

Town Centre First Policy

October 2021



Contents

1. Summary & Key Points	3
2. Terms of Reference	4
3. Vision: Bring our towns back to life!	6
4. Governance	8
4.1 Governance Structure	8
4.2 Interdepartmental group	8
4.3 Multidisciplinary Town Teams	8
4.4 The Property Unit	9
4.5 The Heritage Council	9
5. Recreating Liveable Towns	10
5.1 Public Engagement:	10
Policy Points: <i>(implemented by tasking the town team where not clear below)</i>	10
5.2 Public Realm	11
Policy Points <i>(by tasking the town team where not clear below):</i>	11
5.3 Transport.....	11
Policy Points	11
5.4 Public Health and Safety.....	13
Policy Points	13
5.5 Biodiversity.....	14
Policy Points	14
5.6 Services	15
Policy Points	16
5.7 Community Initiatives:	16
Policy Points	16
6. Regeneration and Vacant Reuse	17

Policy Points	17
6.2 Conservation	19
Policy Points	19
6.3 Serviced Sites	20
Policy Points	20
6.4 Brownfield Development.....	21
Policy Points	21
7. Five Pilot Towns	21
Policy Points	21

1. Summary & Key Points

This Town Centre First policy aims to realise the commitments given in the Programme for Government 2020 to the Town Centre First programme, and other commitments which support and enhance Town Centres. Our vision is to restore our towns and villages to liveable spaces with vibrant communities, promoting compact urban development to both improve the health and wellbeing of our citizens and to provide a sustainable way of living where travel requirements are reduced, and a low-carbon lifestyle is encouraged and promoted. The Town Centre First Policy can offer a solution to both the current housing crisis and the climate crisis by promoting sustainable and compact urban living. To achieve this, actions need to be taken to recreate liveable towns and to refurbish and re-use vacant properties in town centres and within town boundaries. Actions include:

- ❖ Meaningful public engagement with town communities.
- ❖ Designing the Public Realm around people.
- ❖ Designing towns for active travel and sustainable mobility.
- ❖ Tackling Air quality, Noise and Light pollution and Safety issues to ensure that town living enhances health and wellbeing.
- ❖ Creating safe, intergenerational communities
- ❖ Creating biodiverse, nature and people friendly spaces for recreation.
- ❖ Providing easy access to social, economic and cultural services.
- ❖ Promoting community initiatives such as Energy Communities, Housing Trusts and Community gardens.
- ❖ Proactively tackling vacancy in town centres and returning vacant and derelict properties to both residential and commercial or other use.
- ❖ Lifting barriers to buying and renovating second-hand town-centre properties and making it attractive for first-time buyers, families and downsizers.
- ❖ Conserving traditional buildings, ensuring their sensitive restoration and appropriate re-use.
- ❖ Developing brownfield sites for residential use.
- ❖ Providing serviced sites within town boundaries
- ❖ Piloting the Town Centre First programme initially in five pilot towns of various sizes and geographical locations

2. Terms of Reference

To establish a policy that defines and enables delivery of the principles of the Town Centres First initiative, to begin with, in the context of the Programme for Government 2020. To review other existing and developing policies to ensure that they are supportive of the objectives of this policy.

Programme for Government 2020: Commitments

“We will commit to the development of a Town Centre First policy, modelled on the scheme developed by the Scottish Government, and informed by the Town Centre First pilot project.” (p.12)

“We will enable local authorities to lead and collaborate on a Town Centres First type approach to regenerate our towns and villages.” (p.119)

“We will prioritise a Town Centres First collaborative and strategic approach to the regeneration of our villages and towns, using the Collaborative Town Centre Health Check (CTCHC) framework to gather data and lead actions.” (p.12-13).

-Develop and implement a Sustainable Rural Mobility Plan (p.14)

-Ensuring an unprecedented modal shift in all areas by a reorientation of investment to walking, cycling and public transport (p.33)

-Develop a regional approach to air quality and noise enforcement (PfG 2020 p.13)

- Build the capacity of local authorities to lead locally and engage citizens on climate change and biodiversity.

- Prioritise the upkeep and expansion of parks, green spaces, and other recreational infrastructure, for community enjoyment and biodiversity enhancement.

- Support local nature groups and local authorities to work in partnership on local biodiversity projects.

- Build on the success of the UNESCO Dublin Bay Biosphere and achieve further UNESCO designations for Irish sites, including the Lough Allen region.

-Increase the target for the number of Sustainable Energy Communities (PfG p.36)

-Work with local authorities and local communities to develop community gardens, allotments and urban orchards.

-Implement a strategic approach to town centre regeneration by utilising existing buildings and unused lands for new development and we will promote residential occupancy in our rural towns and villages” (p.12)

-Bring forward an expanded Town and Village Renewal Scheme to bring vacant and derelict buildings back into use and promote residential occupancy.”

