

TOWNS AT THE CENTRE

IRELAND'S COLLABORATIVE TOWN CENTRE HEALTH CHECK PROGRAMME IS LOOKING AT HOW BEST TO HELP IRISH TOWN CENTRES TO THRIVE.

Ireland's Collaborative Town Centre Health Check (CTCHC) Programme, created by The Heritage Council and its partners in 2016, and included in the recent Programme for Government – Our Shared Future (June 2020), aims to establish a collaborative and robust approach to undertaking town centre health checks in Irish towns. The aim is to guide the design, delivery, and evaluation of economic development, regeneration, and investment programmes – both public and private – at various levels. The Programme strongly supports the implementation of the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the National Development Plan 2018-2027: Project Ireland 2040, particularly in relation to the stated National Strategic Outcomes, National Policy Objectives and Strategic Investment Priorities. The NPF (section 1.2), entitled 'Making the Vision a Reality', includes this powerful statement:

"A major new policy emphasis on renewing and developing existing settlements will be required, rather than the continual expansion and sprawl of cities and towns out into the countryside, at the expense of town centres and small villages..."

Five key pillars are at the heart of the CTCHC Programme, which involves over 70 partner groups and organisations in Ireland and further afield (Figure 1):

- Government Departments and agencies;
- regional assemblies and local authorities;
- third-level organisations and institutes;
- business representative organisations; and,
- civic society/local groups.

A time of change

The CTCHC Programme is based on the premise that changing demographics and living/travel to work patterns, along with changing consumer preferences and trends, all impact on the vitality and viability of our historic town centres. The Covid-19 pandemic has vastly exacerbated the complex and multifaceted challenges facing town centres. Indeed, many were struggling before the lockdown. Robust data that qualifies and verifies the overall performance of town centres needs to be progressed and upgraded, as part of effective monitoring and evaluation processes and systems. This Programme seeks to close existing data gaps and create innovative partnerships that will ultimately build social capital. Demand for the Programme grew exponentially during its embryonic stage: c.70 people attended the first workshop in Naas (September 2016) and c.130 people attended the second workshop in Dublin (March 2017), a 90% increase. As a result, we created two key programme strands in mid 2018, namely:

1. Border Towns Network (BTN) – the first CTCHC workshop for border towns was held in Monaghan in June 2018, in partnership with Monaghan County Council. A Border Towns CTCHC Workshop Feedback Report¹ was published by The Heritage Council in December 2018. Approximately 60 people attended the first workshop in Monaghan and a second workshop for c. 65 people was held in Dundalk in April 2019. The first Dundalk CTCHC Report had a ministerial launch in June 2019.²
2. Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC) Towns – the first AEC CTCHC workshop was organised by The Heritage Council in partnership with Mayo County Council and partner Government departments in November 2018. As with the border towns workshop, a feedback report was circulated to all attendees (c. 60) for comment/input before finalisation and publication.

FEATURE

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Five key pillars



FIGURE 1:

The five key pillars of the CTCHC Programme.

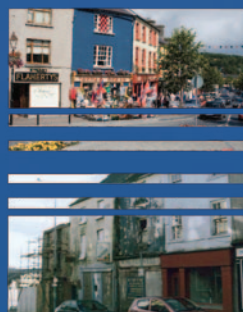
There are 15 towns³ involved in the CTCHC Programme, with over 70 project partners from the public, private and civic sectors in Ireland and further afield. There are approximately 16 additional towns on a waiting list, mostly in the east of the country. It is anticipated that a strand to service the east of the country will be created once additional resources are made available.

Survey

The Programme Co-ordinator developed a 15-step survey and assessment process at the outset, which was agreed with all programme partners. This process surveys, measures and maps (using geographic information systems) key quantitative indicators of a town centre's overall performance, including:

- land/building use and vacancy, e.g., retail vacancy rates in Programme towns range from 13.5% to 26%, whereas the target rate in the other EU member states is c. 5%;⁴
- footfall – pedestrian counts and movement patterns;
- consumer perceptions and confidence in these town centres;
- commercial perceptions and confidence – private sector investment plans and priorities, online presence/selling activity; and,
- pattern(s) of land/building ownership, etc.

Systemic problems and data gaps in Irish towns



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FIGURE 2

The Programme has identified three systemic problems and data gaps.

Programme towns have won a number of national awards: the Bank of Ireland Most Enterprising Town in Ireland: Overall National Award was won by Tralee⁵ in 2017 and Letterkenny⁶ in 2018; and, the KPMG Property Awards: Excellence in Planning Award 2018 was won by Monaghan Town.

Putting town centres first

Collaboration at an international level is hugely important. The Programme Co-ordinator was invited by the European Commission's (EC) DG GROW (the Commission's Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs) to present on Ireland's CTCHC Programme in Brussels in February 2019, and to be part of a panel of experts at the Association of Town and City Management's (ATCM) National Conference in London in spring 2019. Ireland's CTCHC Programme has identified three major systemic problems and data gaps, which are impacting on the overall ability of historic town centres to effectively manage the impact of a global pandemic in parallel with changing patterns in living, working, commercial and cultural consumption (Figure 2):

- land use/floorspace and vacancy;
- building condition; and,
- ownership.

Since mid 2019, the Programme has prepared detailed policy submissions on county development plan (CDP) reviews and the ongoing consultation by the Office of the Planning Regulator, about conducting reviews of local authorities' planning performance. All submissions highlight the need for a major policy shift towards putting town centres first. It is hoped that the next Government will embrace this collaborative and sustainable approach to town planning, to ensure that our unique and distinctive town centres can survive and thrive in a vastly uncertain future.

References in text available on request.

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