



Urban centres and vacancy: Irish towns and cities, a planning perspective

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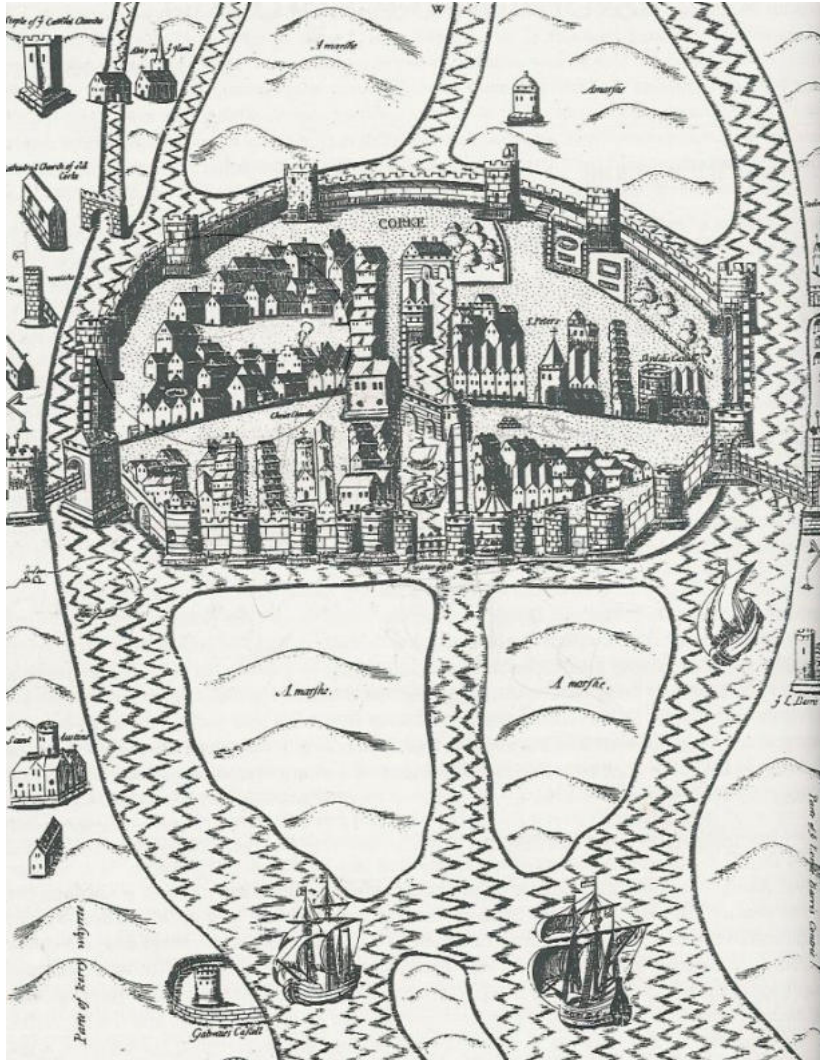
Overview

- Some context: Irish Planning System and Irish towns and cities
- Historic evolution of Irish towns and cities
- Current issues: widespread urban vacancy, yet we have an increasing population
- Actions: Bottom-up Collaborative town centre health checks
- Policy: Top-down approach -National Planning Framework, Town Centre First and Vacancy interventions

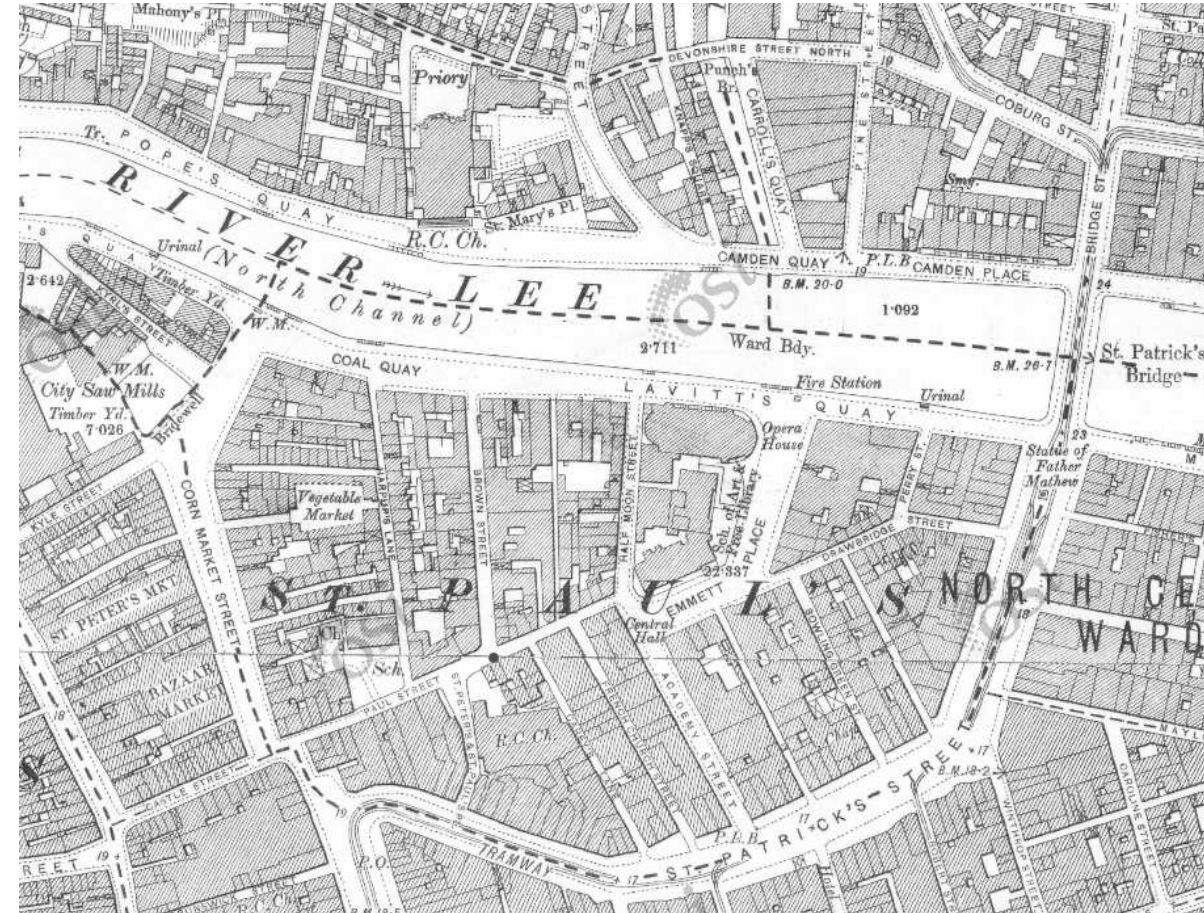


Irish Cities – historically developed beside rivers

Cork City



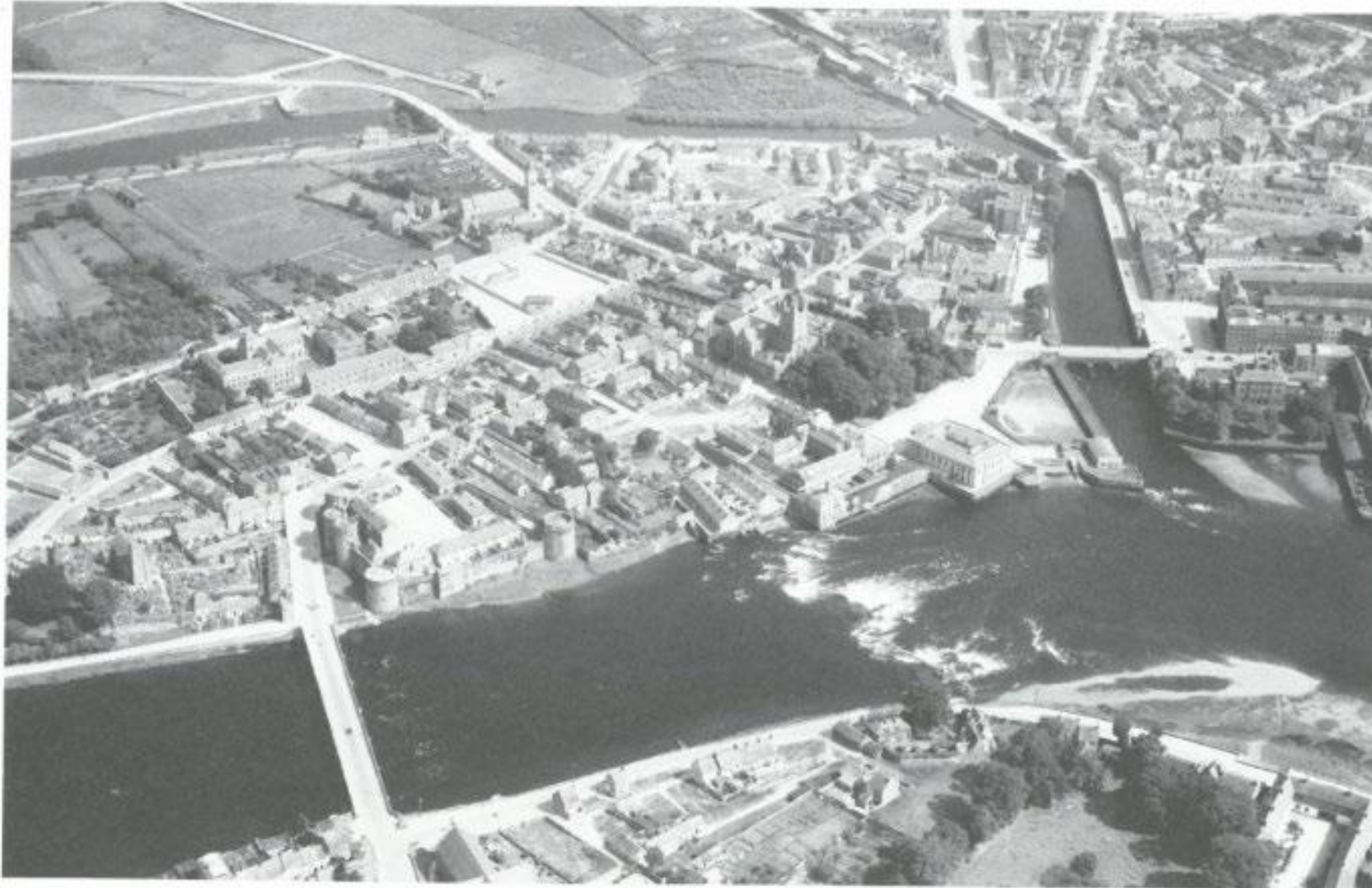
Walled Town of Cork,
c. 1600 from George
Carew's Pacata
Hibernia (source:
Cork City Library)



