

## Dundalk Collaborative Town Centre Health Check (CTCHC) Project

**Project Partners: Heritage Council, Dundalk BID, Dundalk Chamber, Dundalk Credit Union, Louth County Council and Dundalk IT**

**Submission on Louth County Development Plan 2021-2027 Issues Paper**

***'Town Centres First!'***

### **Key Priorities for the plan in order to support the delivery of the NPF and RSES:**

1. Ensure the UN Sustainable Development Goals are at the heart of the new county development plan in order to acknowledge and appropriately respond to Dáil Éireann's declared National Emergency on Climate Change & Biodiversity Loss<sup>1</sup> in May 2019;
2. In accordance with the UNECE Aarhus Convention, the EC's Urban Agenda and the European Landscape Convention (ELC), formulate and deliver a *Town Centre First Policy* for the designated regional growth centres and historic towns of Dundalk and Drogheda (and other towns and villages) within the county – direct all new development to the historic town core or edge of historic core<sup>2</sup>;
3. Ensure that the Louth County Heritage Plan is adopted asap to support the county development plan's heritage objectives and to achieve stated government policy as set out in the National Heritage Plan 2002 and a likely key action under the forth-coming *Heritage Ireland 2030*;
4. In line with the published *National Biodiversity Action Plan 2017-2021*<sup>3</sup>, a County Biodiversity Action Plan is required. Such a report will inform, up-date and assist policy makers both within the County as well as nationally, as to how to respond appropriately to the challenges set by climate change and the significant negative impacts that will accrue through biodiversity loss going forward;
5. Assess the impact of Climate Change on future development in the county – potential development land within town and village boundaries may have to be reassessed to facilitate expected sea level rise and inform proposed flood relief schemes – this would not preclude uses such as greenways or similar – any assessment should include opportunities for green-ecosystem services;
6. Ensure that Louth County Council has sufficient technical staff to support the revitalisation and regeneration of town and village centres within the administrative area – i.e. the post of LA Conservation Officer needs to be filled as soon as possible;
7. Establish sustainable key indicators and monitoring processes through SEA to ensure that a Town Centre First Policy is working, i.e. retail vacancy rates in town centres should be targeted at 5 to 7% (not 24% which is the present vacancy rate<sup>4</sup>);

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[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint\\_committee\\_on\\_climate\\_action/reports/2019/2019-03-28\\_report-climate-change-a-cross-party-consensus-for-action\\_en.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_climate_action/reports/2019/2019-03-28_report-climate-change-a-cross-party-consensus-for-action_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Further retail development in out-of-town locations should not be permitted until vacancy rates in town/village centres in County Louth have reduced to more sustainable levels i.e.5-7%.

<sup>3</sup> *National Biodiversity Action Plan 2017-2021*. NPWS, DoCHG. 2017 – see Action 1.1.5.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/Dundalk-Collaborative-Town-Centre-Health-Check-Report-2019.pdf>

8. It is recommend that the local authority and its partners could involve the Dutch Provinces as international peer reviewers on town centre matters and build on the study visit by the Dutch Delegation of Provinces (13 no reps) to Dundalk in June 2019, as part of the launch by Minister English TD of the Dundalk CTCHC Summary Report 2019<sup>5</sup> - the study lessons learned report from the Dutch Delegation is provided at *Appendix A*;
9. Undertake *Collaborative Town Centre Health Checks (CTCHC)* for the designated regional growth centres every two years and throughout the plan period, i.e. Dundalk CTCHC is due to be updated in 2020 and CTCHC summary findings should be published in 2021, 2023, 2025 and 2027;
10. Formulate and deliver a *Dundalk Town Renewal Plan* as soon as possible, working in partnership with the Heritage Council's CTCHC Programme, EMRA, Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, etc. This plan should also promote the historic town centre as a Strategic Energy Zone (SEZ);
11. Dundalk has the capacity to become a significant urban wildlife destination centred round the bay and its winter assemblages of international wildfowl – planned appropriately, this could be used to extend tourist numbers out of season, if appropriate infrastructure was supporting this aspect;
12. The county development plan should support an audit of embedded carbon in existing buildings in historic town and village centres within the plan area – this audit could link to the ongoing work of the CTCHCs and the proposed Town Renewal Plan<sup>6</sup>;
13. An audit is required to include the management, conservation and management of Louth's peatlands. It should be a target of the local authority to hold these already stable carbon sinks that pertain in Louth's fens and bog habitats, these should be looked to in terms of re-wetting programmes, where feasible, thus creating carbon sinks from carbon sources;
14. Include specific policy to support *Collaborative Town Centre Health Checks* for towns in the county following the Heritage Council and Partners' award-winning programme methodology – please see Tralee and Letterkenny CTCHCs - both towns are recipients of the Bank of Ireland's National Most Enterprising Town in Ireland Award in 2017 and 2018;
15. Ensure that all SHD proposals are within or adjacent to the town centre – Dundalk Town Centre's vacancy rates are currently well above the EU average. Undertake full review of existing opportunity sites in town centres as part of a much-needed switch to a Town Centre First policy;
16. Prioritise the establishment of an *Investment One-Stop Shop* for Dundalk Town Centre in partnership with Dundalk BID and other international and national partners;
17. In line with EC policy, formulate a *Town Centre Living Strategy* for the designated regional growth centres as soon as possible in partnership with the EIB, Dundalk IT and other private investment and social enterprise partners;
18. Prepare a sustainable regeneration plan for publicly-owned land banks - focus on town centre sites, in line with recommended Town Centre First Policy (see above);
19. Develop robust *Enabling Policy* and *Streetscape Design Guidelines* to support infill development in Dundalk Town Centre;