“Provide seed capital to local authorities to provide serviced sites at cost in towns and villages, to allow individuals and families to build homes.” (p.13)

-Expand the role of Vacancy officers in local authorities and support local authorities to bring vacant stock into productive use (p.55)

-Introduce a new scheme to expand and build on the Living Cities Initiative to encourage infill development (p.57)

-Examine ways to ensure that unused or underused building stock in cities and other urban centres can be made available for upgraded and sustainable housing, and further develop ‘Live Above the Shop’ measures (p.58)

3. Vision: Bring our towns back to life!

Our vision is to restore our towns to places where people will want to live, work, study, shop, socialise and engage in recreational activities, by creating a compact, liveable, healthy, urban environment. It is informed by the concept of the ten-minute town where people are within walking distance of all essential services. This includes locally wild, biodiversity-friendly green spaces and cultural, social and economic resources. We wish to enable communities to bring vitality back to their town, as has been done to a certain degree in various towns around the country such as Clonakilty¹, Westport, Ennis, Dungarvan, Kildorrery among others. Town centre living, where dependence on the private motor car is reduced and quality of life is enhanced, can, with the right vision, become an attractive option for all generations².

The Town Centre First initiative offers one available solution to the housing crisis by providing affordable homes in locations where there are existing services and an established community. Towns typically have a strong sense of community, and this enhances social cohesion and personal wellbeing.

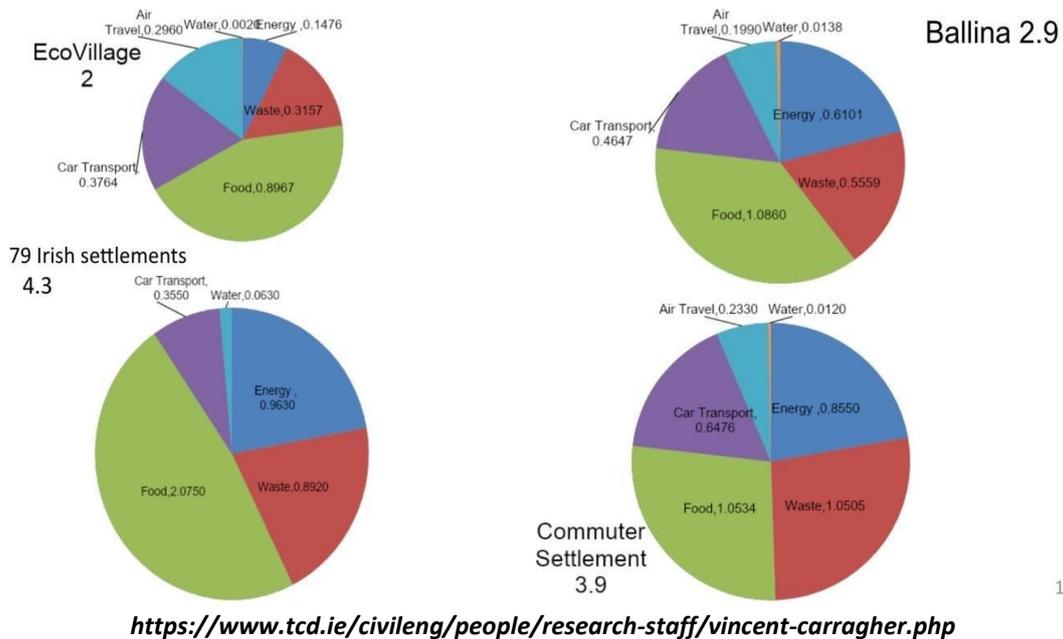
Compact urban living is also an important step towards reducing carbon outputs while also increasing wellbeing. Our current lifestyle is completely unsustainable. Dr. Vincent Carragher's diagram below shows the number of global hectares per person needed to sustain 79 Irish towns. This translates into the equivalent of 2.4 planets. Cloughjordan, at a GHa/person number of 2 is just above one planet = 1.8 GHa/person. Town centre living offers a real opportunity to help reduce this unsustainable lifestyle. Additionally, the practices of Ireland's only ecovillage in Cloughjordan, having still not quite reached one planet living targets, can be improved upon and implemented in other towns to reach sustainable, one planet targets³. One-planet living must be encouraged and promoted through targeted subsidies to reach Climate Action goals⁴.

¹<https://www.calderdale.gov.uk/v2/sites/default/files/Great-Town%20Report%202017.pdf>

²<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/art-and-design/we-don-t-realise-what-we-have-in-praise-of-the-majestic-rural-irish-town-1.4608930>

³ <http://www.thevillage.ie/ecovillage-has-an-ecological-footprint-of-2-global-hectares/>

⁴ <http://www.oneplanetcouncil.org.uk/planning-policy/>



10

Up to the sixties, large families were raised in over the shop accommodation, with car-free, living streets, tight-knit communities and the freedom of the surrounding countryside. “The greenest building is the one that already exists”⁵. And in our towns, some 25% of ground floor properties and 80% of 1st and 2nd floor properties are vacant, and this at a time when we are in the midst of a housing availability and affordability crisis⁶. With some imagination these buildings can be brought back to full use and so self-sufficient, vibrant communities can be re-established and sustained⁷.

Towns are also regional centres of social, cultural and economic activity serving a rural hinterland that benefits from all essential services being concentrated in one urban area and sustainable travel options that enable easy access. Links between smaller towns and larger ones in a given area are of historical significance⁸ and must be strengthened to enhance regional cooperation and development.

The specific requirements of towns of different sizes and geographical areas must be met, with an emphasis on smaller, more deprived towns being given the resources to develop as outlined in the National Development Plan⁹.

