

Local Authority Retail Support

Improving Our Cities and Towns

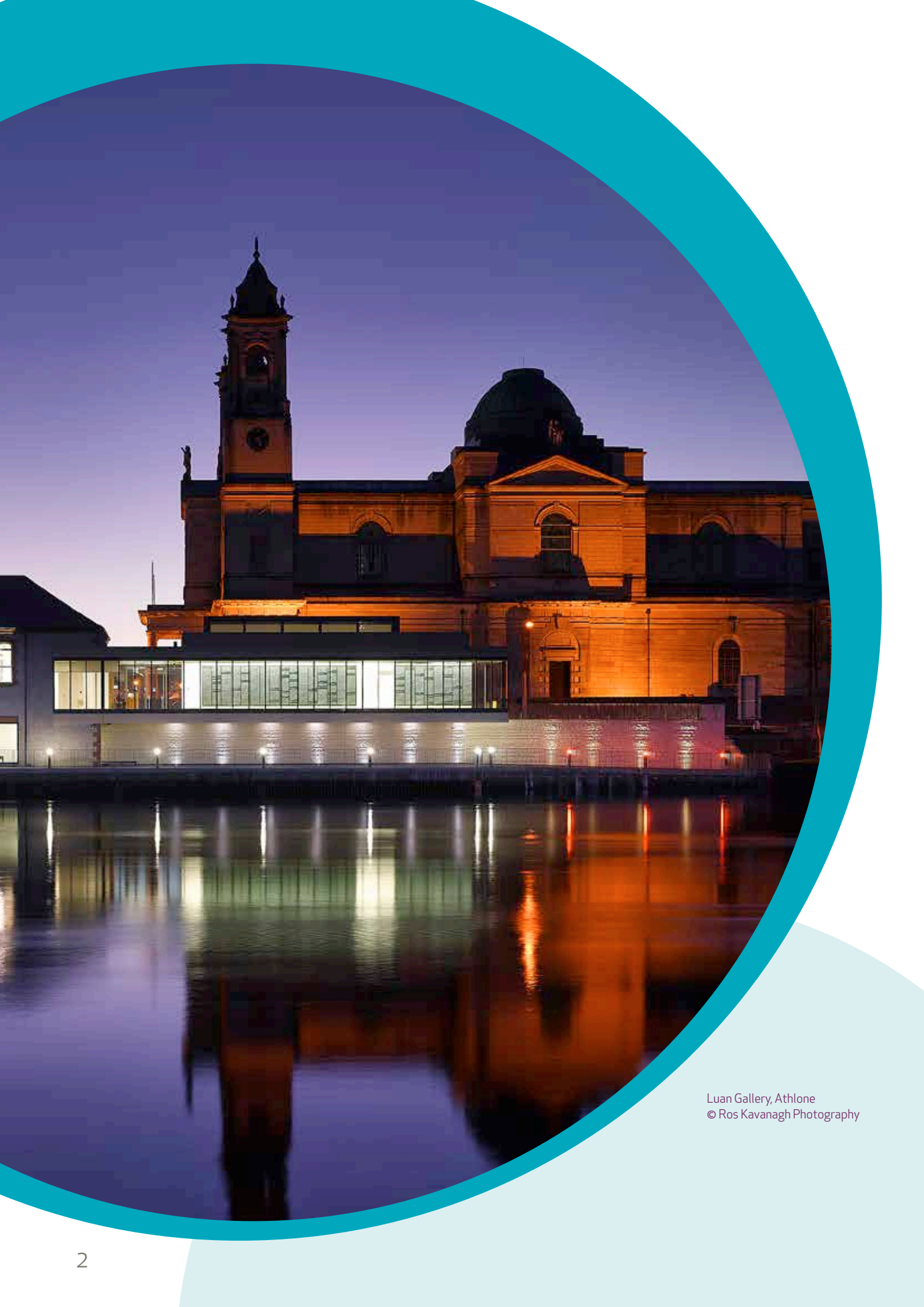




Dún Laoghaire

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Luan Gallery, Athlone
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Introduction

The recovery and growth of the domestic economy is central to the Government's overall programme for economic recovery. Recovery increases disposable income, which is vital to support and grow retail sales. The retail sector in Ireland supports approximately 270,000 jobs directly while associated activities such as logistics and distribution provide much needed additional indirect employment.