25 Inch B&W (1897-1913)

Source:
<https://geohive.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=9def898f708b47f19a8d8b7088a100c4>

Irish Cities – historically developed beside rivers



Limerick City

Medieval layout

*Approximate Formality: Morphology of
Irish Towns p.51*

Irish Towns – historically market towns

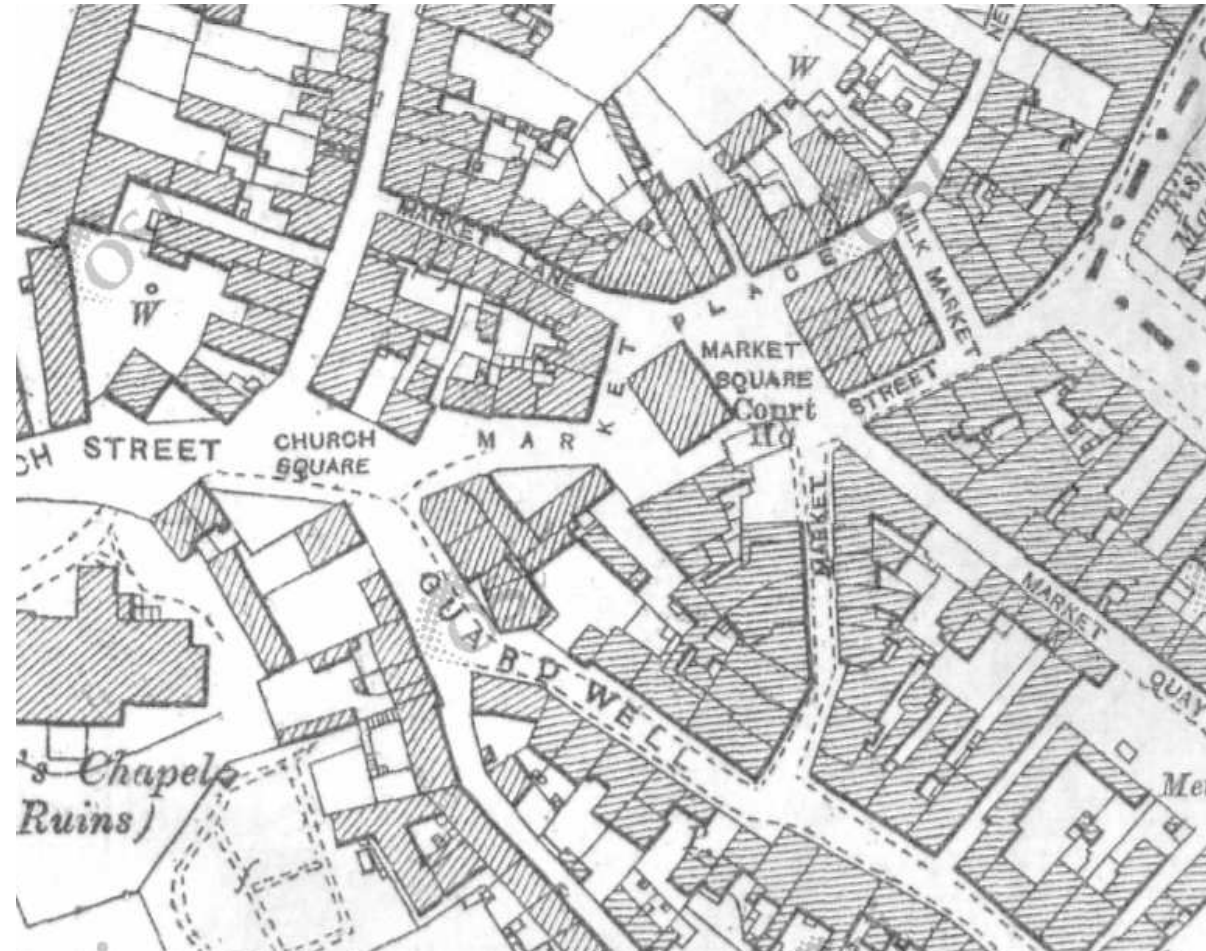
Kinsale, Co. Cork

Historically Church Square and Market Square were the town centre areas, streets radiating to the town gates in a medieval structure



Image from Lawrence Collection.

Source: *Streetscapes of County Cork: A Design Guide for the Historic Setting*, Figure 62



25 Inch B&W (1897-1913)

<https://geohive.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=9def898f708b47f19a8d8b7088a100c4>

Irish Towns – historically market towns



Donegal Town

The Diamond

*Map source: Approximate
Formality: Morphology of
Irish Towns p.101*

Irish Towns – planned towns (Fermoy, Co. Cork)



*Pearse Square, formally Queens Square, taken from Kent Bridge, circa 1880-1900.
(Source: National Library of Ireland, The Lawrence Photograph Collection).*



Fermoy October, 2025

Illustrates some typical issues in urban Irish towns – vacancy in town centre, in particular in upper floors, heritage buildings in decline, traffic

Town and city centre vacancy – recent headlines

Dublin

More than 14,500 properties are vacant across Dublin

New figures from GeoDirectory show a fifth of the buildings have been vacant for more than four years

Irish Times, 4 Feb 2025

Derelict Ireland? Why so many of our properties lie empty

Updated / Thursday, 3 Aug 2023 22:16



By **Conor Wilson**
Prime Time

RTE.ie, 3 August 2023

Revealed: Counties with highest rates of vacant or derelict homes amid chronic housing crisis

More than 80,000 homes are still empty across the country, despite introduction of vacant property tax



An abandoned house in the Cork countryside. Photo: Getty

Charlie Weston

Tue 18 Feb 2025 at 02:30



Irish Independent, 18 Feb 2025

HOME PAGE / NEWS

11,000 vacant and derelict properties 'have been identified for compulsory purchase'



Many property owners are expected to engage with councils and avail of grants to bring their properties back into use before a CPO is issued. Picture: iStock

TUE, 21 OCT, 2025 - 21:33

LIZ DUNPHY

Irish Examiner, 21 October 2025

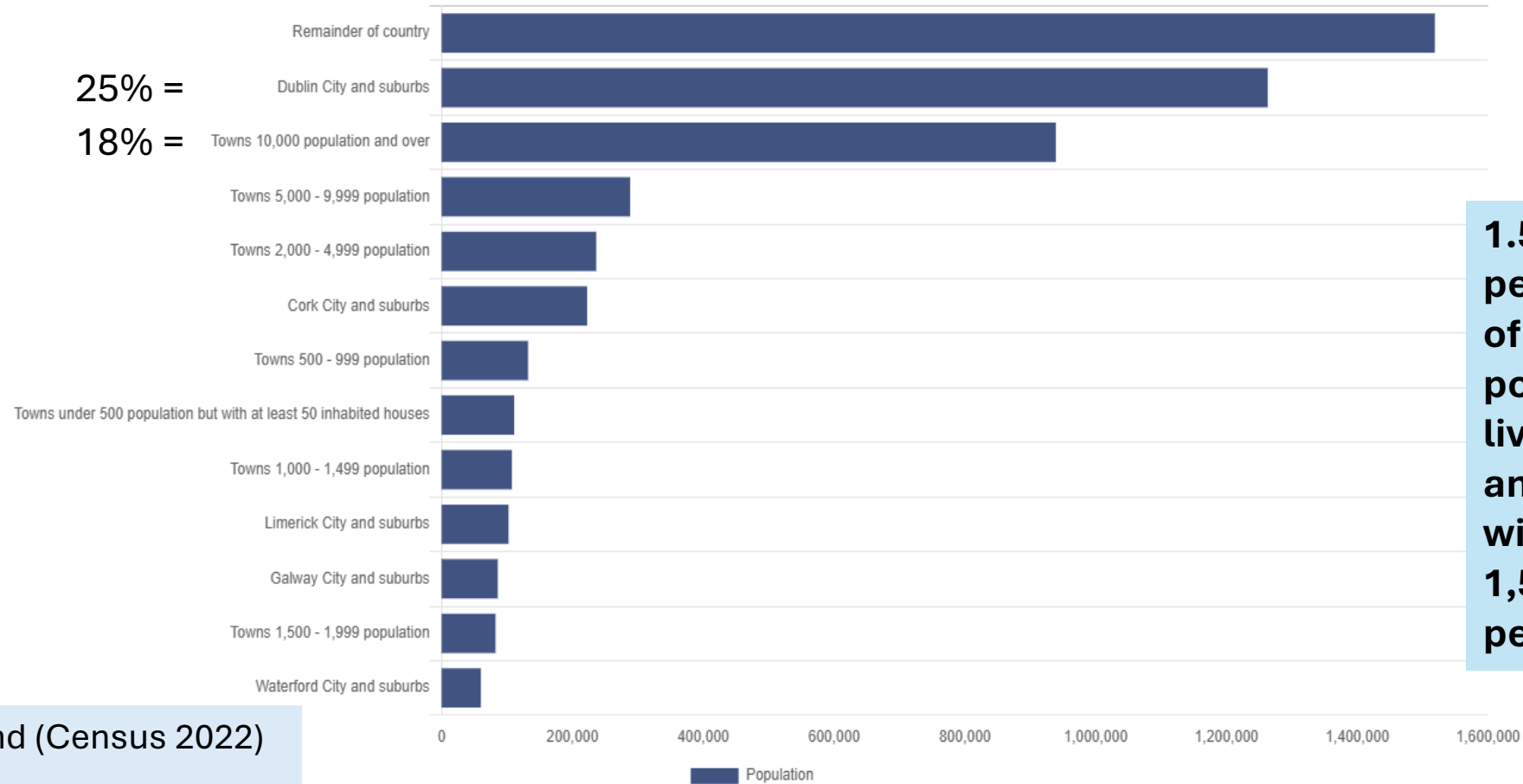
Irish population (Census 2022)