Community involvement in the restoration of towns is vital and this policy is supportive of the Green Party Community Empowerment Policy as a longer-term strategy to ensure local and community engagement.

⁵ <https://visionforsidmouth.org/retrofirst-the-greenest-building-is-the-one-that-already-exists/>

⁶ <https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/Policy-Paper-on-the-Collaborative-Town-Centre-Health-Check-CTCHC-Programme.pdf>

⁷ http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_research_series/Research_series_paper_20_UCD_Rural.pdf

⁸ Approximate Formality; Morphology of Irish Towns Valerie Mulvin ISBN:9780951536490 Anne St Press June 2021

⁹ <https://www.housingagency.ie/publications/incentives-re-use-vacant-buildings-town-centres-housing-and-sustainable-communities>

4. Governance

To realise the Town Centre First initiative in line with the commitments in the Programme for Government a governance structure must be established.

4.1 Governance Structure

Interdepartmental Group Multidisciplinary Town Teams <i>With services and advice from</i> Property Unit Town Centre Partnerships	Dept. of the Taoiseach Local Authority Land Development Agency The Heritage Council
--	--

Programme for Government Commitments 2020

“We will commit to the development of a Town Centre First policy, modelled on the scheme developed by the Scottish Government, and informed by the Town Centre First pilot project.” (p.12)

“We will enable local authorities to lead and collaborate on a Town Centres First type approach to regenerate our towns and villages.” (p.119)

“We will prioritise a Town Centres First collaborative and strategic approach to the regeneration of our villages and towns, using the Collaborative Town Centre Health Check (CTCHC) framework to gather data and lead actions.” (p.12-13).

4.2 Interdepartmental group

Establish a Town Centre First (TCF) **Interdepartmental group** in the **Department of the Taoiseach** to monitor the implementation of the TCF initiative. This group will consist of representatives of different departments including Housing, Transport, Health, Education, Arts and Culture, Environment, Climate Action, Heritage, and Community representatives and will realise a Town Centre First Policy based on the Scottish model but adapted appropriately to Irish towns. It will also ensure the alignment of Town Centre First commitments with related commitments on health and wellbeing, housing, climate action, active and public transport, arts and culture, heritage, biodiversity and community energy.

4.3 Multidisciplinary Town Teams

Adequately fund **Local Authorities** to establish properly resourced and empowered **multidisciplinary Town Teams** consisting of architects, designers, vacancy officers, social facilitators, health, active travel and sustainable mobility, biodiversity, ecology, arts heritage, conservation and other relevant

professionals. Community representatives from each town should form part of the town teams, in an equal partnership. These teams should be coordinated at a Director of Services level within the Local Authority and should lead the TCF initiative, liaising with communities and enabling public engagement and participatory planning in the recreation of town centres that put people and their wellbeing first and ensuring communities are equal partners in the process. Local authorities must be given the resources to recruit professionals with relevant experience and to fund these town teams. This will be an executive charged with delivering the TCF Programme at a local level. The town teams should recognise the different requirements of small (under 5,000) medium (5,000-10,000) and large (over 10,000) towns and adjust actions accordingly.

4.4 The Property Unit

Establish a **Property Unit in the Land Development Agency** tasked with supporting vacancy officers in Town Teams in local authorities in the identification of vacant and partially vacant properties and sites in town centres and within town boundaries (See Section 4.1.5). The Property Unit will work proactively with private owners to promote, encourage and support the sustainable renovation and reuse of their properties for residential and other uses, in the concept of a one-stop-shop service in all matters financial. Bespoke financial packages comprising equity participation with loans and grants, or long-term repair leases as befits the circumstances of the owner would be negotiated. It would also avail of and negotiate the various qualifying grant incentives available in the promotion of such development. A feature of the benefits that would arise would be the provision of long leases and security of tenure for residential lettings. (See Section 6.1.12-4.1.16) Ensure that appropriate expertise comprising chartered surveyors, property executives and accountants within this unit assists in the promotion of the TCF Programme by attracting the participation of property owners. The main purpose of this strategy is to release under-utilised properties for the benefit of the community while recognising the property rights and dignity of the owner.

4.5 The Heritage Council

Fund the **Heritage Council** to continue and expand its work on the **Collaborative Town Centre Health Check (CTCHC)**¹⁰ adding a data field on ownership, types of ownership and vacancy status of properties and to establish a National database on Town Centres and widening the social and environmental parameters, to ensure an unbiased approach.

Further fund the Heritage Council to set up a **Town Centre Partnership** to collate data and to record and share examples of best practice and innovation.

¹⁰ <https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/projects/town-centre-health-check-programme>

5. Recreating Liveable Towns

Town Centre living has been affected by increasing car dominance over several decades. To restore towns to liveable spaces, the public realm must be redesigned to put people first and to make towns pleasant places to live in once more with an emphasis on wellbeing and intergenerational engagement. Many commitments in the Programme for Government for active travel, biodiversity and energy communities can be used to make the town environment more attractive.

Town teams can be tasked with developing a design-led approach to town planning and engaging in participatory planning to ensure public engagement in the enhancement of their towns. Citizen experts, community representatives, organisations representing under-represented groups, and local people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds need to be part of the process from the outset to ensure an enhanced living experience for all and to restore a strong sense of pride and community which has always been a feature of our towns.

