

POLICIES AND ACTIONS TO PROMOTE THE REGENERATION OF IRISH TOWNS AND VILLAGES:

SUBMITTED BY 'BAILE', WORKING GROUP OF ICOMOS IRELAND, MARCH 2017

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The following observations are made on foot of the forthcoming preparation of a new National Planning Framework. We are a working group of ICOMOS Ireland, meeting under the name 'Baile', interested in matters related to the planning, management and conservation of historic towns and villages. ICOMOS Ireland is the national branch of an international NGO of almost 12000 practitioners working to promote the application of theory, methodology and scientific techniques to the conservation of our cultural heritage. The organisation has 29 international scientific committees, each with a different focus; its international committee on the conservation of historic towns and villages is known as CIVVIH (Comité International des Villes et Villages Historique) and our working group reflects its aims in the Irish context. Included in our group are conservation/heritage professionals working in the areas of architecture, town planning and policy-making within the public and private sectors.

ICOMOS Ireland is part of the organising committee for the annual ICOMOS international scientific symposium with a 2018 theme of Sustainability and is working to help realise the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which Ireland signed up to at Habitat III in November 2016 and the New Urban Agenda into the future. This document identifies relevant SDGs by their reference numbers at certain headings in order to connect the proposed actions to these stated goals.



It is well-established that small-medium sized Irish towns are currently in crisis. The urban core of many towns no longer supports a range of business, retail, social and residential activities, and unoccupied or under-used buildings are now common-place.

Policies that encourage people to live in towns should be adopted nationally, regionally and locally (whether this is in existing buildings or new-build developments in infill sites) as this is likely to re-invigorate town centres and increase their attractiveness as places to live. In addition, measures should be taken to encourage the re-use of existing buildings and the preservation of the historic fabric of towns and villages. It is essential that a coordinated approach is adopted whereby national policies and legislation feed into regional and local development plans. The following submission has been divided into four main themes:

1. Living in towns;
2. Environmental issues;
3. Economic issues;
4. Zoning matters.

Each theme examines issues as they might be approached on a national level (e.g. requiring legislative change); on a regional level (relevant to County Development Plans); or at a local level (typically addressed by Local Area Plans, or other local strategies).



1.0 LIVING IN TOWNS

It is the surviving buildings, structures, streetscapes and the places and interlinking spaces that they form that make each town and village unique. This historic fabric should be recognised as a key element in the potential regeneration of any urban centre. Above all, it should not be forgotten that towns are places in which to live.

1.1 NATIONAL LEVEL ACTION

1.1.1 Standards for new build:

Adopt a high (but achievable) level of standards, i.e. specified minimum standards for size, number of rooms, daylight, orientation, access to outdoor space, quality of build, materials, insulation, BER, finishes etc. All new development will be extant for many years to come; we should be aiming for best quality buildings to be inherited by future generations.

1.1.2 Variety of typologies:

A variety of dwelling types should be encouraged and explored (houses, apartment, duplex etc. – various sizes & layouts to suit families of different compositions, couples, families with children, the elderly etc.); the objective should be to have a mix of ages, family sizes and social backgrounds in order to create a viable community within the town centre. National policies and/or financial incentives intended to encourage development and growth should not emphasise one dwelling type above others.

1.1.3 Incentivise private development within town centres:

Consideration should be given to the promotion of incentives that would encourage private development to take place in town centres. This could include tax breaks and grant assistance under town renewal and retrofit schemes for works to existing buildings, extensions to existing and part-new build or new-build on infill sites within the urban core.

The recent ICOMOS / Heritage Council colloquium on Deep Energy Retrofitting for Traditional Buildings addressed some of these issues and several existing schemes were discussed. It is suggested that these retrofit schemes and incentives should be expanded in scope and eligibility.

See also points 3.1.1 and 4.2.1 below.