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<sup>5</sup> The Dutch Delegation confirmed in Dundalk in June 2019 that their retail vacancy rate is at 6.8%.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.buildup.eu/sites/default/files/content/worldgbc\\_bringing\\_embodied\\_carbon\\_upfront.pdf](https://www.buildup.eu/sites/default/files/content/worldgbc_bringing_embodied_carbon_upfront.pdf)

20. Formulate and deliver a *Strategic Plan for the Dublin-Belfast Rail/M1 Corridor* with key partners, including the Dundalk CTCHC Project – the M1 Corridor is a designated EU Trade Route (EU01);
21. Formulate and deliver a *Strategic Development Plan for Louth's Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)* i.e. Dundalk BID and Drogheda BID – highlight the need for National and Regional Strategies for the development of BID Companies in Ireland e.g. Scotland has 40 no. BID companies and Ireland currently has three, with Drogheda BID due to be commence as a legal entity in early 2020;
22. Undertake *Riverscape Studies* in partnership with the NPWS and the Heritage Council for the designated regional growth centres and examine the feasibility of creating greenways and blueways along the rivers/estuaries/port areas;
23. Undertake Noise and Air Quality/Pollution Mapping for the designated regional growth centres in order to inform strategies for town centre living;
24. Prepare and deliver a quality Design Framework/Masterplan for Dundalk Port Area and ensure all sustainability targets are met;
25. Set up a Public Transport Stakeholder Group in Dundalk as recommended by the Smarter Travel Strategy passed by Dundalk Town Council in 2010;
26. Create a Priority Bus Corridor from the bus station in Dundalk to Mullagaharlin and Finnabar Industrial Centres, also servicing Dundalk IT connecting work/study and town centre living;
27. Establish a priority Greenway linking the area of town to the west of the railway with the town centre, at a mid-point between the two existing rail crossings on Castletown Road and the Carrick Road. Also, establish a Heritage Loop using the Dundalk Greenore railway line and the old Racecourse Road to the North of the town;
28. Work with Dundalk IT to identify and develop a vibrant Student Quarter in Dundalk Town Centre;
29. Louth County Council should audit their land banks, giving particular consideration to opportunities for all ecosystem service provision, this can be as basic as applying less chemical herbicides to roadway management and / or facilitating more natural vegetation to establish for pollinators;
30. The larger towns of Dundalk & Drogheda, in particular, enhanced by a range of biodiversity key species, can play a significant role in enriching the users/consumers' experience – a softening of a rich built environment by means of pocket parks, orchards, pollinators, and swift box enhancement etc can all go to enhance the urban fabric as well as functioning as an ecosystem service;
31. Just as many Irish towns turned their backs to waterways dissecting these urban centres in the past, Louth's marine environment also calls to be acknowledged, supported and developed. These sensitive habitats and communities, if sustainably managed will be a constant draw to tourists, the basis for high-end locally produced food and a backdrop to Louth's rural landscape for generations; and
32. It is recommended that a detailed Public Communications Strategy is formulated to ensure that the county development plan is successfully monitored and delivered.

Submitted on behalf of the Dundalk CTCHC Project

26<sup>th</sup> November 2019

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## Appendix A:

### Summary lessons learned by the visit of the Dutch delegation of Provincial employees to Dundalk

**October 2019 – (Author, Kim Ruijs, Regional Project Leader, Retail Agenda, Netherlands)**

In the period between 26<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of June a Dutch delegation of provincial employees whom are concerned with the topic Retail visited Belfast, Dublin and Dundalk. The goal of this study trip was to broaden the knowledge of cross border Retail policy making and check out how Ireland is fighting Retail vacancy.

During the last day of our visit we joined a convention where the Dundalk town center health check was presented. Also, we received a tour of the town with explanation about the actions to be taken.

General reflection of the participants on the visit to Dundalk:

- It is back to basic of retail policy. What happens if you do nothing with spatial planning • Dundalk is currently on the same level where we started in 2015, the urgency of retail vacancy throughout the country and the need to do something about it is starting to grow.
- I also gained insight into other values that you can look at in a city center, for example from a cultural-historical perspective;
- We are dealing with the same problems, and it gives us the back up to keep on focusing on Retail. How do we as a government continue to focus on retail when the political power disappears?
- The streets and spaces above shops are empty, that is our real concern. The urgency is high. We must continue to call attention to this social issue;
- You see what happens in Dundalk when you release the reins on spatial planning;
- Dundalk is very comparable to cities in the Netherlands. If you make sharper choices based on good data you prevent a lot of misery in the future

The Dutch delegation talked about 3 levels of cooperation between Government, Retail and Real estate.