5.1 Public Engagement:

Policy Points: *(implemented by tasking the town team where not clear below)*

5.1.1 Enable communities to collaborate with town teams to develop a town centre first plan that encourages town centre living and enhances quality of life.

5.1.2 Enable and empower communities to adapt to change and develop a sense of belonging and attachment to place by nurturing social memory, social cohesion; and active citizen participation through various community projects and activities which can be organised in collaboration with the Arts Officer and Local Community groups.

5.1.3 Include collaboration with the community in problem-solving and achieving objectives. Use a variety of age-appropriate methods to ensure public engagement of all generations and abilities, including very young children and babies right through to our most senior citizens and those who may face obstacles to engaging. Examples might be a central suggestion box, an interactive town website, social media pages, school projects, trials, surveys, vox pops, community events and age-appropriate activities, skilled observation, think-ins and public meetings to brainstorm, and engagement with representative groups and stakeholders. A once-a-week walk-in one stop shop clinic in each town with a Town Team representative could harness local knowledge and support local initiatives.

5.1.4 The structures proposed by the Green Party Community Empowerment Policy would be included as part of the community representation of the Town Centre First initiative.

5.2 Public Realm

Policy Points *(by tasking the town team where not clear below):*

5.2.1 Task the multidisciplinary Town Teams with developing a town plan with a public realm that puts people first through a design-led approach which encourages public engagement. (Ref. Clonakilty¹¹) and that develops safe, playful public spaces that encourage and promote intergenerational and inclusive interaction.

5.2.2 Ensure town teams collaborate with other departments in the Local Authority and agencies such as Bord Gais, Eirgrid, the OPW and Irish Water to use opportunities to improve the public realm when other essential works such as pipe-laying or flood management measures are being carried out.

5.2.3 Develop the public realm in towns with reference to historical uses and natural heritage to restore the soul, ethos, functions and activities of the town in collaboration with local expertise and knowledge¹². Restore historically used walking rights of way for town residents.

5.3 Transport

Programme for Government 2020 Commitments:

Develop and implement a Sustainable Rural Mobility Plan (p.14)

Ensuring an unprecedented modal shift in all areas by a reorientation of investment to walking, cycling and public transport (p.33)

Policy Points

5.3.1 Avoid Shift Improve

The approach of Avoid-Shift-Improve should be taken in relation to spatial planning, transport infrastructure and services provision in towns to reduce transport emissions. The avoid principle is the highest priority and first step. By adhering to best practice in relation to compact growth and development within existing footprints of town centres, longer commutes are avoided. By providing good public transport and convenient active travel networks, people can 'shift' from private motor car dependency to sustainable modes of travel. In light of covid, all public transport vehicles should be retrofitted with air cleaners and effective ventilation.

The final focus, following these two steps, is the 'Improve' step where electrification of public and private vehicle fleet including freight should be targeted.

5.3.2 Reduce default speed limit nationally to 30km p/h for all built up areas.

5.3.3 Create a town transport and mobility plan that includes an e-charging plan to ensure the mobility plans are future proofed for enabling roll-out of active travel networks, Low Emission zones and

¹¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7C3H_CWwi4

¹² https://www.riai.ie/uploads/files/general-files/RIAI_TownandVillageToolkit.pdf

pedestrianised zones. Mobility Plans for town centres need to include an Urban Freight Delivery Plan and solutions to urban freight traffic should include Urban Consolidation Centres and last mile deliveries using smaller e-cargo bikes and EVs, more suitable for town centre streets, and less noisy. All HGVs need to be banned from town centres. Mobility Plans need to include strategies for the removal of on-street car parking and surface car parks in town centres, repurposing the space for more useful functions e.g., housing, community spaces, green space, retail and workplace provision.

5.3.4 Employ town team expertise in active travel design to redesign the public realm and streets to prioritise people walking, cycling and wheeling and ensure all public spaces are safe, accessible and attractive places for all users, of all ages, genders and abilities. Employ the Principles of the Dutch Sustainable Safety approach¹³.

5.3.5 Build active travel infrastructure networks for urban, suburban and rural areas. These active travel networks must be cohesive, connecting origin and destination points on people's journeys. To prioritise active travel and achieve modal shift, the networks must follow the most direct and convenient routes, and this will require reallocation of road space, reducing capacity for private motor car traffic.

Priority nodes on the network will include public transport stops, schools, workplaces, natural amenities, public service buildings as nodes on those networks. The active travel networks must be safe, comfortable and attractive to use for people of all ages, genders and abilities. The active travel networks will comprise of various components including Greenways, segregated cycle lanes, off-road cycle tracks, quiet routes through permeable estates, quiet 'Rothar Roads' and pedestrianised zones.

5.3.6 Expand Local Link services to connect towns to other nearby villages, towns and larger urban centres, ensuring frequent, affordable, connected and reliable public transport services with universally easy access to timetables and information. Easy connectivity between local, regional and national transport services enhances public transport as a viable means of travel.

5.3.7 Design and plan Active travel networks to integrate with public transport networks to amplify the catchment areas of public transport routes, enabling people to walk or cycle viable distances to public transport stops.

5.3.8 Develop Park n Ride facilities with a shuttle service and active travel network to provide easy access to town centres for rural dwellers.