The importance of the retail sector has been recognised by government in the establishment of a National Retail Consultative Forum, while the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation has recently published a report on town centre retailing. Both the Forum and the Committee recognise the central role played by local authorities in supporting retail through the development and enhancement of town centres as well as through direct financial support.

In recognition of this role action, 325 of the 2015 Action Plan for Jobs stipulated the need to;

“ Identify best practice initiatives which are being undertaken by local authorities to support retail at local level which could serve as exemplars for consideration by other local authority areas.”

It is in this context that this report has been prepared.

This study, by its very nature, cannot cover the full range of activities undertaken by every local authority in support of retail and business generally. In highlighting examples of best practice, it seeks to offer an insight into work undertaken by local authorities in support of retail business which can be replicated by others to enhance the range of supports currently on offer in their area. The report has been prepared under the auspices of the City and County Management Association (CCMA) and the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG).

Carrick-on-Shannon



Carlow

Executive Summary

Local authorities are in a unique position to support business in general and retail in particular. They are directly responsible for the planned development and improvement of town centres where retail is primarily located. The quality of the retail experience is directly linked to the quality of the town centre. Each of our cities and towns has its own unique character, but the quality of the visitor experience is influenced by a range of common denominators, all of which can be directly influenced by local authorities.

In the first instance, towns benefit from a variety of forward planning instruments in the form of town development plans, retail studies, land use and transportation studies, shop front design guidelines, architectural framework guidelines, village design statements and urban renewal programmes. Plans of this nature brought forward by local authorities throughout the country are primary influencers on the development, design, look and feel of our town centres.

The cost of doing business is a primary consideration for all businesses, including retail. Local authorities as planning, rating and parking authorities, influence the rate of charges and need to be conscious that charges are proportionate and, once collected, are reinvested to the benefit of the local economy and town centre development. All business benefits from marketing and strong communication channels to influence consumer behaviour. Local authorities have a strong tradition of collaborating with business in marketing their locations as the best in which to do business, and in so doing have collaborated with Chambers of Commerce and traders associations to good effect.

The overall shopping experience has many influences, including convenient and accessible car parking, clear sign posting, and above all else, a sense of vibrancy and vitality that makes you want to return. This sense of vitality is created by a clean and welcoming environment, in which you feel safe and unrushed. The visual amenity of your environment, created by a quality streetscape and public realm, floral displays and landscaping, coherent street furniture and attractive shop fronts all add to the visual memory and enjoyment of one's retail experience.

While the quality of the visitor or retail experience is directly influenced by the look and feel of one's surroundings, it is likewise influenced by the additional facilities on offer, which can be enjoyed as a part of a visit to any town centre in Ireland. These additional facilities include heritage, cultural and arts facilities, as well as public parks, playgrounds and promenades which can be enjoyed by the whole family.

Most retail business is sustained, in the first instance, by its own community and catchment, but does stand to benefit greatly from the additional footfall associated with tourism and the promotion of special events and festivals supported by local authorities. Tourism in particular is vital to the support of the night-time economy in our larger cities and towns.

While the ingredients for quality town centres that support retail are generally understood, it requires a sustained effort to ensure these ingredients are brought together to achieve success. This requires careful collaboration, a sense of civic and community pride, and a range of town centre management initiatives now commonly associated with best practice across the country.

John Roberts Square, Waterford





High Street, Kilkenny

Chapter 1 - Improving Business Conditions

Direct costs, such as rates and charges, professional marketing and promotion, together with appropriate support structures are all vital to sustaining retail businesses. Local authorities have a direct role in planning, local taxation, traffic management, county promotion and the mobilisation of collective action. In all of these roles, opportunities arise to support retail business, improve competitiveness, and influence the bottom line.