- The **five cities** (50,000+ people) of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford and their immediate suburbs together comprised approximately **1.7 million people, or just over one-third (33%)** of Ireland's population.
- Nearly three-quarters of Ireland's city dwellers are the 1.3 million people, or one-quarter (25%) of the population, who live in Dublin.
- Beyond the five cities, a further **1.5 million people, or 30% of Ireland's population, live in towns and villages with at least 1,500 or more people.**
- There were 49 Towns with a population of at least 10,000 or more people, home to 18% of Ireland's population.
- More than half of the Irish population, or nearly 2.7 million people, now live in cities or large towns of at least 10,000 people.
- **Dublin's population almost equates to that of the next 40 cities and towns combined.**
- In 2022, 37% of Ireland's population lived in settlements of fewer than 1,500 people or in individual houses in rural areas

(National Planning Framework first revision, 2025, p.51)

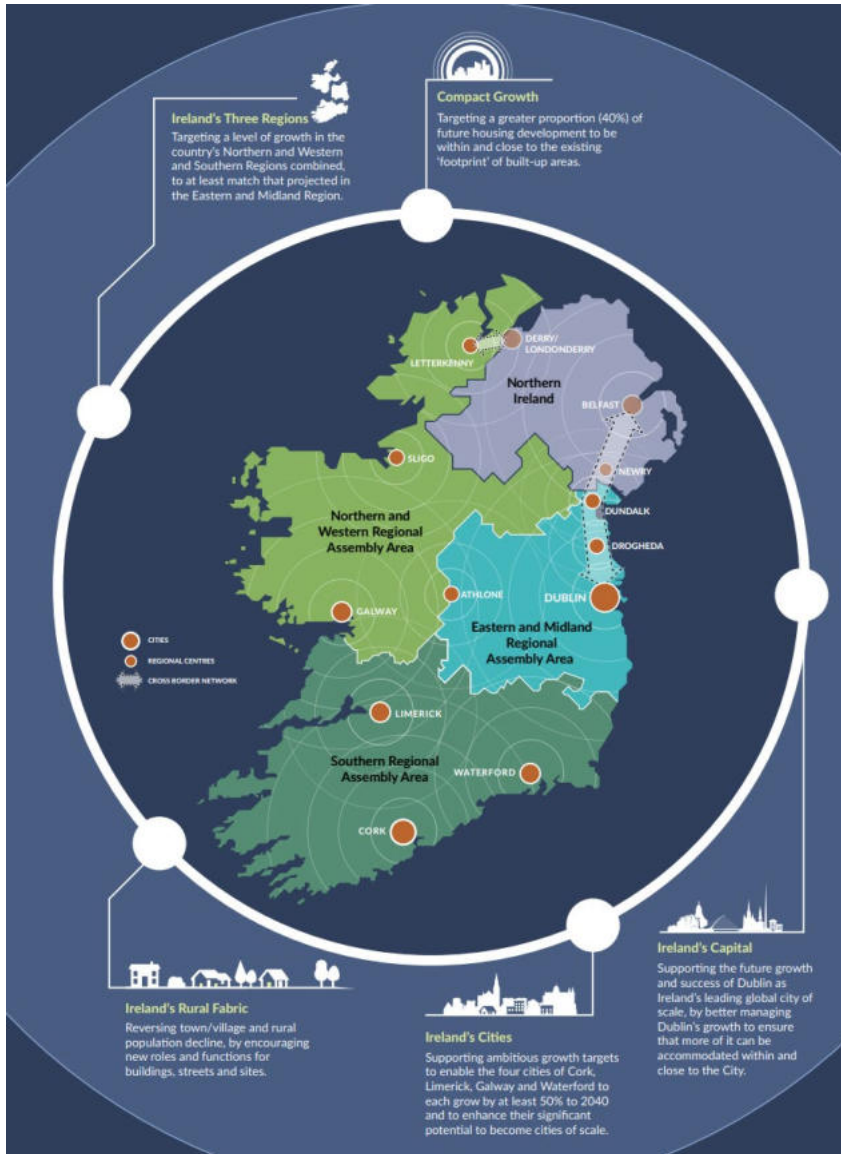


Irish Population distribution by aggregate town size, 2022



1.5 million people, or 30% of Ireland's population, live in towns and villages with at least 1,500 or more people.

Population of Ireland (Census 2022)
= 5.14 million
Estimated population April 2025 =
5.46 million



Ireland's Large Towns

Large Towns – 20,000+² (2016 Census)



Rural county Limerick



10km away, Newcastle West, County Limerick



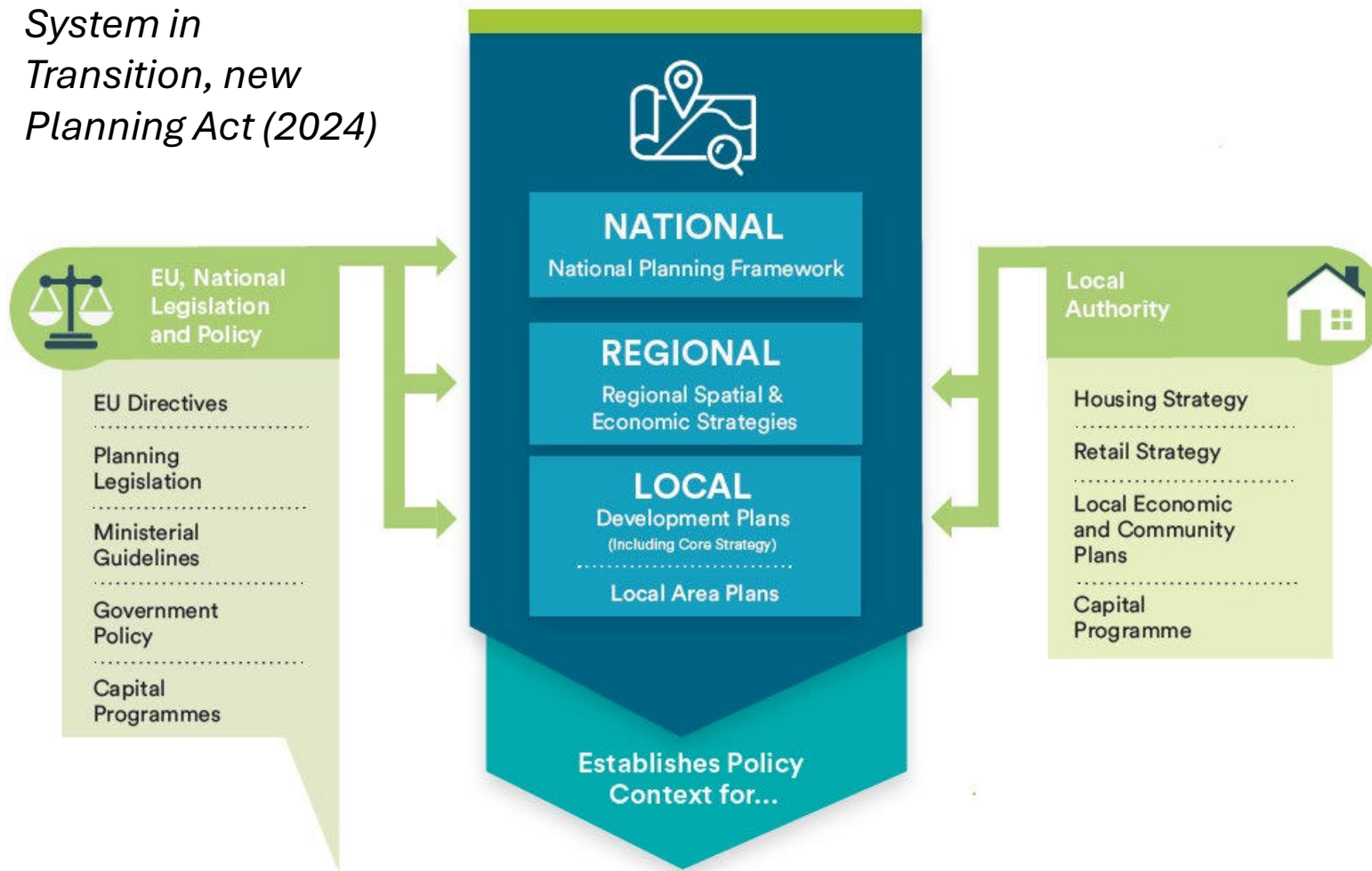
*Sign on window: Compulsory
Purchase Notice – this house is
now back in use*



