

Dublin

A City of Villages

Proposals to renew
Dublin city's urban villages

Fianna Fáil
Dublin City Councillors



DUBLIN CITY - A CITY OF VILLAGES

The Dublin City Development Plan recognises the value of our urban villages and identifies them as key hubs from which employment creation, community facilities, and transport services should be delivered. The Draft Dublin City Development Plan aims to deliver a number of village improvement schemes, however Fianna Fáil in Dublin City want the City Council and state agencies to go further and proposes a coherent plan to support the City's urban villages. This plan has its foundations on the two pillars of local community and local traders. The plan takes its inspiration from the Fianna Fáil policy document *Streets Ahead* and also the new Civic Alliance which has been developed by the City Council in Ballymun which is in part based on the Portas Review 2011 and the lessons which have been learned since its publications.

A changing economic climate and new trends in retail have posed huge challenges for Dublin city's urban villages. In many cases urban villages have not adapted to the offering presented by large shopping centers, such as Liffey Valley, Blanchardstown and Dundrum. Such shopping centers have encouraged Dubliners away from the traditional main street and into high-volume, low cost shopping that is focused on delivering highly convenient, needs-based retailing.

Shopping centers increasingly offer entertainment and experience, which the average high street has not. Shopping centers curate a space, provide consumers with a clean and attractive destination, cheap parking, a healthy retail mix, things to do and the right marketing to get them there in the first place. The mixed ownership of any village makes it difficult to replicate this offering in a village environment.

THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF THESE CHANGES

This change in shopping patterns has impacted on local traders and the long term sustainable local employment which they have created down through the years. This has resulted in a decrease of the village based economy and also a loss of social capital in local communities.

Social capital in the form of village leaders has always proved to be the backbone of any prosperous village. Particularly in disadvantaged communities, social capital can be a key ingredient in delivering asset based community development. The village which does not have traders rooted in the community working hand in hand with local residents faces many challenges

URBAN VILLAGES – “A STRATEGIC VISION”

For an urban village to survive and grow, it must have a clear vision of where it wants to go and it needs coordinated planning, time, resources and management to get there. The basis of this should be a strategic vision for each urban village across the City Of Dublin. These villages are often a patch work of landlords, occupiers, councils, employees and other all with their own needs and interests; a lack of cohesion and joined up thinking amongst stakeholders is one factor that has led to a reduction in footfall.

It is our view that the City Council with its new responsibility of coordinating economic and community activity is best placed to bring together all stakeholders in a Village Team for each urban village.

PUT IN PLACE A “VILLAGE TEAM”

- Dublin City Council should convene a Village Team For each urban village with the goal of putting in place a strong operational and management plan.
- It is proposed that Dublin City Council would employ a dedicated Economic Development Office or Village Manager in each of the nine electoral districts. This Village Manager would be responsible for coordinating the work of a number of Village Teams in that Electoral District. Reporting directly to the Area Manager and the Area Committee they would have responsibility for organising the Village Teams and acting as the liaison between the teams and Dublin City Council.
- The Village Team should include, the Village Manager, the local Tidy Towns Chairperson, the Garda Community Sargent, key landlords, large and small shopkeepers, city councillors and council staff with specific knowledge of planning and economic development, Area Partnerships, other local businesses and service providers, local community groups and local residents.
- The people that lead the Village Teams should be real champions for their village, they should focus on delivering a safer and more prosperous village, increasing footfall and thus economic activity.
- Well organised village markets which do not compete with local business but rather help attract additional footfall should be developed. This must be done in consultation with local enterprises and should focus on hand crafted products not typically available in the Village.
- Village Festivals can be an important generator of footfall and have a positive impact on both civic and community spirit. The City Council already supports a wide range of village festivals across the, however the new Village Manager will identify ways in which the economic activity connected with these events can be monitored and enhanced.
- The issue of illegal dumping, litter and antisocial behavior can be a deterrent to shopping in a local village, particularly in the evening time. Where the City Council does not currently support the work of a Local Policing Fora with a dedicated coordinator, they will ensure that a member of staff is allocated. Every Urban Village should be covered in the operational area of a Local Policing Fora under the auspicious of the area Joint Policing Committee.
- The Public Domain Officers have a strong track record in working with local business and residents, consideration should be given to how this role and the Village Manager might work together on specific projects.

COMMERCIAL RATES

A new Commercial Rates System

- Government should consider whether business rates can better support small businesses and independent retailers
- The current system of varying the vacancy rebate for an entire electoral district is not focused enough to be of benefit to urban villages. Dublin City Council should be permitted to identify the boundary of urban villages and then use the powers to vary the vacancy rebate inside those village zones to incentivise occupancy.
- There should be an inability to pay clause in the commercial rates system to give breathing space to struggling businesses
- We would implement a Commercial Rates Surcharge on Out of Town Shopping Centres

For entrepreneurs hoping to set up new businesses or existing retailers fighting to keep their heads above the water the commercial rates system can be the straw that breaks the camel's back and render their efforts financially impossible. It is imperative that the government and local authorities work together to establish a revamped system that creates breathing space for retailers in financial difficulty, incentivises new businesses to set up in villages and forms a sustainable base for Local Authority finances. Rates should also reflect the need to attract businesses away from the environmentally and socially unsustainable out of town shopping centre model. A blend of national legislative reforms and local measures will help establish a new framework of commercial rates that will help businesses survive and flourish in Irish towns.