5.3.9 Retrofit permeability in town centres including through housing estates and publicly owned campuses, in line with the National Transport Authority Guidelines on permeability¹⁴.

¹³<https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/news/aberdeenshire/1894463/architect-unveils-powerful-vision-for-transforming-north-east-town-centres/>

<https://visionzerouk.wordpress.com/2016/11/15/principles-of-sustainable-safety-in-the-netherlands/>

¹⁴https://www.nationaltransport.ie/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Permeability_Best_Practice_Guide_NTA_20151.pdf

5.3.10 Introduce and encourage car share schemes to facilitate town dwellers and to reduce the need for car ownership with all its attendant challenges (i.e., street parking).

5.3.11 Public seating is a necessary component of active travel networks and a successful public realm. Public seating should be provided at regular intervals on approach roads and throughout town centres to enable modal shift to active travel. Public seating needs to be provided throughout town centres to increase the opportunities for social interaction and enjoyment of public spaces. Public seating needs to be age-friendly, from young to old, and include inclusive seating for people using wheelchairs.

5.4 Public Health and Safety

Develop a regional approach to air quality and noise enforcement (PfG 2020 p.13)

To make towns attractive places to live in, everybody must feel safe to walk the streets and the health and wellbeing of the community must be addressed and enhanced. Air, Noise and Light pollution can all have a negative impact on health and wellbeing and anti-social behaviour can make communities feel unsafe. Towns, however, by their nature, encourage community and social cohesion and these can be enhanced to create safe and healthy communities. The following actions are proposed.

Policy Points

5.4.1 Extend the smoky coal ban to all towns and villages.

5.4.2 Reduce motor vehicle emissions by relocating traffic and parking to backlands as much as possible.

5.4.3 Establish monitoring stations in towns to measure air quality, ensuring all sources of polluted air are monitored, particularly particulate matter from solid fuel burning and from traffic sources. Air quality monitoring stations should be suitably sited to optimise the potential of pick up of polluted air. Real-time data of polluted air levels should be fully accessible and clearly communicated to the public including real-time data displays, to increase awareness of polluted air. Implement actions to reduce and remove sources of polluted air.

5.4.4 Introduce Light and Noise Pollution legislation and task the local authority with implementing both¹⁵.

5.4.5 Develop Community policing of towns, where trained community gardai are assigned to build trust and respect in communities.

5.4.6 Redesign physical activity into people's daily lives through redesigning our built environment and public realm in addition to ensuring our towns have adequate areas for recreation and exercise appropriate for all age-groups.

¹⁵<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/artificial-light-nuisances-how-councils-deal-with-complaints>

5.4.7 Establish community gardens in towns and make the provision of allotments available to town dwellers with no gardens. Create parklets by re-designating 2-3 car parking spaces to public resting areas with seating and foliage, as has been done by Cork City Council¹⁶.

5.4.8 Use detailed design of the public realm to help address and reduce anti-social behaviour and initiate community schemes to address the underlying causes of it.

5.4.9 Provide utilities such as public toilets, public lighting and recycling bins throughout town centres to ensure that public spaces are safe, comfortable and pleasant places to spend time in.

5.5 Biodiversity

- Build the capacity of local authorities to lead locally and engage citizens on climate change and biodiversity.

- Prioritise the upkeep and expansion of parks, green spaces, and other recreational infrastructure, for community enjoyment and biodiversity enhancement.

- Support local nature groups and local authorities to work in partnership on local biodiversity projects.

- Build on the success of the UNESCO Dublin Bay Biosphere and achieve further UNESCO designations for Irish sites, including the Lough Allen region. (PfG 2020)

Green infrastructure and the protection and restoration of biodiversity bring a sense of place, improved quality of neighbourhoods, promote sustainable lifestyles and social inclusion, while encouraging exercise and play. Everybody should have the right to live in a clean and healthy environment - this fair distribution of environmental benefits is fundamental to climate justice.

A publicly accessible, high quality, people and nature friendly green space should be no more than 300 metres from a person's residence¹⁷. These green spaces should be developed and maintained by a dedicated Parks officer within the local authority. Planners should be aware that greenfield and even brownfield sites are rich in biodiversity and so prioritise re-use of vacant buildings over new build on brownfield or greenfield¹⁸.

Policy Points

5.5.1 Support liaison between biodiversity officers in local authorities, local citizens, and the education sector to catalogue biodiversity and habitats within town centres and with this knowledge, protect biodiversity, including during maintenance, restoration, regeneration, and development projects.

¹⁶ <https://benchspacecork.ie/parklet>

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parks_and_open_spaces_in_Oslo

¹⁸ <https://cdn.buglife.org.uk/2019/08/Planning-for-Brownfield-Biodiversity.pdf>

5.5.2 Ensure there is a tree or biodiversity officer within each Local Authority to develop a tree protection policy and adequate Tree Protection Orders. Create a Tree Charter to ensure community engagement with decision-making on street trees.

5.5.3 Hedgerows and native plants such as ivy, lichens, wildflowers and wall plants need to be protected for their value in placemaking and importance as biodiverse ecosystems.

