



## **Town Centre First Advisory Group (TCF AG)**

### **Minutes of Meeting 1**

**Date:** Friday 18<sup>th</sup> December 2020

**Venue:** Via WebEx

**Attendees:** **Minister of State Peter Burke** (DHLGH), **Maria Graham** (DHLGH), **JP Mulherin** (DRCD), **Martin Colreavy** (DHLGH), **Paul Hogan** (DHLGH), **Alma Walsh** (DHLGH), **Patricia Curran** (DHLGH), **Ciara Doherty** (DRCD), **James Fitzpatrick** (DHLGH)

**Caroline Brady** (North East Regional Enterprise Plan), **Fiona Mansergh** (Dept. of Health), **Tara Buckley** (Retail Grocery Dairy & Allied Trades Association), **Virginia Teehan** (The Heritage Council), **Brendan O'Loughlin** (Offaly Local Development Company), **Angela McEvoy** (Irish Planning Institute), **Conor Norton** (Technological University Dublin), **Orla Murphy** (UCD School of Architecture), **Nathalie Weadick** (Irish Architecture Foundation), **Seamus Boland** (Irish Rural Link), **Finbarr Filan** (Chair Sligo Tidy Towns / Sligo BID), **David O'Connor** (Property Industry Ireland - IBEC), **Joe McGrath** (CCMA), **Tommy Ryan** (All-Island Local Authority Programme), **Mary Hoade** (Association of Irish Local Government), **Kevin Lynch** (Southern Regional Assembly), **Una May** (Sport Ireland), **Noelle Sweeney** (The Housing Agency), **Kathryn Meghen** (RIAI), **James Boyle** (IDA Ireland), **Michael MacAree** (NTA), **Karl Fitzmaurice** (ETBI), **Paddy Mathews** (Fáilte Ireland)

**Apologies:** **James Benson** - Construction Industry Federation (CIF)  
**Morris Conway** - Town Centre Living Initiative (TCLI)  
**John Knox** - Irish League of Credit Unions (ILCU)

## **1. Introductions & Background**

The Chair, Peter Burke TD, Minister of State with responsibility for Local Government and Planning, opened the meeting. He gave a brief background to the Group with reference to the Programme for Government and the Town Centre First initiative. The purpose of the Advisory Group (AG) is to harness the potential and capacity of a broad range of sectors including representation from the public sector, business, environmental, social and knowledge based sectors to guide strategic thinking and decision-making in the preparation of a TCF approach. The AG will also inform the work of the Inter Departmental Group and provide updates, reports or advice as required.

The Minister thanked the representatives for volunteering their time and expertise in participating on the group.

## **2. Town Centre Living Initiative Report**

JP Mulherin (DRCD) made a presentation to the Group regarding the Town Centre Living Initiative. The presentation covered the challenges facing town centre living that were identified, and the suggested actions outlined in the Report. The presentation concluded with key reflections on the TCLI and how these will be useful in progressing the TCF initiative.

## **3. Draft Terms of Reference for the Advisory Group (led by DHLGH)**

Martin Colreavy (DHLGH) made a presentation on the Town Centre First (TCF) draft Terms of Reference for the AG, and specifically the four broad Pillars that will frame consideration by the AG / IDG. He outlined the timeframe for the IDG, which is co-led by DHLGH/DRCD, and how the work of the AG will dovetail into and support their work. Martin also outlined the intention of establishing three working groups under each pillar that will allow for more detailed consideration of specific or more specialised areas and these will feed into and support the work of the IDG.

The aim is that the IDG would report to Government by the end of Q2 in 2021, with recommendations on a TCF framework. Town Centre First (TCF) AG members discussed various aspects of the challenges facing towns and identified their involvement in other initiatives and supports of particular relevance to the work of the AG. Overall, the AG welcomed the TCF initiative and in particular the inclusive approach of involving key stakeholders.

## **4. Stakeholder Advisory Group – Discussion and Contributions**

A number of stakeholder representatives made positive contributions and suggestions in relation to progressing work on the TCF more generally and also in the context of the work of the AG and the working groups to be established. While the contributions were varied, there were a number of recurring themes identified, which are set out further below.

In summary, the single most important issue identified by all stakeholders is the need for community buy-in through early engagement with all relevant parties, such as householders, retailers, employers, community groups, local authorities, private sector and public sector, young and old etc. Generally the view expressed by the participants was that that while there is sufficient policy around towns centre regeneration and a number of dedicated funding streams (albeit with more joining up), the success of the TCF initiative will depend ultimately on how well it is implemented, which in turn is dependent on trust and buy-in by all stakeholders in the town.

