

## **PRESS RELEASE**

Thursday, 15<sup>th</sup> October 2020

### **Minister for Heritage launches Sligo Collaborative Town Centre Health Check research report**

*Heritage Council-led project helps to inform town centre investment decisions*

The Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform, Malcolm Noonan, TD, yesterday launched (14.10.20) the summary report published by the Heritage Council and its partners of the key findings of a major collaborative town centre health check (CTCHC) assessing the strengths and opportunities of Sligo's Historic Town Centre.

The scheme sees the Heritage Council partner with local organisations to collect a range of data that will help to inform investment decisions for the management and revitalisation of the historic town centre. The 15-step CTCHC process looks at the overall health of the town centre, including the level of town centre activities; land / building use; pedestrian footfall patterns; and business operators' and consumers' perceptions of the quality of the environment of the historic town. The Heritage Council worked collaboratively with Sligo Business Improvement District; IT Sligo, Sligo Chamber; Sligo County Council and Sligo Tidy Towns on the project and the data was collected during 2019 and 2020.

Launching the report at an online event yesterday, Minister Noonan said: "I am delighted to launch this Town Centre Health Check, the report provides hugely insightful data on the health of the town and a wonderful insight into how it is perceived by the people who know it best – its citizens and its businesses people. I believe the town centre is the very heart of Sligo Town, as it is for towns right across the country, and this Government is committed to regeneration of these town centres, bringing vacant buildings back into use, making it more attractive for people to live there, and supporting our towns as they reopen and recover. This survey was, of course, largely carried out pre-COVID-19, and, while it is difficult for us to consider bustling town centres at this time, we must hold firm to the belief that this pandemic will end; and towns, with our support, will strive and prosper."

Immediately before the event, the Minister announced significant additional funding of almost €96m, allocated for heritage in Budget 2021. He added: "This represents an increase of 51%, recognising the vital role played by our heritage in supporting the physical and mental wellbeing of the nation, contributing to biodiversity, and mitigating the impacts of climate change."

Key findings from the Sligo Town Centre Health Check include:

- 61% of consumers thought Sligo town centre to be generally attractive

- 51% felt there was a feeling of vibrancy in the town
- 97% of consumers thought that the choice and quality of cafes and restaurants in the town centre was good or very good
- 34% of respondents shopped online at least once a month, but 63% of online shoppers did not shop from Sligo-based online shops
- 53% anticipated that Brexit will have a negative impact on Sligo town centre
- 34% visited the town centre at least once a month for public events
- 80% of consumers had not visited any historic attraction in the past 12 months.

With regard to seating and areas to congregate, 30% rated this amenity as good; 43% rated the range of events in the town centre as good, and 44% rated the attractions in the town other than shops as good.

Of the business-owners surveyed, the majority would improve access to the town centre, with 33% saying they would like to see improvement to traffic flow and parking, and an equal number saying they would make improvements to pedestrian access and public areas. Some 37% of respondents would like to try pedestrianisation on a trial basis.

Other key findings include

- 68% of business said they made an investment to their building within the last five years and 58% have future investment plans for their building
- 63% of businesses own a space on the upper floor of their premises, of which 50% are vacant
- 65% wished there were more music and arts events in the town centre
- 77% of businesses have a business website; 85% a Facebook account and 77% a presence on Instagram
- In January 2020 (pre-COVID), less than half of the businesses had seen improving trading conditions over the past two years; 68% attributed changes in trading conditions to Brexit
- All of the businesses surveyed had been affected by COVID-19 measures, with more than 50% saying their turnover had decreased by between 50% and 90%.

The research also found that there were approximately 200 vacant buildings in the town centre, and that footfall dropped by 33% after 5pm.

Commenting, chief executive of the Heritage Council, Virginia Teehan said: "Dating back to Norman times, the layout of Sligo's historic streets and laneways makes Sligo one of the most picturesque settlements along the Wild Atlantic Way. Therefore, we were disappointed to see the vacancy rate of buildings in the town centre and the lack of engagement with heritage activities on Sligo's doorstep. While Sligo is due to benefit from initiatives such as the Heritage Council's Historic Towns Initiatives and the Urban Regeneration Development Fund, the research highlights the need for a heritage-led town renewal plan for Sligo.

"We were delighted that the Government included in its Programme for Government its intention to prioritise a Town Centres First collaborative and strategic approach to the regeneration of our villages and towns, using the Collaborative Town Centres Health Check framework. This provides a useful framework for Government to support collaboration, enabling and repurposing of built heritage in an urban context. The heritage sector has been particularly badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and heritage-led regeneration is vitally important as we try to deal with the unprecedented impacts from COVID-19 on towns, cities and communities."

CTCHC Programme Co-ordinator with the Heritage Council, Ali Harvey added: "The CTCHC report clearly demonstrates the importance of having a robust baseline and verified data to inform decision-making and investment proposals for town centre renewal. This is hugely important as town centres throughout Ireland are facing a most uncertain future as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and changes in consumer behaviour. The collaborative effort of the project partners and the innovative partnerships created bode well for the future of this wonderful historic town and the wider north west region."

The business owners research was conducted by Sligo BID. Its chief executive, Gail McGibbon said: "The partnerships that have been forged through this collaborative data-gathering process have been hugely rewarding, helping to generate a collective movement within all of the partners. I believe that such partnerships can see true long-lasting change for Sligo town centre with the CTCHC Programme. Establishing critical baseline information is vitally important to towns such as Sligo and it is essential that the Programme for Government invests in this much-needed programme to support historic town centres in Ireland."

IT Sligo was responsible for the Land Use Survey element of the research. Its President, Dr Brendan McCormack said: "IT Sligo looks forward to continued collaboration with all the stakeholders involved in this innovative regeneration project. We are a 'region in transition' and we need to drive forward projects that enable the revitalisation of Sligo Town as a centre of regional development, as identified by the key aims of Project Ireland 2040".

Chief executive of Sligo County Council, Ciarán Hayes said the CTCHC report provided a framework for taking stock of Sligo's assets. He added: "We must be equipped with this sort of data-driven process to build for the future. As a town in Ireland's North West, Sligo, like other towns, is facing unchartered territory yet has so much to offer, and this report will help us to enhance and maximise the quality of life for everyone in the town and for newcomers who have moved here more recently."

Finbarr Filan from Sligo Tidy Towns added: "A healthy and vibrant town centre is important for everyone who lives, works and visits Sligo Town. This process is fundamentally about how a town's heritage informs our sense of identity. Heritage reminds us of how important our town is in who we are - it is as important and as simple as that."

## **ENDS**

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### **Notes to Editors:**

- The Sligo Collaborative Town Centre Health Check 2020 report can be found on the Heritage Council website, [www.heritagecouncil.ie](http://www.heritagecouncil.ie).
- Heritage Council chief executive, Virginia Teehan and CTCHC co-ordinator, Ali Harvey are available for interview.

### **About the Collaborative Town Centre Health Check**

The Collaborative Town Centre Health Check is a process by which information is collected on a systematic basis for a range of indicators with the aim of establishing the opportunities and challenges facing town centres. Twelve towns were selected to participate in the pilot programme, which is co-ordinated by the Heritage Council, in collaboration with third-level institutions and other agencies. The research outputs of the project support the development of County Development Plans and local area plans. See the [www.heritagecouncil.ie](http://www.heritagecouncil.ie) for further details.