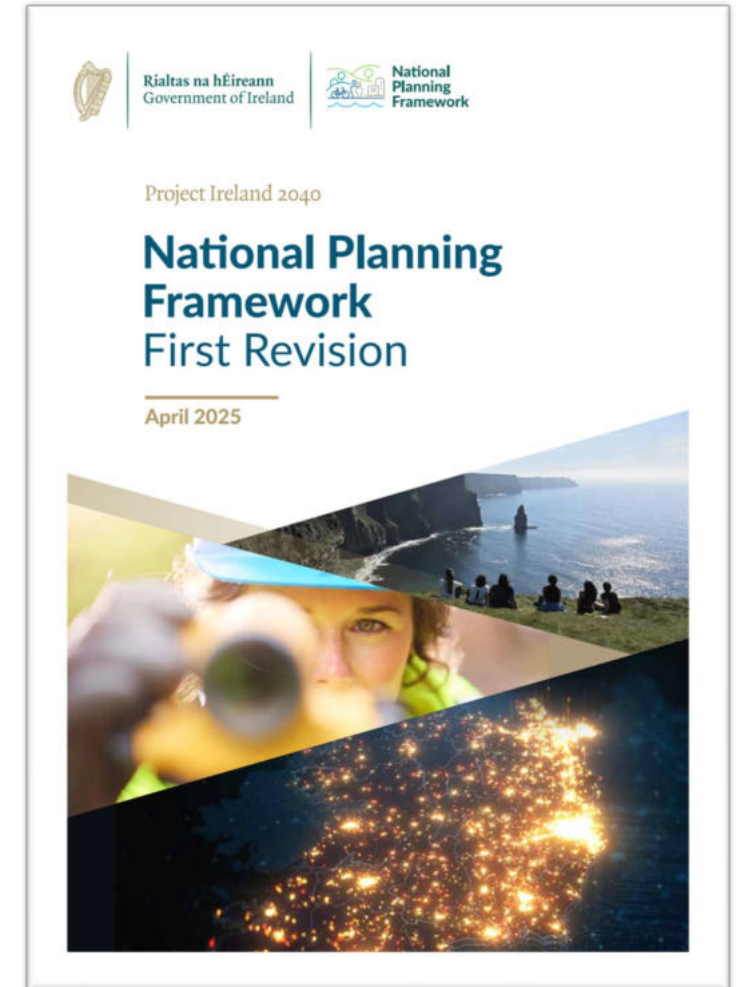
*Maiden Street, Google Maps
(2023)*

Irish Planning System

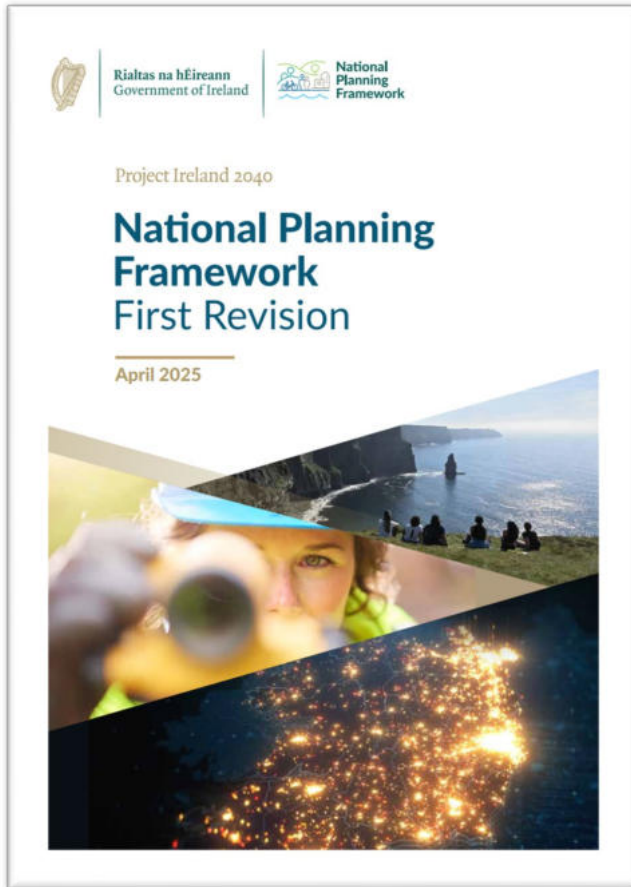
*System in
Transition, new
Planning Act (2024)*



*Decision making on
proposals for development*



Government interventions : NPF policies



National-Planning-Framework-First-Revision-
April-2025-1.pdf

National Policy Objective 7

Deliver at least 40% of all new homes nationally, within the built-up footprint of existing settlements and ensure compact and sequential patterns of growth.¹²

National Policy Objective 9

Deliver at least 30% of all new homes that are targeted in settlements other than the five Cities and their suburbs, within their existing built-up footprints.

National Policy Objective 8

Deliver at least half (50%) of all new homes that are targeted in the five Cities and suburbs of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford, within their existing built-up footprints.

National Policy Objective 10

Deliver Transport Orientated Development (TOD) at scale at suitable locations, served by high capacity public transport and located within or adjacent to the built up area of the five cities or a metropolitan town.

Page 22

National Policy Objective 25

Target the reversal of rural decline in the core of small towns and villages through sustainable targeted measures that address vacant premises and deliver sustainable reuse and regeneration outcomes²⁸.

Government policy: Compact Growth

EMBEDDED IN ALL TIERS OF THE IRISH PLANNING SYSTEM

- **National Planning Framework** (Revised Draft): National Strategic Outcome no.1 is **Compact Growth** (Government of Ireland, 2024a).
- **National Guidelines Sustainable Residential Development and Compact Settlements Guidelines for Planning Authorities** (Government of Ireland, 2024b).
- **Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies**
- **Local development plans**, e.g. *Cork City Council Development Plan 2022*'s Key Strategic Principle 1 **Compact Growth**: where land-use and transport planning is integrated to 'achieve a compact city with 50% of all new homes delivered within the existing built-up footprint of the City on regenerated brownfield, infill and greenfield sites ...'

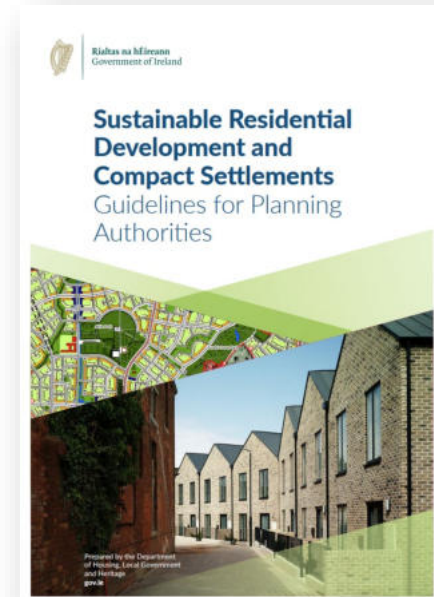


Figure 2.4: Strategic Objectives for Cork City 2022-2026.

Irish Planning System – relevant aspects

Ireland has a discretionary planning system – each planning application is assessed against national and local policy and local context in deciding whether a proposal gets consent.

There is a substantial level of vacancy, in particular, upper floor vacancy in the city centre – various incentives to address this

Lack of infrastructure in towns and villages has led to high levels of rural one-off housing at edge of villages or in the countryside.

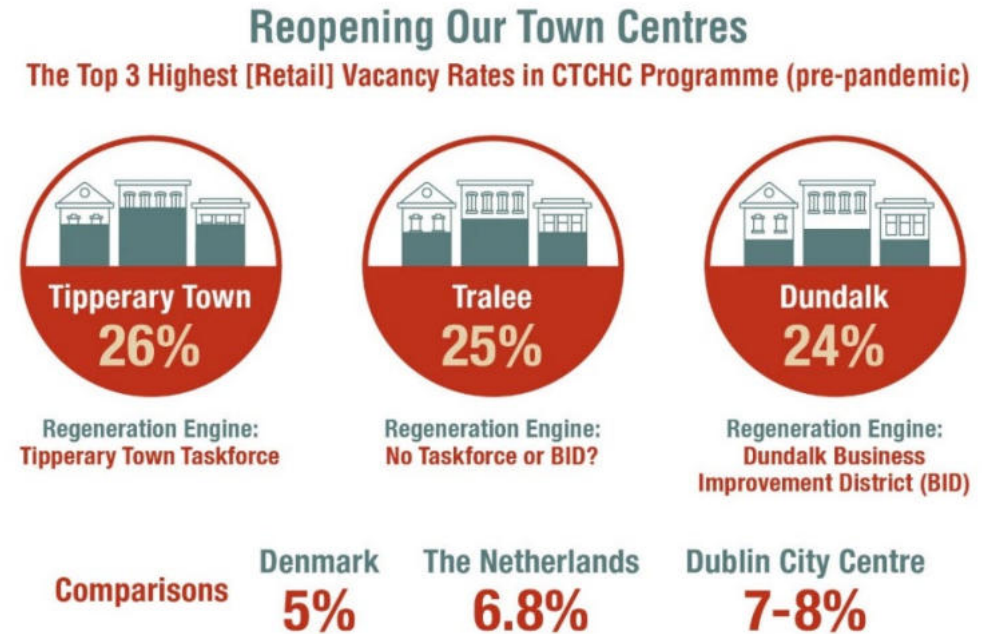


Living City Initiative (living above the shop, Oliver Plunkett St, Cork city)

Heritage Council Collaborative Town Centre Health Check Programme (2016-2023)



- Emerged from concerns that historic town centres were in decline
- Undertook ‘health checks’ of towns, on the request of local groups
- Collaboration with local stakeholders and the Universities and students ‘feet on the ground’
- Highlighted very high levels of vacancy in some historic towns
- Led to the inclusion of Town Centre First policy in the Government’s policies and Local Authorities took on the health check approach