As old business models change in the age of internet shopping, fostering new enterprises to fit new demands will be increasingly important in keeping the main streets of our villages alive with commerce. For example in the UK, Councils have the power to exempt struggling businesses from paying rates and rural businesses have a 50% mandatory exemption on rates. Empowering Local Authorities to alleviate the burden of rates in specific key sites in villages and for new businesses will serve as an incentive for innovative retailers to set up shop and create local jobs.

A specific inability to pay clause should be introduced via an amendment to the Valuation Act. This clause, which is standard in valuation procedures in the UK, is a key measure to help alleviate pressure on struggling businesses. It is a central demand of the Irish Employers for Affordable Rates (IEAR) group and their vision for a reformed Rate Valuation process in Ireland. Putting in place provisions and specific criteria to ensure that eligible businesses benefit from a reprieve in making potentially onerous rate payments will help save struggling retailers.

COMMERCIAL RATES SURCHARGE ON OUT OF TOWN SHOPPING CENTRES

In order to balance out the financial costs of incentivising new business with a rate relief a special commercial rates surcharge will be levied on out of town centre shopping centres. This surcharge will also encourage businesses to locate in environmentally and socially sustainable town centres rather than drive to only out of town facilities. The additional charge will reflect the parking advantages enjoyed by out of town centre developments. A similar charge has been implemented in Northern Ireland from April 2012 with the introduction of the so called “Robin Hood” tax at a 15% rate which is expected to yield £5m per annum. Creating a rates system that balances the books, reflects the overall costs of out of town centres and fosters an emphasis on bringing business and customers into villages is a vital part of any meaningful effort to revitalise Irish towns.

FOSTERING A SPIRIT OF ENTERPRISE

Dublin City Council should use the new Local Enterprise Office (LEO), SICAP agents and the Village Managers to promote an entrepreneurial spirit throughout the urban village and be proactive in the support they can offer new local businesses or older businesses that may be going through a period of hardship.

The new Dublin Economic Monitor should be expanded to include key statistics about vacancy rates and the commercial rates collected in the five administrative areas. The publication should also indicate the number of new businesses which have been created and supported by the LEO in each area and to highlight key economic projects undertaken by the Village Managers.

Currently there is a shortage of enterprise space for new start-up business. There is a particular demand for such space from retailers. The City Council should identify a number of pilot projects where enterprise space can be created in urban villages, Particular attention should be given to prominent buildings which have been vacant for more than five years. In such cases the power of compulsory purchase should be considered where there is no alternative use planned.

ACCESS TO TOWN CENTERS

It wouldn't be possible to tackle the challenge of the urban Village renewal without looking at parking and the effects, both positive and negative, on its renewal.

The ease of parking in out-of-town shopping centers is one of the big advantages and the primary reason for the outward migration to the shopping centers.

Offering 90 minutes free parking in urban villages could have a big impact for the economy there; the increase in the cost of parking, when taking in conjunction with the free parking in shopping centers curtail the appeal of that location to the shopping consumer and therefore the longer term economic viability and wellbeing of the area is hampered.

Parking charges are often introduced to prevent free spaces in villages being used for all-day commuter or staff parking. Any change in parking policy must create free short term spaces for shoppers.

Ninety minutes free parking in urban villages should be provided through the Dublin City Council Parking App, which uses a location based parking scheme.

Other options available are to have a more flexible, well communicated parking offer (example: “Free after Three” parking promotion offers free parking after 3pm at three of their car parks to help the area’s businesses)

Village Teams should focus on making high streets accessible, attractive and safe

A representative of the Village Team should be invited to their respective A Joint Policing Committee, to air their views with the area management, and senior Gardaí in their locality.

The dedicated public order unit that Fianna Fáil recently proposed would be able to work in tandem with the committee, in order to ensure a safe environment in which people can shop, free from open drug and alcohol abuse, ant-social behavior etc.

PLANNING REPRESENTATIONS

The Village Team would be able to make submissions to the planning process upon careful consideration of issues. Examples might include the proliferation of betting shops and take-away’s in any one village.

MENTOR SYSTEM

The Local Enterprise Office should establish a number of village based PLATO mentoring projects where large retailers from outside the village support and mentor local businesses and independent retailers.

WORKING WITH LANDLORDS

- The City Council should explore further disincentives to prevent landlords from leaving units vacant or rendering them un-rateable.
- When important properties in the middle of the high street are empty it pulls down the attractiveness and the desirability of the street
- Innovative solutions could add value to not just the individual properties but to the surrounding area
- Central government and local authorities must lead by example with the vacant properties they own. empty public properties could be used to showcase of local micro-businesses, enable new ventures to test their ideas and profitability before committing to bricks and mortar investment; Village Team could use second floor spaces as meeting point or to try out new ideas on the high street

- Introduce a public register of urban village landlords
- We really need to bring landlords more into the picture when it comes to running the main street.
- Having a public register would mean landlords making their contact details available to the local Town Team; also it would encourage the landlords to be a part of the Town Team

POSSIBLE PROJECTS TO BE CONSIDERED BY VILLAGE TEAMS

- A “Virtual” Village: social media and website about the village and its’ traders;
- Village Market Days
- A village Festival with cultural and family attractions
- Free village Wi-Fi to make the high street the place to go for home workers
- Promotion of the village with local tourism attractions and hotels.
- Create a positive image that will rekindle community pride and improve consumer and investor confidence

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