1.2 REGIONAL LEVEL ACTIONS

1.2.1 Flexibility in Building Control

Encourage a non-prescriptive approach to the Building Regulations (i.e. applying alternative solutions to the prima facie examples as set out in TGDs when dealing with existing buildings) by actively engaging in consultation (e.g. Part B, Part M), particularly in the case of the re-use of existing buildings, where the TGDs cannot always be applied. Local authorities should be facilitated to allocate specific resources to this end. Support testing and/or analysis to establish verifiable data which can inform guidance for historic buildings. It is worth noting that while it is provided for in the Building Regulations, a non-prescriptive approach is difficult to apply in practice as the required level of consultation and advice is not available in most building control authorities due to lack of resources.

1.2.2 Location of public services

It is within the gift of local authorities (and indeed state-run bodies) to strengthen the urban core of our towns by carefully considering the location of public services (e.g. schools, libraries, healthcare, nursing homes, county council offices etc.). These facilities should be situated within the central urban area wherever possible, providing reasons for people to spend time in towns. All opportunities for connection within the urban fabric should be taken (i.e. interlinking of routes though the town, particularly on foot/bicycle). The provision of such facilities can also provide opportunities to create exemplars in the re-use of existing buildings. Resources should be allocated appropriately in order to facilitate the re-use of existing buildings and brownfield sites, which can involve a greater capital outlay in comparison with greenfield development, but which will deliver more long-term benefits for a town and its inhabitants.

1.2.3 Location of local authority/social housing schemes:

New social housing schemes should be located in existing structures or on infill sites wherever possible. This would help to re-populate urban centres and provide more diverse living patterns than the large single-tenure estates located on the edges of towns, as often developed in the past. This approach will work best where private development is also located within town centres in order to achieve a balanced urban community and range of tenure types (see point 1.1.3 above).

Similarly, sheltered housing for the elderly/infirm should also be located within the urban centres. This would allow for the greater integration of this sector of society in town/community life. It is increasingly likely that new typologies of housing for the elderly and for multi-generational living will



be required as the age profile of the country shifts; this provides an opportunity as well as a challenge. The advantages of proximity in the town/village context are of benefit to social groups such as the elderly and disabled, with opportunities for positive integration with a wider demography through sharing services and amenities.

1.2.4 Parking strategy

It is accepted that parking issues provide a significant challenge in the successful regeneration of towns. When parking is difficult to find or costly, it is all too easy for shoppers to use retail centres on the peripheries of towns where parking is plentiful and free. Despite this, many towns continue to charge a fee for on-street and municipal parking as it provides a valuable revenue stream. Means of offsetting this parking income should be considered on a regional level along with ways of encouraging the development of under-used backlands for parking (perhaps particularly for business owners/employees and future new town centre residents) that might free-up parking on-street for short-term use. New parking arrangements could be linked to campaigns for a healthier lifestyle (e.g. park and walk).

1.3 LOCAL LEVEL ACTIONS

1.3.1 Streetscape

Introduce specified standards for materials to be used for the renewal of public spaces (e.g. natural stone paving in important areas, near significant historic buildings).

Co-ordinate all new street furniture, lighting schemes, paving schemes etc. and rationalise signage and poles/lampposts.

Identify existing historic features and materials (wrought iron railings and gates, stone bollards, kerbstones, plinth walls, steps, cast iron covers, lamp standards etc.) and select and design new additions in a complementary manner. Thus distinctive character and identity of place is recognised and enhanced.

Give careful consideration to proposed uses of buildings in relation to public spaces (e.g. overlooking and passive surveillance, night-time uses in proximity to residential etc.).

1.3.2 Amenities

Towns are traditionally places where access to rivers and canals is available, but frequently ignored. These amenities should be developed, as they provide opportunities for walking, fishing, leisure uses



etc. that are not as easily provided outside towns due to poor access, or land ownership issues. In order to achieve this it is important that integrated routes are identified in local area plans. Thus a riverside or canalside walk should be part of a network of paths that link these places with the town centre, schools, community centres, houses etc.