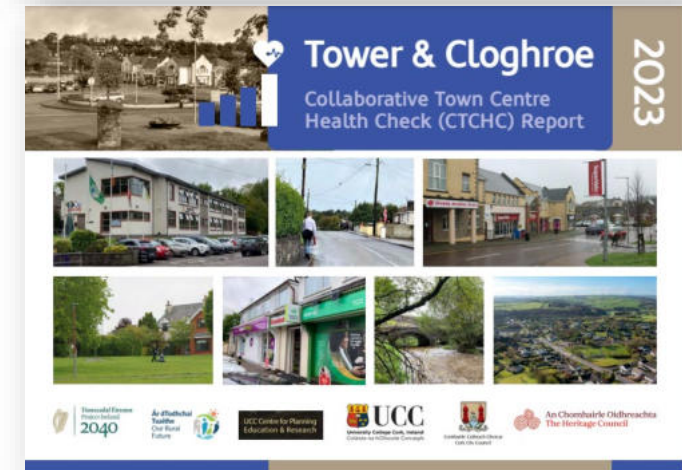
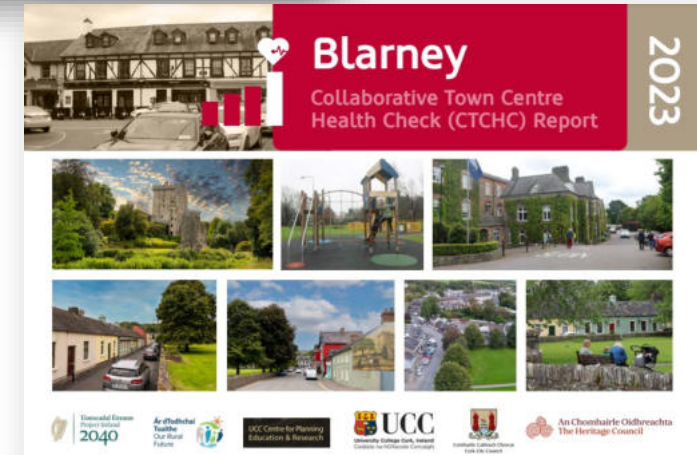


©CTCHC Programme, Heritage Council, June 2020

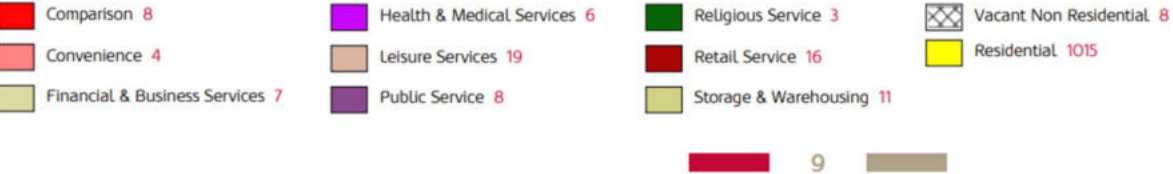
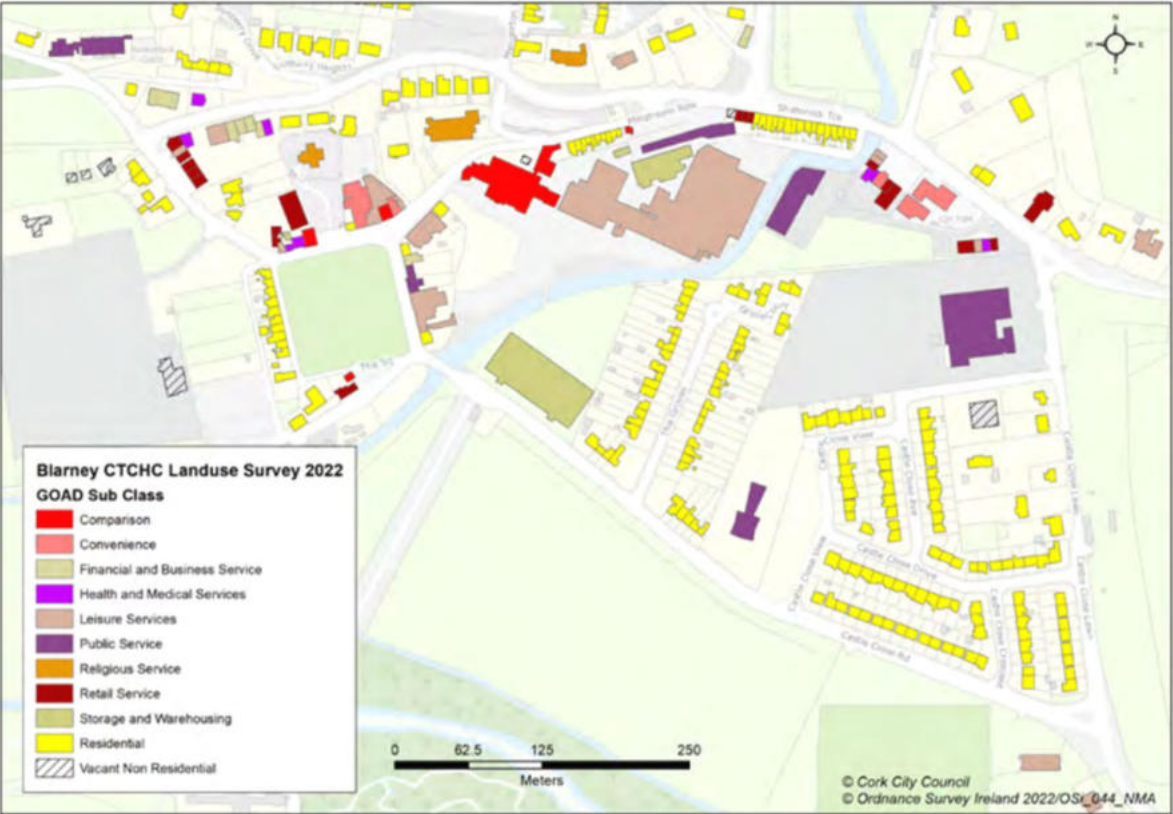
<https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/Policy-Paper-on-the-Collaborative-Town-Centre-Health-Check-CTCHC-Programme.pdf>

Collaborative Town Centre Health Checks – Blarney and Tower (launched May 2023)

- Collaborative Town Centre Health Checks led by Heritage Council (programme founded by Alison Harvey)
- Blarney and Tower CTCHCs were funded by the Project Ireland 2040, Our Rural Future
- UCC Masters in Planning and Sustainable Development students involved during Covid-19 restrictions
- Student project: engagement (webinar), vacancy counts, mapping, footfall counting, business surveys
- Results shared with the community and Council, including a submission to the revision of the City Development Plan



Blarney Town Centre CTCHC Survey of Land Use



Blarney town core

(surveyed in May 2021, findings updated to reflect peer review in March 2022)

Mix of land uses including Centra supermarkets, Woollen Mills, hotels, restaurants, pharmacies, shops, financial services and schools. A new larger secondary school is under construction on the grounds of the current school.

The data below excludes the Blarney Business Park.

Vacancy Non Residential

9.5%

(Calculated using all GOAD landuses surveyed excluding residential)

Vacancy including Residential

0.73%

(Calculated using all GOAD land uses surveyed in town)

Residential in the Town

92.4%

Non Residential

7.6%

Blarney Business Profile

Retail can be found in different areas around the town centre. Most historic shops are found along the north and east side of the Square, and the route through Blarney from the Blarney Filling Station at the entrance of the town, via the popular tourist destination of the Blarney Woollen Mills, along by the Square and circling up to St Ann's Road with local services such as the post office. The area around the filling station has some convenience shops, services and some take-away food options.

Geographically disconnected to the town centre is the Blarney Business Park, which offers services for the wider region such as the NCT, car dealerships or logistics.

St. Ann's Road – Blarney Shopping Centre

- Local shops and services (post office, pharmacy, car repairs, beauty)
- Professional services (physiotherapist, credit union, auctioneers)

Blarney Business Park

- Located on the N20
- Mix of uses: Warehousing, & Distribution, Commercial, Supply Chain
- Opened in 2018

Blarney Filling Station and local shops

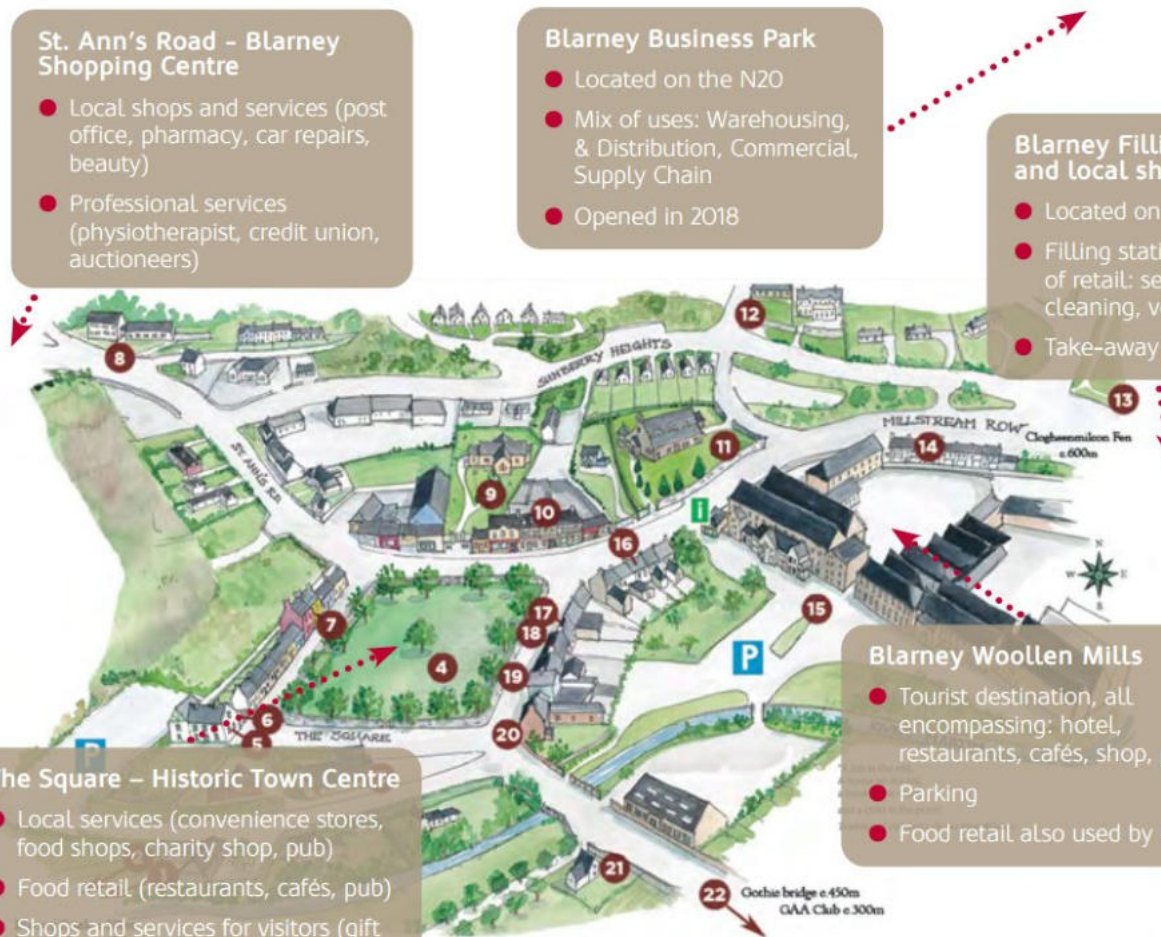
- Located on the R617
- Filling station and group of retail: services (dry cleaning, vet)
- Take-away food retail

