

Oireachtas Committee
Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government & Heritage
Leinster House
Dublin 2

22 Sept 2021

RGDATA Submission regarding the promised Town Centre First Policy (TCF) and the need for urgent action to regenerate Ireland's town and village centres.

RGDATA, the representative group for Ireland's independent retail grocery sector, has a unique viewpoint on the regeneration of Ireland's Towns and Villages. RGDATA represents grocery/convenience retailers in almost every town and village in Ireland. Our members are a key driver of local engagement, facilitate daily footfall into our towns and villages and are continuously investing in the local communities that they serve.

International research by Prof Kevin Leyden from UCG clearly shows the value of having a family owned food/convenience store at the centre is an essential component of a vibrant, connected community.

RGDATA is the only trade association that actively participates in the planning process making regular submissions on planning policy, a founding collaborator with the Heritage Council of the successful Collaborative Town Centre Health Check Programme and Tara Buckley is a member of the Advisory Group on TCF and the Advisory Group on the Circular Economy.

It is vital that commercial traders in our towns and villages engage in the process to revitalise and regenerate local communities – RGDATA members are actively doing this and have practical experience of the issues and challenges involved.

It is important that the Oireachtas Committee members hear directly from the coalface about what needs to be done to revitalise our towns and villages and to engage all citizens in a meaningful way to deliver change.)

Here are the key points RGDATA made to the TCF Advisory Group:

1. Be ambitious for Town Centres

It is really important that the TCF has at its heart a strong sense of ambition for our towns and a belief in what they can achieve. A TCF policy will deliver significant benefits to all our citizens including advancing social capital and improving citizens' daily lives. Ensuring vibrant, connected local communities and economies will deliver on the Programme for Government "Our Shared Future" and EU goals with regard to The Green Deal, promoting the circular economy and delivering on environmental and sustainability goals.

2. Timely initiatives

Town Centres have suffered an unprecedented perfect storm and need support now – we are already over 12 months into the TCF development and no policy, programme or plan has been actioned. Many Towns and villages are suffering. They have been hit by the downturn, Covid-19, changes in shopping practices and many are dealing with the legacy of bad planning, vacancy and dereliction. Some are still recovering from the ruin inflicted by the last major recession in 2008.

3. Don't reinvent the wheel

It would be a complete waste of time to start to reinvent or recreate programmes or initiatives that have worked well in comparable situations. For instance, the Scottish Town Centres First Programme has been successful and worked effectively in helping to regenerate and support Town Centres – we should embrace it and apply it here.

4. Recognise existing initiatives and expertise

The Collaborative Town Centre Health Check Programme (CTCHC) has been hugely successful and cost effective in helping to produce data on the health of town centres and providing a starting point for collaboration of all stakeholders and moving onto evidence based strategic regeneration initiatives. The CTCHC programme needs both national co-ordination and proper funding. The CTCHC programme works and is accepted by all as an excellent starting point for the Town Centre First Policy.

A national TCF co-ordinating body should be established to manage programmes like the CTCHC and activity should be based on specific targets (e.g. mandate the commissioning of a specific number of CTCHCs within each County by the end of year 1 and the rollout of Phase 2 of the programme etc).

5. The process must be data driven

The TCF must be data driven and evidence based. We need accurate data on building use, vacancy and dereliction, footfall, population trends etc and town centres need to be mapped using a national mapping and 3D modelling system. This will provide the basis for setting demonstrable and achievable targets to ground programmes and to demonstrate progress and to produce evidence based, shovel ready projects that will qualify for national and EU funding.

6. Be prepared to recognise what is not working

Local Authorities should be key to the regeneration of town centres and the implementation of the TCF policy. However, Local Authorities cannot do this alone - they are an important stakeholder but experience in Ireland and internationally has shown that broader based initiatives, stemming from the community with the support of local authorities will work best. If the roll out of the TCF programme is left exclusively to Local Authorities as distinct from broader based structures, without some ongoing national oversight, guidance and support, the programme will not succeed.

Equally structures such as BIDs are not broad-based enough to lead the level of engagement and participation required to deliver an effective Town Centre First programme. Community Development Groups and Local Enterprise Associations need to be harnessed effectively.

7. National entity needed

A national entity is needed to promote best practice and co-ordinate programmes that deliver TCF. The Town Centre Partnership in Scotland is an ideal precedent that can be easily applied in Ireland. This will require a dynamic manager and a small team with expertise in the various aspects of Town centre regeneration including data collection and analysis, digital communications and 3D modelling that is funded by central government to set up and roll out national programmes to deliver the Town Centres First policy and a national portal for data and information sharing and promoting and supporting a collaborative approach and sharing of best practice.

8. All State entities must sign up to the Town Centre First policy

There are numerous examples where different State entities or different publicly funded programmes conflict with the overall objectives of the Town Centre First policy. For instance, key public utilities, such as a Post Office or HSE office may move out of town, or a publicly funded housing initiative may move to convert viable commercial units in a town centre into residential use, rather than providing the dynamic mix that is required to sustain vibrancy and viability. This also applies to decisions about schools, primary care, transport – every facet of Government must be locked in. Providing some process so that State funded initiatives or State entities support the TCF policy is absolutely key to success. Otherwise, money gets squandered and the overall public policy objective is wasted. This could be achieved through ministerial guidelines being issued on Town Centre First. It is crucial that we all stop working in silos and collaborate if we are to successfully address town centre regeneration.

9. Value For Money from Town and Village Renewal expenditure & other existing and future funding schemes

Expenditure on Town and Village Renewal Schemes needs to be well directed and fit within the overall policy context supporting TCF. When allocations are being made under the Town and Village Renewal Schemes, or any other state programmes, it is vital that they demonstrably support the achievement of the policy objectives behind the TCF programme. Ireland has plenty of experience to date of how ad hoc and disjointed funding merely leads to incidental improvements in some towns or villages, while core problems undermining the vitality and viability of the specific towns or villages remain to be tackled. The TCF is an opportunity that must be grasped to tackle this issue in a meaningful way.

10. Examples of success and best practice

The examples often quoted of Westport, Clonakilty and Kinsale as towns that have successfully maintained their core function and provide a mix of commercial, residential and community uses are well known. But let's extend our focus by exploring other towns which are less well known, where the efforts of local groups can be identified and embraced when providing national guidance – some encouraging examples include – Croom, Co. Limerick and Skibbereen, Co Cork.

11. Communications and debunking myths

It is really important to communicate to communities and public representatives that the Town Centre First Policy is absolutely core to rural regeneration. Having vibrant and strong town and villages will provide the network of community and economic infrastructure that will support rural Ireland. The Town Centre First Policy is not about depopulating rural areas and moving people into towns or villages – instead it is about supporting rural Ireland and utilising the existing infrastructure and fabric to meet the needs of communities, whether living in towns or in remoter rural areas in a sustainable and positive way.



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RGDATA
Local Shops – Local Communities