### Recurring themes

- No one size fits all, community leaders must be at the fore, the need for joined up thinking including identification and streamlining of diverse and discrete funding sources, collaborative, cross sectional, cross county border /hinterland approach;
- This is a real opportunity to achieve something enduring and tangible; however existing town centre layouts and physical fabric of the town may dictate/restrict how much can be achieved;
- Unique components need to be identified in each town, noting that the main street functions differently to the other streets as you fan out from centre. Spatial plans at national level and how that can be translated at town level needs to be examined. Also, need to consider other national sectoral plans and strategies, all of which impact on towns;
- TCF development and implementation must be action led, there is sufficient policy already, there must be a willingness to embrace major change, create a low carbon society etc., if we are to be carbon neutral by 2050;
- Funding has helped but it is insufficient and too scattered to arrest decline, further strong investment/funding state/private sector required;
- It is important to have safe, attractive, vibrant towns, with suitable employment opportunities in order to attract business and talent. Mechanisms to address vacant buildings and dereliction needs to be developed;
- Urban Realm – if edge of town green field sites are more attractive and offer less investment risk, make it financially unattractive to build out of town, offer fiscal incentives to locate to town centres, refurbish old buildings, heritage building etc;
- Place making – and with raised awareness due to Covid 19, people value attractive towns where they can work and raise a family. Develop modern use for old buildings (work spaces/employment hubs), make it viable to work and live in historic buildings;

- ✓ The concept of “Town Centre First” needs to be made attractive to *rural Ireland*, how the message is delivered needs to be carefully managed.
- ✓ It is vital to create night time activities for town centres, to ensure they are vibrant at all times – important to avoid ghost towns at night;
- ✓ Town Centre Health Check is important but is only a snapshot in time, need to develop from that starting point. Need to look at success in UK towns including the Scottish model TCF;
- ✓ Good examples of successful towns are Kinsale, Clonakilty, Westport – explore why and how. Tipperary Town revitalisation project also a good model to review.
- ✓ Role of the Local Authorities in town centre regeneration is crucial and they will be key drivers of the TCF development and implementation. CCMA are fully committed to the TCF principles and many Local Authorities are already embedded in town initiatives.
- ✓ Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) are an important mechanism for development of town centres and already have established mechanisms in place e.g. purple flag.
- ✓ Project Reimagine (funded by Creative Ireland) brings together architects and local partners, enabling communities to play an active role in their development. Use existing mechanisms where available – need to hear from other groups on town projects they are involved with.

## **5. Next Steps/Conclusion**

- ✓ A number of Group members expressed an interest in making a presentation on their own experience of town centre projects at future meetings. The Chair, Minister Burke, said he was open to this suggestion, not just in relation to towns but also in the context of broader rural policy;
- ✓ The intention is to prepare a position paper for Government towards May/June (prepared by the IDG), with the support of the AG and the three working groups. The importance of working at pace was highlighted but it was noted that detail is also important;
- ✓ It is envisaged that there would be two to three more meetings (at least) of the AG; ideally they will be a week or two in advance of, and feed into, the IDG meetings where applicable;
- ✓ The mapping exercise to consolidate details of existing projects/mechanisms and funding streams is currently underway by the two departments and will provide the essential landscape for the TCF work to be taken forward;

- Group members were asked to revert with written submissions in regard to the documentation circulated for the meeting and to specify the relevant or primary pillar (accepting that there will be overlaps between the four pillars) to which they apply;
- They were also asked to identify potential related sectoral policies/initiatives (whether individually or others involved in relevant town projects etc.) under each pillar for circulation, bearing in mind that Pillar 4 (Coordinating investment and resources) will encompass the other three Pillars;
- The Chair extended his thanks again to AG members for their time and expertise. He acknowledged the commitment of all the stakeholders present. Stressing the importance of moving things quickly and maximising the opportunity presented by the TCF initiative, the Chair asked members to revert to the Department as soon as possible and is looking forward to working with the AG in the new year.

Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

18<sup>th</sup> December 2020



## Town Centre First Advisory Group (TCF AG)

### Draft Minutes of Meeting 2

**Date:** Friday 5<sup>th</sup> March 2021

**Venue:** Via WebEx

**Attendees:** **Chair - Minister of State Peter Burke** (DHLGH), **William Parnell** (DRCD), **JP Mulherin** (DRCD), **Maedhbh Cronin** (DETE) **Martin Colreavy** (DHLGH), **Alma Walsh** (DHLGH), **Patricia Curran** (DHLGH), **James Fitzpatrick** (DHLGH)