5.5.4 Ensure liaison between Tidy Towns and local environmental groups on town centre planting and biodiversity-friendly mowing practices around public green spaces, while ceasing the use of herbicides, insecticides, fungicides and other pesticides. Recognise that biodiversity is innately 'untidy' and prioritise the Tidy Towns competitions to reflect this and to put biodiversity at the heart of plantings and green space management.

5.5.5 Liaise with and support An Taisce and Heritage Council initiatives.

5.5.6 Prioritise action against light pollution - over 50% of invertebrates and 30% of vertebrates are nocturnal and need protection from unsympathetic LED and other artificial light¹⁹.

5.5.7 Task Biodiversity Officers in Local Authorities to develop and implement a Town Biodiversity Plan which includes green spaces within neighbourhoods, owned by public and private concerns (hospitals, health centres, schools, offices, etc.) in conjunction with schools, citizen scientists and local groups.

5.5.8 Develop Green Active Travel Routes, such as high-quality cycle and networked walkways for emissions and pollution reduction, increased habitat, other environmental improvements and improved health and well-being for people²⁰. Expand the Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets section on planting to reference the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan and recognise the potential of active travel networks to help create and expand biodiversity corridors alongside.

5.5.9 Develop grants for creating the biodiversity-friendly green infrastructure we need in town centres, ensuring opportunities for people to be in nature by providing appropriate seating and varied habitats either natural or man-made. (i.e., ponds, marsh areas, groves)

5.5.10 Mainstream biodiversity by making biodiversity a condition of planning in new developments.

5.6 Services

-Ensure access to high-quality internet connections for people across Ireland (PFG 2020 p.72)

The function of a town is to provide **economic, social and cultural services** to its population. When services go, a town loses its function and becomes a dormer village or town to a larger urban settlement increasing reliance on the private car. For towns to function, essential services must be available and accessible.

¹⁹ Dark Sky Ireland Our vision and policy on reducing light pollution in Ireland March 2019
<https://www.darksky.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Dark-Sky-Ireland-Policy-Document-2019.pdf>

²⁰ Green Active Travel, Central Scotland Green Network 2021. <http://www.centuralscotlandgreennetwork.org/campaigns/green-active-travel>

Policy Points

5.6.1 Task the town teams, in consultation with townspeople and community representatives, to audit each town, listing services needed- economic, social and cultural- and encourage the provision of those services both by Local Authorities and private enterprise. Vacant properties could be sourced and supports given to encourage businesses to establish themselves there. Towns could identify its own 'niche' service that could be promoted and developed (ie. boutique shops/fish restaurants/animal/pet services etc.) in association with interested bodies such as Enterprise Ireland and Leader. All initiatives supported by the Town Centre First team should have a logo acknowledging this, to promote it.

5.6.2 In the case of smaller towns and villages, services could be provided to a cluster of towns²¹ with a local transport link to connect them to each other. Each town/village could provide one service for the cluster of villages.

5.6.3 An excellent countrywide broadband service is a prerequisite for rural towns.

5.6.4 Fund cultural events and festivals to attract people to the town and develop a sense of place and pride. Employ a dedicated Festivals and Events coordinator to support and promote these.

5.6.5 Identify and future proof against risks (flooding, excessive heat, etc.) coordinating works with the OPW and other relevant bodies ideally using nature-based solutions. These opportunities can be used to carry out works to enhance the public realm and biodiversity by town teams.

5.7 Community Initiatives:

Increase the target for the number of Sustainable Energy Communities (PfG p.36)

Work with local authorities and local communities to develop community gardens, allotments and urban orchards. (PfG p.66)

Policy Points

5.7.1 Encourage the establishment of Sustainable Energy Communities, in partnership with SEAI in towns and encourage sustainable Community Energy initiatives, such as a community wind or solar farm.

5.7.2 Encourage Community-led housing projects in towns²².

5.7.3 Fund Arts programmes and initiatives in towns that use local knowledge to research recent social history, which is within living memory, where town centres were vibrant living spaces and celebrate this history in various intergenerational art forms to nurture a sense of pride in the town.

5.7.4 Plan and develop a system of community gardens, orchards and allotments to ensure that all residents have access to areas to grow food.

²¹ Approximate Formality- Morphology of Irish Towns. Valerie Mulvins p 93-94

²² <https://soa.ie>

6. Regeneration and Vacant Reuse

“We will implement a strategic approach to town centre regeneration by utilising existing buildings and unused lands for new development and we will promote residential occupancy in our rural towns and villages” (PfG p.12)

“We will bring forward an expanded Town and Village Renewal Scheme to bring vacant and derelict buildings back into use and promote residential occupancy.”

“We will provide seed capital to local authorities to provide serviced sites at cost in towns and villages, to allow individuals and families to build homes.” (p.13)

Expand the role of Vacancy officers in local authorities and support local authorities to bring vacant stock into productive use (p.55)

Introduce a new scheme to expand and build on the Living Cities Initiative to encourage infill development (p.57)

Examine ways to ensure that unused or underused building stock in cities and other urban centres can be made available for upgraded and sustainable housing, and further develop ‘Live Above the Shop’ measures (p.58)

6.1 The Town Centre Health Checks programme has shown that vacancy levels in town centres are 25% and over²³ with an estimated over-the-shop vacancy rate of 80% or more. This is an available resource that can, if exploited, go a long way towards easing the housing crisis, promoting regional development and reducing carbon emissions.