The Square – Historic Town Centre

- Local services (convenience stores, food shops, charity shop, pub)
- Food retail (restaurants, cafés, pub)
- Shops and services for visitors (gift shops, hotel, restaurants)

Blarney Woollen Mills

- Tourist destination, all encompassing: hotel, restaurants, cafés, shop, pub.
- Parking
- Food retail also used by locals



Picture Source: Pure Cork. Artist: Rhoda Allanic

Blarney Business Survey – Current Status

Respondent Profiles



- 14 Businesses located in the Town centre
- 1 online-based business
- 1 Business park respondent
- 6 retail businesses, 4 retail service businesses, 4 professional services
- 7 located around the Square

Respondents (not including Blarney Castle) have been **trading on average for 20 years** so are well established in the area. The longest trading business has been around for 62 years.

At the time of the surveys the newest shop on the Square is three months old, indicating **new shop owners are hopeful for the future of the town centre.**

Average employee number: **8 full-time** and **5 part-time.**

Strengths of Blarney Town Centre



"Blarney is a more vibrant town than when I grew up, the schools are coming down and using the greenspace in the Square a lot more now"



Overall view of Blarney is positive. Comments: Clean, Pretty – Magical town with world famous Castle and gardens – Good except parking – beautiful village – cute traditional village – friendly, relaxed – little green village – welcoming.

Quality of people and shops are celebrated. Rating of the town centre was high for quality of shops and services in the town centre, as well as for the feeling of safety. People and sense of community was the most mentioned in strengths.

Feeling that Blarney is a special village. Many references to the landscape and beauty of the built heritage (Castle, Square and village).

Challenges of Blarney Town Centre



"Blarney is like a Doughnut, services are on the outside"

"Parking is a Huge problem"

"The Woollen Mills have become the village centre, the Square isn't the centre anymore, decisions are made in favour of the big businesses"

Parking was identified as the main challenge.



Town centre is seen as moving away. Town centre is seen as been relocated between the Woollen Mills (main tourist destinations) and the area around the filling station (local services and take-away food). Some retailers feel the tax rates don't reflect this.

Room for improvement. The variety both of shops and goods did not score so well. There are also concerns about the low levels of events in the town centre and the general feeling of vibrancy which doesn't reach the score of 4 (=good). There's also room for improvement in areas to sit and congregate.

Blarney Town Centre Survey

Business owners were asked to rate aspects of Blarney Town Centre on a scale from 1 to 5

- 1 - Very Poor
- 2 - Poor
- 3 - Neither Good nor Bad
- 4 - Good
- 5 - Very Good



Feeling of safety and security during the day in town centre	4.83
Café/Restaurant quality in the town centre	4.50
Feeling of safety and security at night in the town centre	4.33
Café/Restaurant choice in the town centre	4.33
Standard of service in shops in the town centre	4.33
Pavement cleanliness	4.25
Quality of shops in the town centre	4.17
Attractiveness of Blarney Town Centre	4.00
Parks and green space in the town centre	4.00
Pavement quality	3.92
Attractions in the town other than shopping	3.83
General ease of getting around Blarney	3.83
Value for money of shops in the town centre	3.67
Variety of goods available in shops in the town centre	3.67
General feeling of vibrancy in Blarney Town Centre	3.64
Seating and areas to congregate	3.58
Range of events in Blarney Town Centre	3.25
Variety/Range of shops in the town centre	3.00
Traffic flow in the town centre	2.75
Parking in the town centre	2.42
Cycling facilities – cycle parking	2.00
Cycling facilities – cycle lanes	1.50

Blarney Public Engagement Summary

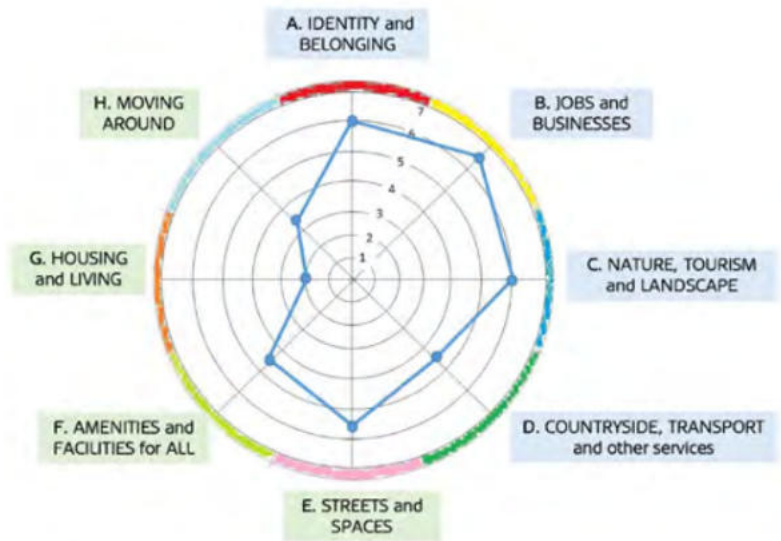
Using the Place Standard Tool the online community engagement had focused discussions on eight topics: Identity and Belonging, Jobs and Businesses, Nature Tourism and Landscape, Countryside, Transport and other services, Streets and Spaces, Amenities and facilities for all, Housing and Living and Moving Around. Each topic was introduced by a student with some prompt questions.

The attendees from the community spent 5 minutes discussing each topic, before giving it an overall rating on a scale of 1 – 7, where a score of 1 denotes a weak performance and lots of improvement is needed, and 7 implies that it is performing well and little improvement is needed. The results are shown on the wheel and chart.

The topic which scored the highest was Jobs and Businesses (6.6) and the topic that scored the lowest was Housing and Living (2). The average score per topic was approximately 4.8. Therefore, this shows that Blarney is doing reasonably okay, however there are some areas that need attention. A summary of the discussion is included on the following pages. A report on the consultation was submitted to the Cork City Draft Development Plan review in 2022.

This breakdown of the ratings was shown to the community:

- 7 Doing really well
- 6 Doing quite well – a few things to be worked on
- 5 Doing well – but some actions needed
- 4 Doing ok – but it could slip back without attention
- 3 Weak-ish – but can improve if worked on
- 2 Quite weak – many actions needed
- 1 Very weak – a lot of improvements needed



Topic discussed and rated	Community rating
Identity and Belonging	6
Jobs and Businesses	6.6
Nature, Tourism and Landscape	6
Countryside, Transport and other services	4.5
Streets and Spaces	5.6
Amenities and Facilities for all	4.5
Housing and Living	2
Moving Around	3.25

Overview of Community and Stakeholder Feedback

Summary of engagement evening, business surveys, submissions and other meetings with stakeholders

Community Amenities



A need for a community hall, swimming pool, public toilets, more seating and better pedestrian paths around the village. Some community members mentioned the need for an additional supermarket in the town.



Signage was highlighted by the businesses to help visitors find the amenities and to find smaller shops away from the main tourist destinations.

Need to further develop festivals for locals and visitors.



The students met a representative of Blarney Castle Estate, who could not attend the community meeting. They are open to future discussions about using the Square for future cultural events once the protected square was not structurally altered.

Sensitive setting of Blarney

At the community meeting, there was a discussion about the historical and cultural value of Blarney, the historic buildings and the surrounding landscape. The residents felt that future developments in Blarney should respect these.

The representative of Blarney Castle Estate also highlighted the importance of key linear views from the estate given its international historical importance.



Where is the town centre?

The businesses who responded to the survey highlighted that the town centre is moving towards the R617 road and away from the traditional area around the Square. Noted that some visitors bypass the town centre by using the path beside the River to go from Mills to Castle.

Moving Around

The community raised issues of footpaths and pedestrian safety and the businesses raised issues with parking and traffic on numerous occasions.



Footpaths in Blarney are frequently found to be too narrow and dangerous, or to disappear entirely, resulting in pedestrians moving onto the road and excluding safe accessibility for pushchairs and wheelchairs/mobility aids. Improvements such as a raised speed table and/or a zebra crossing were suggested by community members, in particular in the traditional town centre and around the schools. This would also aid children's independent, active patterns of mobility to and from school thus further reducing traffic congestion.



The potential for improved pedestrian linkages from the town centre to the Clogheenmilcon Fen, the Waterloo walkway, Inch's field, a continuous path to Tower and to the Blarney business park were mentioned, as well as potentially developing a greenway along the former Muskerry Tram Line.



