites legislation to facilitate either private development or to build our own developments, much of it housing. However, we cannot have the core of every town and village dominated by public housing; it just will not work. It is about balance and I think that was the point being made rather than shirking any responsibility.

On incentives, we will need to use grants, subsidies, supports, which are and will be limited, or tax breaks to try to incentivise private development. I believe Senator Hopkins talked about confidence. Confidence is a big part of it which is why we talked about changing the narrative. If we could get a “Grand Designs” or Dermot Bannon-type programme around living in small towns which actually shows how good it is and can be, then I think that narrative might start to change. It has worked. One hears about Clonakilty, Kinsale and other places, but it is a 20-year programme and this is a very important step in it. We could go on for a very long time because it is a very big priority for local authorities.

I will allow others to make some contributions.

Chairman: I know Mr. Hynes has given a comprehensive overview on behalf of the local authorities. I believe he has addressed the questions. I am conscious that we have only ten minutes left.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Just one-----

Chairman: I am sorry Deputy. I will call Senator Murnane O’Connor and Deputy-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: For the record-----

Chairman: We need to wrap it up.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I welcome this. I welcome Mary Mulholland. I am from Carlow, and Carlow and Kilkenny work together. The scheme needs to be promoted more. I was going to ask how the six towns were picked and that has already been answered. Was a specific allocation made to each of the six towns picked? Is there special funding for them and if so how much?

There was considerable discussion of vacant properties. I have great concern about vacant properties. It is great that we will work with these six towns, which I welcome. However, my town of Carlow has vacant property levies. Those levies are very substantial irrespective of the local authority. In the last budget we went from anything over 6,000 which was originally a 5% levy it has now gone from anything over 6,000 to a 30% levy. That is not an incentive. The bigger picture here with all local authorities together with this is the fact that we need to give incentives, even in these small towns but also in Carlow itself.

I have another issue about rates and I do not know if that was brought up. A revaluation was done between 2014 and 2018 and I believe only 20% of the properties were actually visited. I believe 80% of them were done through maps. These are issues the witnesses might take into consideration in the plan they are doing because these are major issues. For example, Carlow does not get half the capital funding we should get. It all boils down to money. We need to ensure that smaller towns and villages, like Carlow and others, get the capital funding they are not getting. I have many more questions but I know I have to be respectful.

Overall, I think it is good, but on a bigger picture there are major issues that need to be looked at in the 31 local authorities, certainly in my own area.

Chairman: I thank the Senator for her co-operation. We have had a very constructive meeting. I thank all the witnesses for their work on this very important issue of regenerating our village and town centres, making them a more attractive place in which to live and work. Considerable work remains to be done. I highlight Mr. Hynes's contribution. What he said is key in terms of getting community engagement as a start, getting that plan in place and then drawing down the necessary resources to implement that plan. That is exactly what we heard last week from the community organisations. Westport is put up there as the poster child and it has won national awards. It would not have achieved those objectives if it did not have that master plan back in the day. As has been said, it was a 20-year project and it is reaping the rewards of that. The resources followed as well, which is key.

The job of work done by each local authority is important. There is certainly a crossover between Castleblayney and the Waterford experience. There is so much overlap there. So much must, and should, be learned. I compliment the Minister for coming up with this initiative and the officials for working closely with the various different groups but we need to learn the lessons from this and enable local authorities to work more closely with communities and provide the necessary resources to bridge the gaps that are there.

Mr. Hynes said that we do not need to look outside this State. In his initial contribution, he said that Mayo County Council has adopted the Scottish approach to community futures. This ties in with what Free Market said last week because it is pushing the Scottish approach, which seems to have been adopted by the county council. What is his thinking on that?

Deputy Stanley has just returned. I understand the pressure he is under. We are trying to

wrap the meeting up but I know he wants to make a contribution. Could he make his contribution and I will then ask every organisation represented here to give a one-minute wrap-up? We will then adjourn.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I had to pop in and out of the meeting. Regarding the range of funding, one of the previous speakers mentioned a calendar so that one would know when the scheme opens and closes and that would provide a brief on the scheme. I find that one can get fazed by the whole thing. I know from talking to people in the various towns who are trying to access funding for groups, villages and towns that they find this to be a problem as well. One local authority official told me that it is €30,000 here, €27,000 there and €60,000 somewhere else. It tends to have little impact. It is a bit like the decentralisation scheme in 2003 to which there was a scattergun approach that did not have as much of an impact as it could have had. Perhaps the departmental officials will address that point.

My next question is for Mr. Shanahan. I am familiar with Boyle and was interested in the contribution on that town because if I go to Donegal, I always stop in Boyle. I have noticed in recent years that the town become very dilapidated. Some work is now being done and it is looking a lot better. It is typical of a lot of towns. In the area in which I live in - Laois-Offaly - one could pick out ten towns that have suffered the same fate but Boyle was particularly badly hit. Could Mr. Shanahan address the question of Banagher? A couple of things strike me about it, one of which is the use of the old convent, which he mentioned in his statement. What kind of use could this be put to because I know Mountrath had a similar building? Most of the towns around had a quarter where the schools and religious buildings were located. Many of them are now derelict. What use could they be put to?