**Caroline Brady** - North East Regional Enterprise Plan, **James Lavelle** (DTTAS), **Tara Buckley** - Retail Grocery Dairy & Allied Trades Association (RGDATA), **Michael O'Brien** - The Heritage Council, **Brendan O'Loughlin** - Offaly Local Development Company, **Angela McEvoy** - Irish Planning Institute (IPI), **Nathalie Weadick** - Irish Architecture Foundation (IAF), **Finbarr Filan** - Chair Sligo Tidy Towns / Sligo BID, **David O'Connor** - Property Industry Ireland - IBEC, **Joe McGrath** - County and City Management Association (CCMA), **Tommy Ryan** - All-Island Local Authority Programme, **Mary Hoade** - Association of Irish Local Government (AILG), **Kevin Lynch** - Southern Regional Assembly (SRA), **Una May** - Sport Ireland, **Noelle Sweeney** - The Housing Agency, **Kathryn Meghen** - Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI), **James Boyle** - IDA Ireland, **Paddy Mathews** - Fáilte Ireland, **John Knox** - Irish League of Credit Unions (ILCU), **Morris Conway** - Town Centre Living Initiative (TCLI), **Lorraine Hosty** - Construction Industry Federation (CIF), **John Sheehan** - Local Authorities Members Association (LAMA), **Shane Conneely** - Chambers Ireland, **Sarah Sherlock** - Society of Chartered Surveyors of Ireland (SCSI), **Julie Farrelly** - Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI), **Philip Crowe** (UCD School of Architecture).

**Apologies:** **Michael MacAree** - National Transport Authority (NTA), **Conor Norton** - Technological University Dublin.

**Karl Fitzmaurice** - Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)  
**Seamus Boland** - Irish Rural Link

## **1. Introductions & Background**

The Chair, Peter Burke TD, Minister of State with responsibility for Local Government and Planning, opened the meeting.

The Minister thanked the representatives for their input and informed the group that the Department had received a number of significant submissions to date. The Minister outlined how feedback going forward is important and how it can be specific and targeted.

The process will require a multi layered approach with a need to harness a broad range of information, which is underpinned by the diverse representation of the group. The process is taking shape: following the initial development stages through the forum of the Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) and Advisory Group, the agreed key pillar areas have formed the basis of the working groups (WGs) now set up, these will focus on 1) Governance & Enabling Structures 2) Economic & Social Purpose and 3) Living Towns Approach. The WGs have commenced work over February/March to inform a draft proposal for discussion/development over April/May.

The Advisory Group will continue to feed into and run parallel with the three Working Groups, with the intended target of the Inter-departmental Group reporting back to Government in June 2021.

## **2. Presentation by Philip Crowe, UCD, Centre for Irish Towns (CfIT)**

Dr. Philip Crowe gave an overview on Centre for Irish Towns (CfIT) and an outline of key related recommendations of the Pilot Town Centre Living Initiative (TCLI) in terms of TCF.

## **3. Question and Answer Session/dialogue on item 2 and more generally**

The Advisory Group found the presentation useful and interesting, with gave rise to a broad range of questions and general discussion. Key issues addressed included the following:

- lack of data / evidence and joined-up thinking;
- Population nationally has increased since 1991 while a significant proportion of the population live in towns and rural settings – need to explore how to facilitate further population growth in towns, which will be ultimate success factor (post Covid remote working might assist);
- the importance of having an architect to drive the vision for the town e.g. successful towns like Westport and Clonakilty have a dedicated town architect as opposed to towns that are struggling who do not have (such as Ballinrobe for example);
- financial supports essential and provision of services essential to support towns, in particular the lack of water/waste water services by Irish Water is problematic and needs to be addressed in the context of the National Development Plan;
- there is a need for appropriate infrastructure to support town living (in terms of being provided or upgraded) – this is an essential element to attract people to live in towns;

- it was noted that essential services being withdrawn from Town Centres – e.g. banks, post offices etc.;
- Town Centre Health Checks undertaken to date provide useful learnings – however before embarking on more there is a need to use these findings to progress TCF framework and support other towns;
- a pilot project was suggested to monitor the issues, identify barriers and find solutions, fast track success in terms of TCF framework, achieve a quick win and gain confidence in the process;
- Portlaoise Town Team is a good example - works well, pulls together all strands, how a town should function and operate: the team collaborates with elected members/business/community groups , young/old - towards common goals set in an action plan/vision statement for a better town centre;
- Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) have a Sustainable Energy Network comprising over 500 communities which has a lot of data that might be useful to the TCF (SEAI fund them to masterplan their energy use, transport, fuel etc.) - it is done by the Community but SEAI provide a member for each LA area (not LA based). This might be a useful tool to roll out many of the TCF objectives - integrate together Town vision/statements/ goals/regeneration strategies etc. SEAI can provide this to the Group;
- need to revert to location-based information/longstanding needs – overlapping data, if mapped, can be better understood; support a holistic/multidisciplinary approach requires geospatial focus for vision/delivery; data harmonisation/Unify data/integrate into existing structure E.g. Geohive, MyPlan etc. support and facilitate better outcomes; also current development of National Digital Database on recreation amenities;
- Achieving behavioural change is critical – a disproportionate emphasis on capital spending without taking into consideration need to influence behavioural change will not work.

