

Address

Revitalising Small Towns – the role of Local Government

- Thank organisers for inviting me here today

1.0 My **key role** – as instructed – is to stress the **key learning points** from all of the presentations given today and to hopefully ensure that you leave here with one or two key nuggets that will assist you in your endeavours. In particular I have been asked to summarise the actions and the **main messages** in the context **of the LA** and what perhaps it can do

BUT – before I do that – and having listened to the various contributors over the day, I think it is important that the context of the work in small towns is **contextualised** - unless we truly understand the space we are in and unless we are entirely honest about the issues we face, then any endeavour will be in vain – I think this came through clearly in all of the presentations

*Place
setting
Demos, etc*

2.0 - So what do I mean by this

First area we need to be honest about is the **change** that is occurring in the retail sector/town centre and how we are coping with this

All change is **difficult** – except when one chooses to change and chooses how that change should occur – then it is okay.

Also need to acknowledge that - all of our **actions have impacts/consequences** and this will obviously impact on how we deal with change. When one undertakes an action without realising its impact and/or it imposes change on another sector, that creates a **complex space for everyone**, including that stakeholder that undertook the action. This is one of the difficulties facing local authorities that we need to be aware of – particularly in the context of acting as leaders/drivers/enablers/honest brokers. It is the most difficult aspect of any of the part of the entire process.

*1 Starts + ends with
People!*

3.0 - How does this Apply in terms of Retail Change/Impacts

In the context of the small towns in Ireland – the change happening may not necessarily have been sought by the retailer who currently operates in the town; it may not necessarily have been sought by the consumer/local shopper although their shopping habits may have directly influenced this change. *& this*

But it is clear that the traditional role of the small town has changed *has impacted* significantly. I believe that we are currently in the space of deciding whether this change is to be positive or negative. And we do have a **choice** as to how to *town centres* manage it .

II What are the changes

There are a couple of key changes that have occurred in recent times

- Centralisation of services (post offices; AGS; motor tax; driving licences etc)
- Growth of internet and computer usage leading to on-line purchasing
- Provision of on-line services (planning applications; bill pays; banking)
- Growth of larger retailer space leading in some instances to out of town centres

III Why has this happened – some of the unintended consequential impacts

- The **on-going and persistent public demand** to have more efficient and more effective services – this has in a greater part led to a centralisation of services. There is a greater push from the broader public to be smarter; more cost effective; cheaper – and the resulting outcome of this is centralisation and the **closure of services** in small towns. So the impact of cheaper more effective services is the loss of banks; post offices etc
- With the **growth in computer usage** and accessibility, and in particular your iphones, a wider world has opened up to the consumer that has led to greater choice and perceived better value (perhaps short lived value!!). **On-line shopping** is rising phenomenally and shops are now being used as a “window shopping “ facility with the actual product

bought on line – leading to closure of small independent retailers on the high street (and simultaneously a growth in warehousing)

- **Out of town centres** have emerged as a result of **customers demanding** larger, brighter more spacious modern shopping facilities which could not or would not be accommodated in the existing premises of small towns for a variety of reasons (ownership plots; lack of economic incentive to upgrade; age of the retail owner; listed nature of the building; complexities of owners; lack of political will to CPO lands etc) . In addition, it is likely that lands would not be released/or it is very difficult to obtain land in the centres of small towns for large scale shopping facilities (4 acres+) resulting in such facilities being pushed to the edge or out of centre. Restrictive car parking spaces in some towns also posed problems – either insufficient car parking available or inappropriate car parking fee structures in place to allow easy accessibility.

These are only a handful of **some of the key change stimulants** – but change does not have to mean a death knell for the town centre:- For every change and negative impact, there is a potential opportunity or potential positive impact – we have to find this !!

4.0 What are the Options – other stakeholders

As mentioned above, the actions of the consumer (which is the community) and the changing nature of retail have created a complex space. There are a number of **key actors involved in this complex space** – the retailer; the community/consumer and the local authority. In order to manage the change so that there is a more positive outcome for each sector, it is **critical that each sector is aligned with and cooperates** with the others in terms of what role it now sees the new town centre playing – **Need to know your Place.**

5.0 To date - The options used in some instances included

- a) Blame one stakeholder entirely for the demise of the town centre – blame rates; car parking charges; permission for out of town centres;

lack of local government support etc etc – there may be some initial support for this, but it is short-lived. It might make one feel better but it does not stop the decline

- b) continue **seek to put the clock back** – a lot of energy has been expended on this method to date and the **outcome is pretty much pre-determined** –it will without doubt result in a dying if not dead centre and poorer working relationships – **no-one wins least** of all the town centre.
- c) **Work together to address the challenges** and use the tools currently at our disposal to bring a new and different life to the town centres. One stakeholder working on its own will not deliver this – all need to be involved and all need to be willing to work differently; look at new potential customers and be willing to do things differently

All of the presentations have clarified the best way to do this – in essence, the First Step is to ensure that All stakeholders agree on the role and function of the town centre – if it is of value to the community; they need to be agreeable to support it **AND you need to understand the impact of this on your own area, and your stakeholder compadres!**

- place
- context
+ role
- Demogr.