Regarding vacant premises, town centres have been hollowed out for a number of reasons. They contain dilapidated buildings that are difficult to bring up to any kind of modern living standards and the bungalow blitz means people live two or three miles out of town and nobody lives in the town centre. The buildings are old and dilapidated, and this is replicated in different towns and counties. In some cases, these buildings have large back gardens. In the case of many of them, should we not just face reality and accept that what is needed is a ball and chain, knock them down, build new streets off the main street and get people living in the town centres? There are signs that this is happening in some towns, though not through any great master plan. It is happening on an *ad hoc* basis, which is not the best.

Perhaps we would be better off accepting the fact that some of these houses will never be lived in again. I worked in a town that had 21 pubs. Four of them remain and I think a fifth one is struggling. It might come back to life but it might not. Circumstances have changed. People shop differently. There used to be halfway houses such as the pub and the grocery shop, which are now gone. It used to be the case that there was a pub on one side of the building and a grocery shop on the other. Would we be better off in some cases being more radical and saying that what is needed is people housed on the streets because the town centres are deserted? The housing estates in Monasterevin were built in fields almost as if pieces of Lego were dropped from a helicopter. They are all outside the town. This has happened in a range of towns throughout the country.

I agree with Mr. Shanahan that there are many good services on the main street in Banagher with which I am very familiar. There is a fine monument up on the hill to Peter Barnes and James McCormack, which is a lovely feature at the top of the town. Listed buildings come into play when it comes to a ball and chain. We need to recognise reality. I was a county councillor and questioned this several times with regard to our county development plan. It listed build-

ings where the owner did not have the money to maintain them; where in some cases, we did know who the owner was; or where nothing would ever happen and nobody would ever live in them again. If one drives into any town in the middle of the day, one can see that in many of them, the main streets are deserted. We have to get people living in them to create businesses in them again, and provide childcare facilities. Banagher is lucky, as Mr. Shanahan pointed out. He identified pretty well that it has schools. What about listed buildings and demolition?

Sometimes other factors come in play. An estate in Banagher earmarked for a housing association was mentioned. One of the estates built back in the noughties on the right hand side past Corrigan's pub flooded in recent times. The statement said that the bottom half of the town had the greatest amount of dereliction. That is very pronounced. Is it not the case that some of that relates to flood risk because the bottom of the town is prone to flooding? Are there other reasons apart from dereliction that people are reluctant to go in and spend money in those areas and live in them?

Chairman: There are seven groups here. I ask each party to wrap up. Could they address the issues raised by Deputy Stanley and reflect on the meeting as whole? I will begin with the departmental officials.

Mr. William Parnell: I said that there is a lot of learning from today for all of us so I do not need to go back on that. Deputy Stanley asked about a calendar. Deputy Fitzmaurice had just raised that issue. A calendar was circulated by the Minister to the chief executive officers at the beginning of this year. We were talking about the need to ensure that this information gets down to local communities so it is something we will work on with the CCMA.

Deputy Stanley said that small amounts can sometimes have little impact. What we have done over the past two years since the Department was established is establish a range of different schemes. Schemes such as CLÁR or the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme that provide small amounts can have a significant impact on those areas. We have a range of schemes up to the rural regeneration and development fund, where the minimum amount we pay in a grant is €500,000, so we have provided a range of different services.

Senator Coffey asked about funding for each of the projects here today. It was outlined earlier that each project has been provided with up to €100,000 just to develop the ideas from here.

Mr. Peter Hynes: Ms McConnell will take the main ones but I will respond very briefly to the questions that were asked. On the question of the revaluation, that was an exercise carried out by the Valuation Office and we are in the next wave. The process is that the Valuation Office took samples and then valued properties based on those samples. If anyone affected had a problem or an issue, they had a right to appeal. It was a sample-based process.

To respond to the Chairman, we are not suggesting that we do not learn and continue to learn from outside. Senator Coffey posed the key question, which is when we can have a model. We are suggesting that, communally, with further learning to come from this welcome scheme, we have a model that is about community, vision, investment and implementation, and it is the responsibility of the local authority. My point is that we do not need to look outside much more. We can get started and roll it out.

Ms Catherine McConnell: It comes down to three points. There is a huge willingness and appetite for this among communities and the local authority sector. The leadership that is needed, as Mr. Hynes explained, is well established in the local authorities, with the support of

the Department and the communities on the ground. It then comes down to how we make that happen. Engaging the private sector through incentives is key to this. The moneys that have flowed through the various schemes have been hugely valuable but until the private sector is fully engaged in this through incentives, we will not see the kind of impact on the ground that we are hoping for. It is about selling our town centres as places where people want to live, and that is about two issues, the quality of life and the return on their investment. They need to see that what they spend on their home will be over and above what they had anticipated.