The Chair, Minister Burke, thanked the Group for their valuable contributions, noting the very good points that will feed into the development of a TCF framework. In terms of Irish Water, Minister Burke indicated that DHLGH are currently in discussions with the body in the context of the NDP review, noting that we need to unlock the potential that exists and he is working to do his best in that regard.

#### **4. Update from Chairs of Pillar Working Groups and role of Advisory Group/Submissions overlap**

##### **Martin Colreavy (DHLGH) Chair Governance & Enabling Structures**

MC spoke to the Inter-departmental Group (IDG) TCF Framework paper that had been circulated to the Group in advance of the meeting, and highlighted key issues including the details about the shape and structure of the IDG and the Working Groups, and their interaction. Valuable feedback (10 submissions) to date from the Advisory Group, and more will be welcome.



To date, the Governance and Enabling WG has met twice and various themes are emerging.

In terms of Governance, the issues identified include the need to put in place:

- a central /accessible portal or dashboard
- a national toolkit
- research and evidence base
- National network with oversight group - reporting back to Government - indicators of change

From an Enabling perspective, the key themes identified include:

- issues around delivery and implementation
- Establishment of Town Team/Team Officer that is LA based (but multi-disciplinary comprising all stakeholders including community)
- Need for vision/enabling plan (drawing on URDF / RRDF)
- Investment in demonstration projects including pilot roll-out
- Capital investment programme (multi-annual) combined with fiscal supports.

Summarising work to date, Martin outlined that over 15 funding streams and many Town related policies had been identified. There are many overlapping themes across the three working groups, such as:

- No single solution, must be tailored
- Central Portal/Dashboard
- Need for a Toolkit to be developed
- Research/Evidence based
- Pilot/National rollout in parallel

MC suggested some Advisory Group members might like to address/engage with the relevant working groups, where they see themselves adding value and offered members to get in direct contact with the chairs

### **Maedhbh Cronin (DETE) Chair Economic & Social Purpose**

- Similar issues arising here as in other WGs
- Holistic approach - wider community involvement - not limited to main street, not just about vacancy etc.
- Future proofing plans (to be a requirement for funding)
- Community driven
- Emphasis to be placed on night-time economy
- Needs to be properly resourced, streamline funding – look to the long-term and multi-annual funding
- Currently there is too much focus on capital funding and not sufficient funding to build capacity in people
- Unify checklists – broaden out to include social inclusion etc.

- Diversity in employment/business/housing – incentives that attract people to living in towns
- Potential of Business to sponsor /find TCF /towns regeneration

### **JP Mulherin (DRCD) Chair Town Living Town Approach**

- WG has met twice with another scheduled for following week
- Reaffirmed the overlapping themes across the three working groups – the three WG Chairs are collaborating on the issues /solutions
- Issues include access to expertise/capacity building/plan action focused with funding to deliver
- Some Towns come together already and are active – it's not those Towns that require help
- Not everyone thinks Town Centre living is a good thing or attractive- the message needs to be sold
- Behavioural change required/ effect change at local level /collective-Grouping support
- Revert to /use location-based information

## **5. Open dialogue and contributions from Advisory Group members**

### **Other Key Points**

- Regional Assemblies (RAs) are well positioned - RSES recognise and prioritise towns
- RAs share the view that lack of infrastructure is a major blockage to town regeneration- needs to be unlocked
- RAs manage European funding and can tap into funding opportunities
- A lot of work has been done by RAs on Towns in terms of geometrics, Covid-related work, community /residential data across the three regions and can assist with that information
- Traditional models vs circular /sharing economy – probably covered by “future-proofing” concept but conversation with Economic & Social Purpose WG suggested
- Health Check endorsed but caution urged – need to create mechanisms for Towns who have undergone health check to start progressing implementation and progress on the towns
- No point in creating/reinventing more - harmonise/utilise what is there already
- Geo-spatial framework is missing – geo-hive should be expanded
- Offers from some Group members to make presentations if required

The Chair, Minister Burke again thanked the Group for their engagement and valuable input – all will be useful in progressing the development of TCF Framework.

Martin Colreavy brought proceeding to a close, thanked the Minister and the Group members for their time. He advised the group that the contact details of the WG Chairs will be shared with the Group for bi-laterals with them if desired. Martin again invited further submissions and indicated that submissions, along with a summary of same, will be circulated to the Group in due course. Also the output of the working groups once summarised will be co-shared with the Advisory Group for input.

MC stressed that the high level objectives must be converted into targeted actions for submission to Government for consideration. He noted that some issues will need to be re-visited and in this regard he undertook to revert to certain members to follow up.

Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Friday 5<sup>th</sup> March 2021

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