6.0- In this context, what lessons are there for the Local Authority

The key role of the LA can be broken down into 3 key elements – and all of these have already been highlighted throughout the various presentations

a) Leader/Driver/Honest Broker

- a. Bring key stakeholders together - can enable different businesses to come together for the betterment of the town – particularly where there is no local trade association or where there is a trade association which is not perceived to be inclusive of all traders needs/representations
- b. Facilitate the development of an agreed “place” for their town
- c. Provide servicing support for the structure (but not necessarily “do” all actions)
- d. Act as honest broker where there are difficult relationships/blockages

- e. Bring knowledge expertise in relation to policy development; research; funding channels; opportunities
- f. It has the authority to encourage other state and publicly funded structures to get involved such as local development companies; family resource centres; ETB; LEO etc – all of these could have potential roles to play in relation to delivering on particular actions
- g. Be open to new innovative and creative ideas and support other stakeholders to deliver
- h. Policy development to facilitate appropriate development in town centres

b) Infrastructural actions

- a. Civic space creation/improvement
 - i. innovative spaces could include space for gatherings; space for performances (including infrastructure to “mike up”); space for wii fii linkage; teenage youth hang about spaces; chess type spaces for elderly etc
- b. Transformational civic projects
- c. Amenity developments - Be imaginative (bio diversity play areas; sensory gardens; skate board parks etc) – what will bring people in
- d. Car parking infrastructure and traffic management plans
- e. New vision for key streets

BUT none of the above should be progressed unless there is significant buy-in from the community and an understanding of what it is trying to achieve in the context of the agreed vision of place – this takes a lot of preparation and process work which is immeasurable and often goes unappreciated

- c) **Soft support actions** – the LA has generally been good at 1 or 2. It is the **3rd area which is newer** and requires more creativity and a different mind set on behalf of the LA – this is now possible due to the refocus of LA on economic and community development enabled by the new Local Government Act 2014. A number of presentations gave some very good ideas of what this might look like and it is this area in particular which will add value, life and is the final piece of the jigsaw required to address the “sense of place”. Some ideas that came through include

Key Area

- a. Supports to encourage retailers to work in more innovative ways LEO
to **bring businesses** in - the structure set up should allow ideas to be thrashed around and allow risks to be taken – should be willing to allow failure and learn from it
- b. Supports to **encourage local community** to engage with initiatives Rumours
which bring people into the town centre thereby being able to promote the value of shopping locally, eating locally and clearly **tying the message of local supports means local job creation**
- c. Look at supporting **joint retail marketing initiatives** (where it is co-funded by the retail enterprises) - town wide shoe shop promotion to a wider catchment than would normally be the case. Edge of town centres can be an asset in this regard – **co-opetition concept** // Sewellor
- d. Support development of **stronger festivals** and be more hands on
- e. **Tidy Town supports** and assist with plan development and implementation of same
- f. Farmer market/food fair events/special **heritage events** that are linked to that area
- g. **Re-direct activities around Arts/heritage and sports into and around towns**
- h. Look at initiatives to **attract particular sectors of the population** (marketing event targeted at the needs of the older people; event targeted at younger groups linked to price sales in areas they have an interest in; family events etc) – who is your audience!
- i. Look in with **tourism assets in the area** – bundle appropriate tourism experiences and ensure that they include accommodation/food and drink as well as activities but needs to operate holistically (particularly important in those counties where tourism development is weak)
- j. Look at **the gaps in the town area** – work together to fill these and be mindful of the town catchment size (some towns can accommodate more than 2 shoe shops!!!n the more variety there are, the more customers that are attracted
- k. Develop incentive schemes (CIS for new shops; building facade improvement schemes; over the shop usage incentive schemes
- l. Training supports around social media; on-line trading; business management and marketing training

Community initiative - School or
primary competition

m. Incentives to create “experiences” within the town/village and creating “experiences” within the retail facility

Main driver with any supports is that they must be cross stakeholder buy in – everyone should have skin in the game -

The most **important part of this message is** that there is no one all powerful and key stakeholder that can regenerate the town centre – the LA will not do it on its own and neither will any of the others. **BUT** it can play a key role if others are also involved.

Second most important message is that if we are to revitalise our towns – it must be a **long term priority** (similar to RAPID structures!) – Government must continue to prioritise it over a 10 year period and local government must continue to drive it over a 10 year period.

If it is agreed that it is to be a long term commitment – then LAs have to be willing to take a **degree of risk** – funding is always a difficulty and particular capital funding for key projects. But if a proposal is well researched and is a solid idea, the risk ought to be taken to try and deliver it –

Final main message from this is that **funding streams need to continue** for initiatives in this area – it is not just capital funding streams that are required but activity funding streams – **design thinking** is the new buzz word and it is never more apt that in this sector and in this space – our towns need to provide a different experience, they need to be creative, attractive and connected to their sense of place – this is what will be the driver for growth and sustainment of our towns into the future