### **On a national level the Netherlands is working with a national Retail Agenda**

The Retail Agenda kicked off on 17 March 2015, initially for 2 years and was an Initiative of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and relevant partners (public and private). The first 2 years the Retail Agenda focused on 21 actions mainly stimulating local authorities' awareness and raising campaigns.

Retaildeals are the cornerstone of the first phase of the national Retail Agenda. It was a way to create a sense of urgency throughout the country.

What is a Retaildeal?

- A RetailDeal is a commitment taken by a city to bring together the main stakeholders to work towards a future-proof local policies for Retail. Here, futureproof means clear choices of where retail should function, an effort to decrease regulations and public-private collaboration where necessary.
- The Netherlands count 355 cities. Today, 158 RetailDeals have been signed (44%).

On a Regional (provincial) level we agreed upon a couple of actions:

Because most of the authority on Retail lies within the local communities it has been challenging for us how which role we should take.

- Provide objective data on Retail – we do offer information on demand for retail based on current purchases of costumers. And we have information Retail locations and Retail vacancy. Together this gives a perfect view on future demand.
- We've created a Real Estate monitor for all types of Real Estate, so also for offices and farming spaces.
- Try to help cities out on local level to prevent and fight retail vacancy. Some of us provide knowledge programmes others subsidise local initiatives to work on town collaborations.
- Our provincial regulations are focused on creating a healthy and future proof retail structures. We focus on regional balance and try to stimulate regional discussion and agreements on where and what kind of retail is fit for the future.

After 2 years of creating a sense of urgency, partners of the Retailagenda wanted to take the public-private collaboration to the next level. Which meant that the Retail sector and all layers of government agreed to install a permanent Retail team consisting of people from the Retail sector (Trade associations) and the government.

Focus of this 2 year program is on creating knowledge and sharing knowledge on 5 themes. All the partners in the Retailagenda deliver a financial contribution and a team member who is fulltime available.

The board members meet every 6 weeks to talk about progress of the program.

Examples of products and projects that we do:

- Organisation of Innovation labs where local governments experiment with subjects like: city dispatch, Loyalty cards, smart distribution
- Learning from each other in peer-to-peer learning about local transformation with real estate.
- On Human capital level we have 4 projects where we work to close the gap between labour market and education. Also, we created an educational programme for city managers. And work on making Retail entrepreneurs future proof.
- We create knowledge on local transformation and collaboration through publication of brochures.
- On a regional level we've gathered all the initiatives and bundled it in a infographic to create awareness of all our actions.
- We've started a European lobby to include this Retail issue in the Urban agenda

The Retailagenda is a network organization and does not have the means to invest in transformation, it is a way of working together get the same outlook on Retail and know which parties are in the lead to change.

## **Province of North Brabant**

### **Current developments in the province of Noord-Brabant**

- Many vacant stores in the city-centers
- Turnover is low amongst retailers
- The problems in the medium-sized cities are substantial
- There is little distinctive character in the region
- Increasingly more store capacity in the center is given a different function.
- Retailers lack innovative power

### **Brabant Retail Policy**

#### **Give direction**

Monitoring the retail vacancy

Purchase Flow Research

Regulation on where retail can settle (only in existing centers and only bulky goods in the outskirts of town).

Guiding principles in order to achieve regional agreements

#### **Stimulate change on local level**

Retail course for local policy officers on future proof retail policy

- **Topics that have been taught:**
- Placemaking; creating interesting places
- Social added value; a city for people
- Real estate
- The identity of a city
- Center management
- Legal aspects
- Future exploration
- Exploration of the inner cities/shopping centers

Retail advisory committee that checks new retail plans on supply and demand

#### **Enable things to change**

We give grants to middle sized towns to transform their city center under conditions

Support Research projects by students

Provide support with the transformation tasks

Linking other social tasks of our government (sustainability, energy transition, housing)

## **Provincial Retail Advisory Committee**

### STRUCTURE:

- Independent committee with experts from universities, retail business community, consumer behavior, real estate, livability and inner-city development.

### PURPOSE:

- Solicited and unsolicited advice on the social value of new retail concepts and spatial plans with retail initiatives that require regional coordination.

### FOR WHOM:

- provincial administration
- regions
- municipalities

### ABOUT WHAT:

- spatial plans
- retail agreement
- center development strategy
- master plan

### HOW:

- The request for advice is submitted in writing
- A visit is made to the municipality that request advice
- A conversation with the municipal administration
- The advice is drawn up

## **City of Sittard**

**A total of 90.000 inhabitants of which 40.000 live in Sittard**

- **Location: Belgium on the left. Germany on the right (DETAILS)**
- **Old City Center**
- **Own Football club**
- **Growth (wealthy) during the coal mine era and shift to petrochemical industry.**

## **Focus Retail policy**

- **Heritage and culture**
- **Recreation and experience**
- **Dealing with lower demand of Retail**
- **Transformation of functions**