The following actions aim to achieve these commitments:

Policy Points

(To be implemented at national government level unless otherwise stated)

6.1.1 Devise Section 28²⁴ Guidelines specifically for Town Centres.

6.1.2 Expand and extend the Living Cities Initiative²⁵ to include all of Ireland rather than just the special regeneration areas of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Kilkenny and Waterford.

6.1.3 Expand the remit of the Property Registration Authority to include the compulsory registration of all properties in Ireland and the establishment of a publicly accessible database of property ownership to facilitate the easy identification of ownership of vacant properties.

6.1.4 Examine legislation around mixed use development and ensure a balance between the rights and responsibilities of both residential and commercial interests and a mechanism for resolving issues.

²³<https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/Policy-Paper-on-the-Collaborative-Town-Centre-Health-Check-CTCHC-Programme.pdf>

²⁴http://www.housing.old.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/section_28_guidelines_-_enforcement_during_covid_19_emergency_30_mar_2020.pdf

²⁵ <https://www.revenue.ie/en/property/living-city-initiative/rented-residential-relief-and-commercial-relief.aspx>

- 6.1.5 Employ full-time suitably trained Vacancy officers and a county Architect in every Local Authority. These will be part of the town teams and will be supported by the Property Unit to tackle vacancy in town centres. Vacancy officers must be properly resourced to proactively identify vacant properties and engage with their owners to renovate and reuse them using the various schemes on offer²⁶. All local authority owned properties should be refurbished and re-let in a timely manner.
- 6.1.6 Use financial incentives to reward Local authorities that substantially reduce vacancy rates and that exceed their targets. These incentives could encourage and finance further regeneration in the local authority area.
- 6.1.7 Empower Local Authorities with other options such as Compulsory Sale Orders or Compulsory Option Orders, Derelict Dangerous Buildings Notices, Vacant Site or Building Levy to facilitate the re-use of deteriorating properties.
- 6.1.8 Encourage different demographic groups, such as first-time buyers and those down-sizing to buy town centre properties by offering credit access, grants and expanding the Help to Buy scheme to include second-hand town centre properties and ensuring renovation costs can be added to mortgage repayments. Supports and advice on renovation should be easily available also through the local authority vacancy office. The barriers to buying secondhand town properties must be lifted and instead incentives must be put in place that make it more attractive to buy a Town Centre secondhand property rather than a new build. A carbon bonus for secondhand properties is one option.
- 6.1.9 Introduce carbon-counting in any cost-benefit analysis to acknowledge the economic benefits of Town Centre developing vacant or partially vacant property. Insist on environmental externalities, including neglect, as real quantifiable costs.
- 6.1.10 Value quantitatively all diverse benefits including wellbeing indicators such as social cohesion, well-being of the individual, embodied carbon savings, heritage/ cultural preservation, biodiversity etc.²⁷.
- 6.1.11 Disallow inappropriate and out of town developments that would have a detrimental effect on town centre living.

Task the **Property Unit** with:

- 6.1.12 Enticing participation by private and public owners and negotiating appropriate development of unused properties and sites. Strategic investment models involving leasebacks, joint participation and various fiscal incentives; Income Tax relief - proportionate to Capital Invested, on a timeline; BIK (Benefit in kind) relief provisions; Vat rate adjustments / remissions; LPT remissions; Rates remission; Development charges easements; Site Value Tax; extended planning permission exemptions - past Dec 2021.

²⁶ <https://www.mayo.ie/housing/vacant-homes>

²⁷ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/86215-the-town-centre-living-initiative/>

6.1.13 Designing bespoke incentives and investment programmes to facilitate and implement the development of properties for commercial, residential and recreational use, acknowledging “the-greenest-building-is-the-one-that-already-exists.

6.1.14 Re-designing the Living Over the Shop²⁸ scheme which offers tax incentives to shop owners to convert the upper stories of shops for residential use. Address the regulatory obstacles that prevent their renovation and offer a ten-year exemption of property tax (and/or other incentives).

6.1.15 Designing beneficial economic initiatives that provide for long lease and security of tenure.

6.1.16 Assessing current schemes: The Buy and Renew²⁹ and the Repair and Lease³⁰ Schemes have been widely availed of in some local authorities (Waterford, Louth) but not in others and this anomaly must be rectified. The Property Unit could evaluate these to see how they could be improved. Extend these schemes to include Cost Purchase³¹ and Cost Rental³² housing. At present these local authority schemes (Buy and Repair and Repair and Lease) are only used for Social Housing whereas they should also be used to provide cost rental and affordable housing.

6.2 Conservation

Policy Points

6.2.1 Task the town team with establishing a working group, led by the county architect, consisting of senior planners, conservation officers, fire officers and other relevant parties to streamline and simplify regulations for the sustainable renovation and development of protected and other historic structures and renewing and updating the 2018 Bringing Back Homes manual³³ and guidance for Energy efficiency in traditional buildings³⁴ Revise Building regulations and add Technical Guidance Documents to support the ease of conversion of traditional buildings. Many buildings that are vacant in our town centres contribute greatly to the character of the Irish town and most are robust and can be easily converted to modern living standards without destroying or compromising the heritage value. Much research exists on the sensible and compatible energy retrofit of such buildings and the cost benefit if properly assessed through a life cycle analysis is positive. Greater understanding is desirable between the conservation officers, fire officers and planning to achieve this and a revisit of the protected structure legislation within the Planning Act 2000 needs to be considered³⁵.