2.0 ENVIRONMENTAL

The issue of sustainability and climate change is of increasing significance and relevance in all areas of society, not least in the area of planning and development. Ireland signed up to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. SDG11 *'Sustainable Cities and Communities: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable'*, at Habitat III, in Quito, (Nov.2016).

The re-use of existing building stock and the consolidation of our historic town centres as places of commerce, habitation and social interaction, within a defined area in which resources can be shared efficiently, should be a prime objective for society at this juncture.

2.1 NATIONAL LEVEL ACTIONS

2.1.1 Energy usage/wastage: (SDG 1, 2, 3, 7, 11, 12, 13, 15)

'the greenest building is the one already built'

The construction of new buildings where there are plenty of opportunities for re-use represents a waste of materials and energy. Even allowing for the upgrading of fabric that may be required, the embodied energy of an existing structure is considerable. Counteracting abandonment and consolidating town centres as places where business can be transacted, social encounters take place and a high standard of living is available, reduces unnecessary journeys by car and allows more families to survive with a single car, where two would have been required previously. This should be considered as part of our commitment under the Paris Agreement. as well as Habitat III The Irish Green Buildings Council has recently highlighted this issue and is participating in an international collaborative project (Build Upon) on building renovation and retrofitting, which could have a very positive impact on existing towns. It should be noted however that any such renovation projects would require a specialist skills base to deal with the conditions and requirements of historic building construction.

2.1.3 Shared services: (SDG 11,12 ,13)

Services such as fixed-line broadband can be provided much more efficiently to the population of a town, with a reasonable density, than to individual houses spread throughout the countryside. Such provision is key to the survival and growth of regional areas, as it is critical for the establishment of new business and attracting new residents from the cities.

2.1.4 One-off houses (SDG 11, 12, 13)



A national policy should be developed that challenges the accepted cultural norm of building one-off houses outside existing urban centres. This would act as a buttress to policies adopted at local authority level, where pressure for such development is most keenly felt and where policies for 'local need' development have not always been consistently adopted and applied. Complementary measures to make it easier for development to take place within urban centres along with advocacy and implementation of actions that advance and enhance urban living would also be of support.

2.2 REGIONAL LEVEL ACTIONS

2.2.1 Septic tanks: (SDG 6, 12)

The proliferation of septic tanks is an acknowledged problem that needs to be addressed. Dwellings located within urban centres can be connected to mains sewerage. Policies that adopted a more restrictive attitude to the development of one-of-houses on the edge of towns, in favour of housing within towns, are more sustainable and fit with our commitments as part of the EU as well as Habitat III.

2.2.2 Infrastructure: (SDG 3, 6, 11, 12)

Development plans and other strategies should encourage the use of existing infrastructure and the development of infrastructure that will benefit larger groups of people rather than facilitating low-density development. This should take place in the context of the enhancement of existing infrastructure (e.g. the public realm) in order to improve the overall attractiveness of towns as places to live and to facilitate more widespread recognition of their inherent value and uniqueness.

2.2.3 Health aspects: (SDG 3)

More compact and interconnected urban centres create more opportunities for walking.

Living within towns provides greater opportunities for cycling (this might be most significant for the young/school going age groups).

Separate cycleways and pedestrian walkways should be identified whenever possible in order to provide the greatest amenity value.

Shared facilities such as pocket parks/playgrounds/skateparks etc. can be better utilised by the whole community when urban centres are interconnected.

Interconnected routes (e.g. between schools, churches, town centre, amenities etc.) for both walking and cycling should be identified and continuously developed.



3.0 ECONOMIC **(SDG8 – DECENT WORK AND SUSTAINED INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC GROWTH)**

Regional towns are traditional centres of commerce that have existed and developed over a long period. These should be re-invigorated/re-established, as their influence over the surrounding rural hinterland is significant.

3.1 NATIONAL LEVEL ACTION

3.1.1 Affordability:

Affordability of houses in towns is a key issue: the re-use of existing structures/dwellings can be costly in comparison to new-build (inevitably located on the edges of towns). This could be addressed by a site value tax or other financial instrument/incentive. Also, the importance of challenging the culture of one-off housing (see above) is also relevant in this context.