Blarney CTCHC Project Team and Contributors

Blarney CTCHC Project Team

Alison Harvey, CCTCHC Programme Founder and Co-ordinator, The Heritage Council

Jeanette Fitzsimons, Lecturer, Centre for Planning Education & Research, University College Cork

Stephen Murphy, Social Inclusion Development Officer, Cork City Council

Martin McCormick, SEE Roads Operations, Cork City Council

Ciara O'Flynn, former Conservation Officer, Cork City Council

Serena O'Connor, ICT GIS Officer Cork City Council

Blarney CTCHC Project members would like to thank **Dr Luke Kelleher** (UCD) who undertook the Land Use Surveys peer review.

The team would also like to thank **Kelly Cotel**, **Lorcan Griffin** and **Kevin O'Connor** from Cork City Council's Planning Policy Unit and **Ashleigh Murray**, Cork City Council Executive Architectural Conservation Officer.

The project team would like to thank the staff at the Centre for Planning Education and Research, and **Kevin Burke** who is a guest lecturer on the M.Plan.

Thank you to An Garda Síochána Blarney, Emma Baume of Southgate Associates and Freda Hayes of Blarney Woollen Mills.

This project is funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development and Cork City Council under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme using the Heritage Council's Collaborative Town Centre Health Check methodology.



#CTCHC
#towncentres
#lovetowncentresCTCHC
#datamatters
#heritagematters
#blarneytown

Masters in Planning and Sustainable Development (M.Plan) Students who participated in the Blarney CTCHC in 2021:



Caoimhe O'Connor, Ciarán McMahon, Colin Kotin-Hogan, Declan Foley, Gemma Glenn, Isabella Ryan, Kelly Cotel, Louise Wood, Maeve McCarthy, Matthew Williamson, Muireann Carroll, Shauna Cagney.

Blarney CTCHC Report written by Jeanette Fitzsimons and the M.Plan students and graduates with input from the project team.

Government interventions : Town Centre First

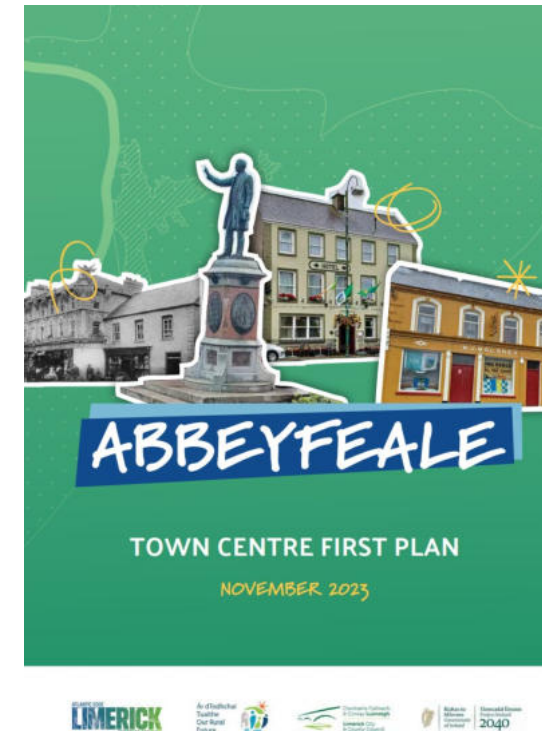
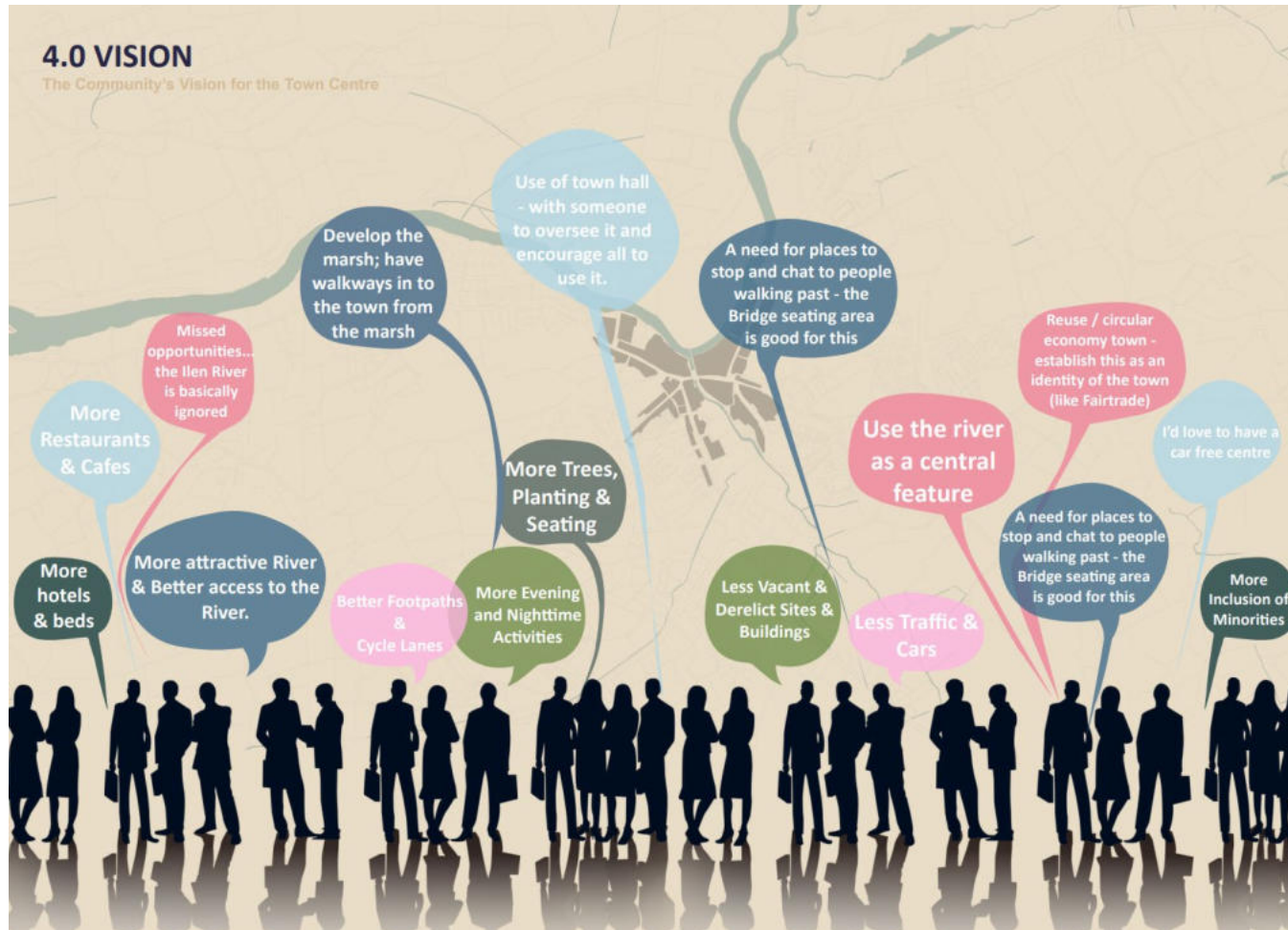
Town Centre First - Roles and Key Responsibilities



- Town Centre First was included in the Programme for Government 2020 – built on the Heritage Council experience
- Collaborative plan-led approach, tailored to local challenges with local stakeholders on the Town Team
- Funding to make the plans and funding for projects arising from the plans – action orientated



Government interventions : Town Centre First



Outcome: Funding allocated to upgrade shopfronts in the main square in Abbeyfeale

What about urban towns or neighbourhoods?

THRIVE – the Town Centre First Heritage Revival Scheme – was launched by the Minister of State for Local Government and Planning Kieran O'Donnell TD on February 8th 2024.

The scheme is run under Ireland's two European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Regional Programmes and is co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union.

THRIVE promotes a citizen-centred community-led approach to planning and design under the [Town Centre First](#) framework and supports projects that embrace the core values of the [New European Bauhaus](#) – sustainability, aesthetics, and inclusion.

(Source: <https://www.corkcity.ie/en/council-services/services/planning/thrive/>)



THU, 18 SEP, 2025 - 07:00

Cork's Shandon to get once-in-a-generation €7m funding boost

The historic Butter Market and Weighmaster's House will be restored and reimaged as 'Shandon Exchange', an enterprise and community hub.



(Source: www.echolive.ie)



Shandon Community Engagement 2022

A collaboration with staff and students from the Centre for Planning Education and Research, University College Cork