6.2.1 Re-design SEAI grants to promote and encourage the renovation of traditional

²⁸<https://www.retailexcellence.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Retailers-call-for-the-reintroduction-of-a-Living-Over-the-Shop-Scheme.pdf>

²⁹ <https://www.mayo.ie/housing/schemes/buy-and-renew>

³⁰ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d32c4-repair-and-leasing-scheme-rls-further-information/>

³¹ Where the state owns and rent the land to the occupier and the occupier owns the buildings.

³² Where the rent charged to the tenant is approximately equal to 1/480th of the costs borne by the landlord over a 40-year period

³³ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/68a5b-bringing-back-homes-manual-for-the-reuse-of-existing-buildings/> (see above)

³⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/42161-public-consultation-on-the-draft-guidance-for-energy-efficiency-in-traditional-buildings>

³⁵ <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/42161-public-consultation-on-the-draft-guidance-for-energy-efficiency-in-traditional-buildings//>

buildings by recognising their low carbon credentials and embodied carbon savings, providing BER criteria with guidelines for heritage buildings (Record of Protected Structures RPS) and other buildings of solid wall construction, which represent approximately 65% of buildings within town centres. BER rating must be revised to recognise the insulating qualities of older buildings, which often perform better than more modern buildings and embodied energy already in place. Develop appropriate grants and incentives for the sustainable renovation of historic structures including solid wall construction and BER ratings and guidelines

6.2.2 To facilitate the utilisation of the upper floors of street properties, introduce a tiered grading standard for Protected Structures in town centres differentiating between those of high heritage value where the total building is to be preserved, to those of limited worth retaining the facade only (like that in the UK). This would greatly assist in realising a myriad of properties onto the market to participate in the TCF programme.

6.2.3 Employ Architectural Conservation Officers in every Local Authority.

6.2.4 Commission further technical guidance documents to encourage understanding in the community and within professional bodies. Education is also important within the professional and skills sectors – this can also increase local knowledge and skills and create more locally based jobs. (ICOMOS) (SPAB Ireland).

6.2.5 Establish a training body tasked with creating apprenticeships training tradespeople in conservation techniques and upskilling current tradespeople in conservation and renovation.

6.2.6 Enable residential reuse of traditional buildings by offering appropriate exemptions and resolving often conflicting regulations on fire safety, disability access, heritage conservation, retrofitting, ecological and other considerations.

6.2.7 Develop enabling regulations that recognise the principle of sustainability and update the 2018 Bringing back homes manual accordingly³⁶.

6.2.8 Introduce a Carbon Levy on demolition.

6.2.9 Introduce a Carbon Credit for the reuse of vacant dwellings.

6.2.10 Introduce a Site Value Tax and a Windfall tax³⁷.

6.3 Serviced Sites

Policy Points

6.3.1 Provide seed capital, possibly funded through a windfall zoning tax, to local authorities for Cluster Housing serviced sites within town boundaries with active travel infrastructure, permeability and

³⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/68a5b-bringing-back-homes-manual-for-the-reuse-of-existing-buildings/>

³⁷ The windfall tax should be 80% (not as proposed by government currently at 50%)

biodiverse spaces included at planning stages. Houses should be built to a low-carbon energy standard, emulating the Kilsheelan Cluster housing scheme³⁸.

6.3.2 Provide funding for the development of a Community-led Housing model in Ireland and support existing initiatives.

6.4 Brownfield Development

Policy Points

6.4.1 Introduce fiscal instruments to prioritise brownfield development including a Site Value Tax/ 10-year tax relief/grants/ vat exemptions etc.

6.4.2 Give preference to residential content in Brownfield site development.

6.4.3 Increase the ratio of brownfield development in the National Development Plan to ensure that no brownfield sites in urban areas are left undeveloped. Compile a national database of brownfield sites to facilitate this

6.4.4 Acknowledge the economic benefits of Town Centre brownfield site development, including wellbeing factors such as social cohesion, accessibility and environmental indicators and factor these benefits into Local Area Plans.

6.4.5 Provide essential infrastructure for brownfield sites to encourage their prompt development.

7. Five Pilot Towns

Policy Points

7.1 Accelerate over three to five years, and substantially fund 5 pilot town programmes, where there are pre-existing good broadband and rail or good public transport services, one in each province, and Cloughjordan, Ireland's only ecovillage. The pilot towns should include a small, medium and large town, one with a large and one with a low urban influence. Initiatives need to be tested or developed incrementally to ensure they are effective and ensure continued support, during iterations.

7.2 Begin widespread initiatives in towns around the country, based on the learnings from the six-town study³⁹ already complete, and the 5 pilot towns. These initiatives could include exemplar developments and specific street/area development within towns and should include the Town Centre First logo as a way of promoting the initiative.

³⁸ <https://www.tipperarycoco.ie/news/rrdf-announcement-kilsheelan-cluster-housing>.

³⁹ <https://assets.gov.ie/77498/3b9f04d1-987f-4ed9-ac4c-750162e3f2a6.pdf>