3.2 REGIONAL LEVEL ACTION

3.2.1 Supporting financial opportunities: (SDG 8)

Opportunities to spend money locally should be prioritised through zoning/land uses by the restriction of large out-of-town shopping centres. Small and medium-sized business should be supported along with large sized commercial premises where the retailer is prepared to locate within the town centre. There are numerous examples of large grocery outlets successfully trading in town centre locations when there is a willingness to depart from 'big box' premises, and/or where they can be accommodated in backlands. Leading on from this, employment opportunities will be created locally in cases where small businesses can now survive. A virtuous cycle can be created once a critical level of inhabitation and activity is reached. Support for smaller local businesses plays an essential part in this process and the Local Enterprise Office network is a significant stakeholder.

3.3 LOCAL LEVEL ACTION

3.3.1 Re-use of buildings as a resource: (SDG 11, 13)

The Local Enterprise Office network could be used to put in place schemes for learning trades/skills that would be utilised in the re-use of existing structures (e.g. roofing, plumbing, electrics, plastering etc. and also potentially specialist skills such as ironmongery, conservation joinery, thatching etc.) thus reducing costs. Currently a scheme to retrofit insulation is used in this manner – this could be extended to other skills/trades. Local initiatives to support and encourage building maintenance



should also be established, whereby economies of scale could be achieved for property owners/occupiers, an entire town would benefit from regular upkeep and local employment would be generated.

4.0 ZONING

4.1 NATIONAL LEVEL ACTION

4.1.1 New zoning strategy

Investigate the possibility of widening the zoning strategy by allowing the zoning of upper floors separately (i.e. allow commercial/retail uses at ground floor and residential uses above). This would reflect the fact that towns can be places with a tightly woven fabric, where various activities can comfortably take place within a small area. The implications of doing so would include considering how the imposition of rates/local property tax etc. , would be managed.

4.2 REGIONAL LEVEL ACTIONS

4.2.1 Promote infill development: (SDG 11)

Re-use and/or infill development should be encouraged/permitted ahead of greenfield development wherever possible with an emphasis on high-quality of design for infill/backland proposals.

4.2.2 Land-use matrices: (SDG 11, 16 ,17)

Land-use matrices in development plans should be used to favour mixed re-use of existing buildings within the urban core ahead of edge-of-town sites in terms of permitted development.

4.2.3 Targeted policies: (SDG 16, 17: *Build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels*)

Specific policies and guidance should be included in development plans regarding out-of-town shopping, petrol stations shops etc. Also, traffic policies should aim to create good quality pedestrian provision in town centres and routes for traffic within the town but not through the centre.

4.3 LOCAL LEVEL ACTIONS

4.3.1 Local policies: (SDG17 – *Strengthen implementation and revitalise the Global partnership for sustainable development*)



Specific policies for individual towns to facilitate heritage-led regeneration such as those discussed herein should be put forward in Town Development Plans, Local Area Plans, Settlement Plans etc. – these plans should be informed by an analysis of what each town/village could be and fed-into locally by a consultation process. This would encourage more strategic thinking, decisions informed by local needs and the possibility of linking with rural requirements of the hinterlands of towns.

Design Statements (as per the Limerick County Development Plan) or other similar reports/documents required as part of the planning process could be used to encourage development within urban areas, for example by requiring comparative analysis of site locations for new housing (i.e. is greenfield development necessary when brownfield sites are available?).

3D plans and/or village design statements (e.g. as prepared for Mulranny, Co. Mayo) can act as a valuable aid in the planning process. These should provide an emphasis on heritage-led regeneration.

Many successful town regeneration projects undertaken to date in Ireland have either been led by, or involved, a designated design professional (e.g. town architect, county architect, county architect's department etc.). Consideration should be given to increasing the number of these roles and examining how local authority resources are utilised, even for relatively small schemes. Local level engagement and empowerment are important objectives and require particular skills; these skills should be developed within the local authority structure.

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