UCC Centre for Planning
Education & Research

October 2022

Cork's urban densification

Planning permissions predominantly outside of the city centre core

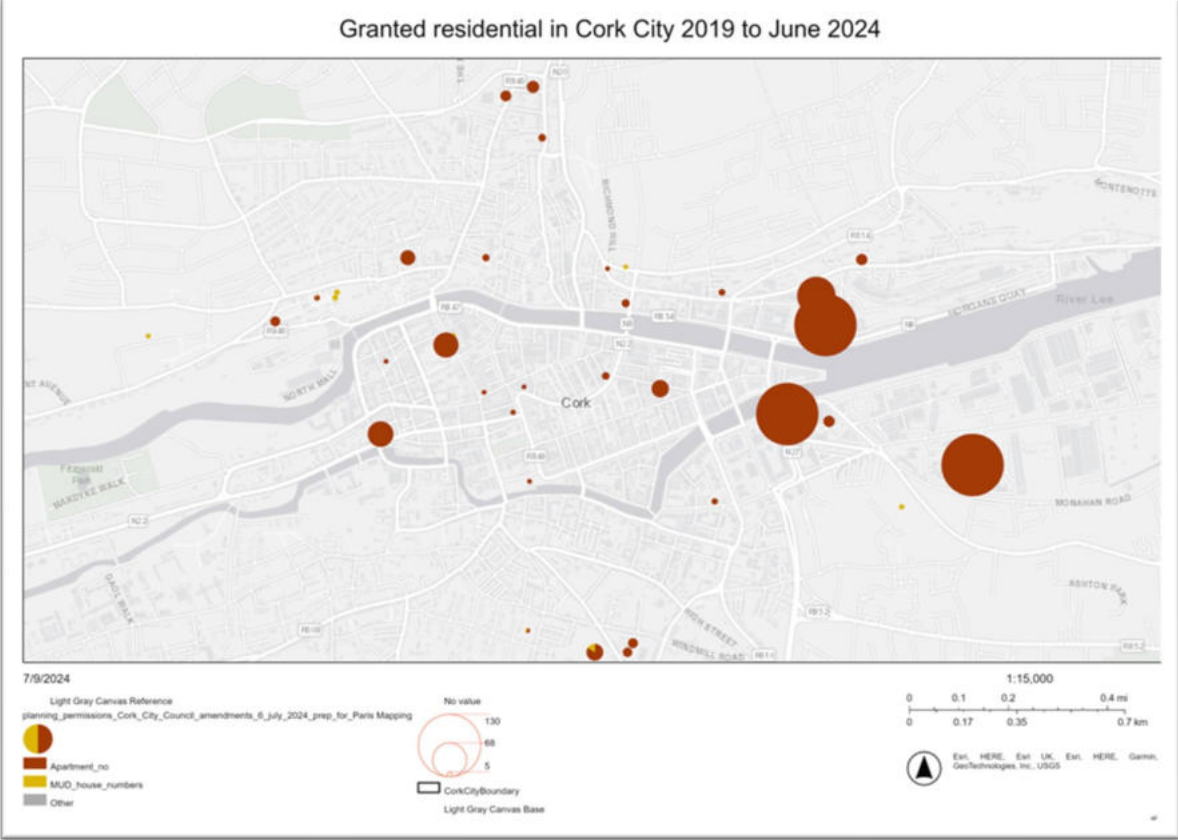
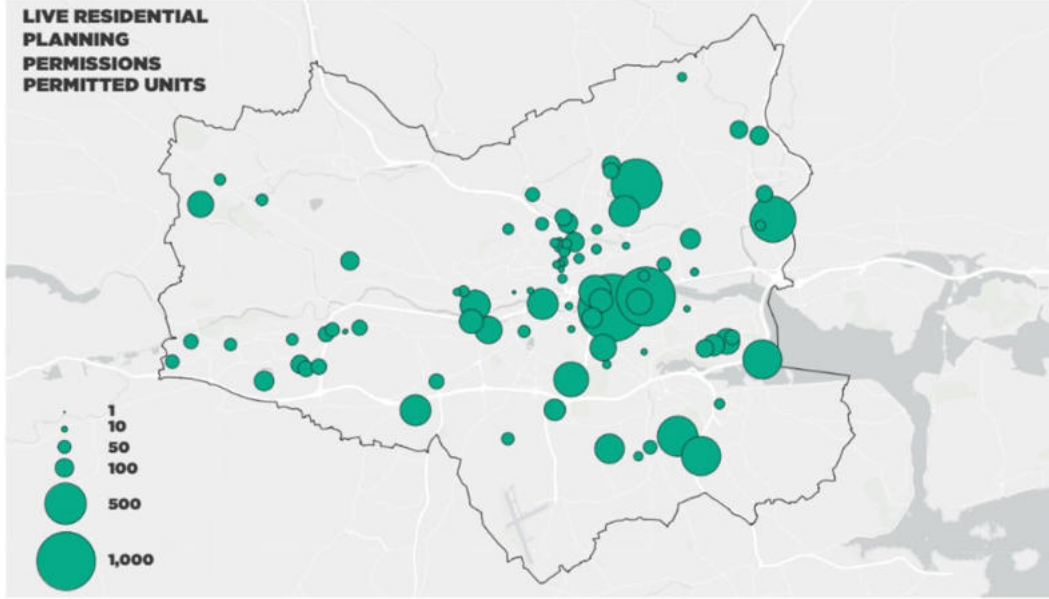


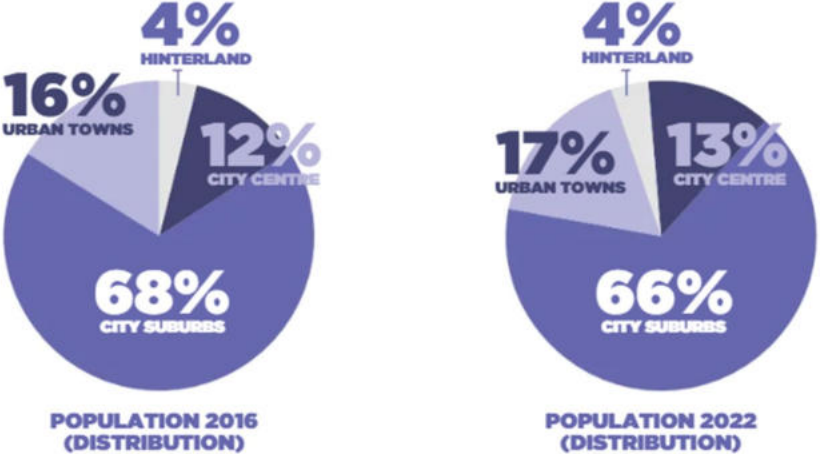
Figure 26: Sites with Live Residential Planning Permissions



Sites with Live Residential Planning Permissions (source: Cork City Council Residential Activity Monitor).

[Cork City Development Plan 2022-2028, Section 15(2) Two-Year Progress Report]

Figure 21: Population Distribution in Cork City in 2016 and 2022



Source: Census 2016 and Census 2022

YET CITY CENTRE POPULATION INCREASING

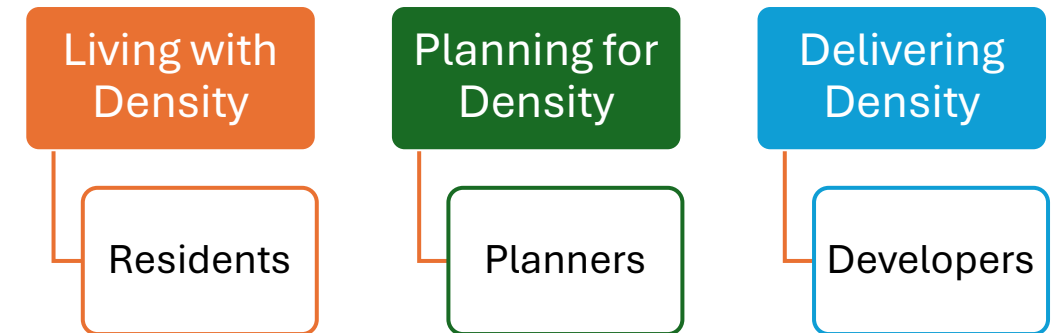
My current research

Doctoral research in urban planning based in University College Dublin under the supervision of Dr Paula Russell and Dr Declan Redmond

To understand how the densification of urban areas is perceived and experienced by those who live, plan for and deliver compact growth and densification planning policies?

- Does the acceptance of the policy align by those different groups?
- What can we learn from the perceptions and experiences to inform future policies at the levels individually and collectively?

Learn from the perspectives of those..



THIS MAY ALIGN WITH FOURNIS AND FORTIN'S (2017) SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE FRAMEWORK



Research commencing in 2026

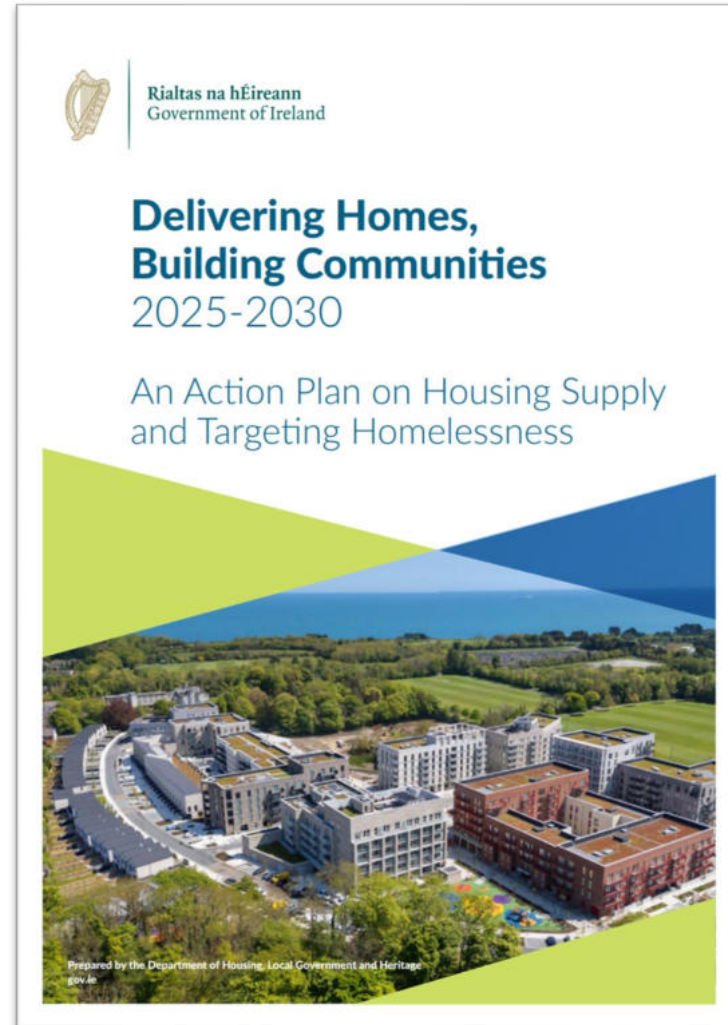
PERSON AND PLACE-CENTRED HOUSING IMPACTS: EVALUATING EFFORTS TO ADDRESS VACANCY AND THE EFFICIENT USE OF HOUSING STOCK IN IRELAND

Maedhbh Nic Lochlainn, Henrietta Zeffert and Jeanette Fitzsimons
University College Cork

Housing policy is every changing

Launched last week!

Expands Town Centre First and Vacancy Tools



Thanks for listening

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