Ms Mary Mulholland: Deputy Smyth asked me several direct questions. I made reference to piecemeal schemes. My point is that we are identifying from this pilot a need to have a strategic plan on a page and that the valuable funding streams available to support all the different initiatives need to be aligned to match that plan on a page, which is the ultimate objective. They all have significant value individually but, cumulatively, they would have more. It is about lining up the strategy with the funding streams, which all have significant value in their own right.

Mr. Hynes dealt with the issue of the arts. The arts community also has separate funding streams and it is about integrating all of those objectives. Culture makes a place, especially in small communities, so it is about aligning them. That is not necessarily to say there is anything wrong with them being piecemeal but it is about aligning them with a plan on a page.

To clarify, the objective is to have living, vibrant town centres and mixed tenure is essential to achieve that. It is certainly the responsibility of the local authorities to co-ordinate and formulate the strategic plan. However, the delivery has a public and a private requirement or, otherwise, it will not be sustainable. I agree with Ms McConnell that there is an appetite in the communities. The recent investment under the various schemes, such as the town and village scheme, the RRDF or the outdoor recreation scheme, and the plethora of smaller investments that have been made, are increasing the public appetite to engage in this type of strategic approach. We need to grasp that opportunity and maximise its impact.

Mr. Paul Clifford: It is long-term planning that we need as it is possibly the 1960s since some of these towns saw the best days. It has to be local authority-led. Community involvement is critical to that, as Mr. Hynes outlined. Once we have the community engaged, we need incentives and they need to be ongoing, not just short-term. There are two areas of focus, the public realm and public buildings, and we can lead the way on that.

Chairman: What were those two areas?

Mr. Paul Clifford: The public realm and public buildings. Many authorities have ownership of old courthouses and former public buildings in need of renovation. The second element relates to the private sector and the conversion of former retail outlets into housing, and regeneration of old terraced housing or substandard housing to get people back living there.

Mr. Tom Shanahan: In response to Deputy Stanley in regard to the convent building to which he referred, that belongs to the Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board and it is the subject of a current planning application, so I will not say more on it than that. The building I referred to in the presentation is another building in the town centre which we are looking to purchase for development into a community-remote working hub.

I take the Deputy's point on the challenge in regard to listed buildings. With regard to demolishing these and looking to a type of greenfield development, these streets are very much the character of the town and we risk losing the town centre character by setting back the

streetscape, which is not always possible given they are listed buildings. There is an example in the presentation where we look at how decent sized back gardens could be used to extend and modernise these units into modern-type houses that would be more attractive to family living.

In general, the key point is incentives for the individual property owners in these areas because of how expensive it is to develop these buildings. The community engagement stakeholder element is important and the local authority is best placed to lead that. There is a palpable sense of optimism out there to develop and try to regenerate these towns. The funding schemes in place for town and village regeneration are certainly acting as a catalyst or a seed to get this going and it is that good mix of public realm and public funding, along with the private property owner piece and the incentives, that is needed.

Ms Nollaig Whyte: I reiterate that Roscommon County Council has a strong commitment to regeneration and there are two ways we show that. First, we have just set up a multidisciplinary team to cover the entire county. Second, the largest catalyst in Boyle was the purchase of the Royal Hotel site. Through having that site and getting the planning ready, we were ready for the RRDF funding that has stimulated the rest of the work we have done. There is an interest and a passion from people on the street. In June, some of the people who had lived on the street came back to the works and told us their story. Additional properties began to be done up as a result of the historic towns initiative. Sometimes, it is just a question of seeing a bit of confidence. However, the added incentive of having a financial contribution towards doing the work makes a big difference. It needs to be sustainable so we need a three-way partnership between the local authority, the community and property owners, and the employers to provide jobs in the area.

Mr. Rupert Maddock: I want to concentrate on one area. The long-term objective is to change the mindset regarding living in towns and villages. Particularly in rural areas, there is this concept of having a front and back garden, and we want to try to swing that across to something that makes towns and villages attractive, for example, where people are close to services, the buildings themselves can be very attractive to live in and people do not need to be a taxi service driving their kids around. In that regard, we had a meeting with an auctioneer who gave us grounds for optimism that there would be a market for residential units in towns and villages.

The other point is that the only realistic option for use in Cappoquin is primarily residential in the long run. As was mentioned earlier, the pubs are going and a lot of the commercial sector is leaving, but if it was largely residential, that would drive some local services. Our study has shown that affordability has to be addressed. We largely found that the sale price of the property only covers the development cost and when this is added to the acquisition cost of the property, it does not match the sale price of the property.

Chairman: I thank the witnesses for a very constructive meeting.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.20 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 27 November 2019.