1.1 Rates and Financial Incentives

Since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008 no local authority has increased rates, and in many cases, rates have been reduced by as much as 10%. All local authorities have put in place rates payment plans and have worked closely with business to manage their local taxation liability during these difficult times. The economic downturn has given rise to a large number of retail vacancies. In response, local authorities have attempted to incentivise the tenanting of vacant properties. A number of local authorities including Limerick, Wexford, Laois, Louth, Tipperary, and Offaly have offered staggered rates relief over a three-year period in an effort to incentivise new tenancies. Kerry County Council has put in place a specific Rates Support Grant to support new flagship retail opportunities based around "lifestyle choices." Carlow County Council has a targeted incentive scheme for new food and craft businesses that set up in vacant properties.

Conscious of the negative visual impact of vacant properties, both Galway City and Waterford Councils have offered businesses the opportunity to register their space for use in support of cultural and arts activities in between lettings. Fingal County Council has introduced business promotion grants to support product showcases and marketing and promotion events. Cork and South Dublin County Councils have put in place a business support fund to the value of 1% of rates. In the case of South Dublin, the fund is targeted specifically at the retail and SME sector, and is only available to ratepayers with an annual rate demand of less than €10,000.

While planning fees are set nationally, development contributions are set locally, and many local authorities have been examining ways in which contributions can be tailored to support town centre business. In the case of Westmeath and Kerry County Councils, development contributions have been reduced by as much as 50% for new developments and extensions in the retail core of town centres. In the case of Roscommon County Council, there is a 50% reduction in development contributions for the redevelopment of derelict sites in town centre locations.

Thomas Street, Limerick





Parking, Bray



Parking, Tullamore

1.2 Traffic Management and Parking

All local authorities provide, manage and regulate car parks and on-street parking in our cities and towns. Good quality, accessible, and appropriately sign-posted car parks are fundamental to an enjoyable retail experience. Likewise on-street car parking is critical to short-stay business and must be managed and regulated to the benefit of all business, which means prompt turnover of spaces provided as a direct support to retail business, rather than general parking provision. Parking and traffic management generally is supported by the provision of traffic warden services by all local authorities, either by direct provision or outsourced contracts to specialist firms.

Conscious of the impact of car parking and car parking charges on consumer sentiment, local authorities have introduced different pricing structures including free periods and staggered charges based on location. All local authorities offer free car parking over the Christmas period, while the majority of local authorities have been able to offer long stay car parking for office and retail workers on the edge of town for as little as €1.00 per day. A number of local authorities have offered free parking on the edge of town as "Park and Stride" initiatives including Louth County Council, in the case of Drogheda. Cork and Galway provide park and ride facilities, while a number of towns, including Killarney and Ennis, provide dedicated coach parking

to facilitate all important tourist visitor stop offs. Many local authorities have offered reduced charges, including Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown which has recently reduced its charges from €2.00 to €1.50. The most common approach is to offer free periods. South Dublin County Council has recently moved to introduce first half hour free, while in the case of Cashel, it is the first 20 minutes free. In a similar initiative, Longford County Council offers a 30 minute grace period, while Kilkenny County Council has a 20 minute circulation time in all of its car parks. Offaly County Council has introduced a number of incentives in Tullamore, including the first 15 minutes free, and the second hour free, preceded by the first hour for €1 during off peak periods. Kerry County Council has piloted free parking before 11 am during off-peak periods.

1.3 Marketing and Communications

In the context of their economic development role, City and County Councils promote their area generally, while there are specific targeted promotional campaigns for tourism and foreign direct investment. In the case of retail, there are numerous worthwhile examples of collaboration with the retail sector involving market research, marketing and promotion. A number of local authorities, including Carlow County Council have produced YouTube clips and local investment brochures, while practically all local authorities have used their corporate



Shop Local Campaign, Monaghan

ATTENTION: RETAILERS

As part of the Sustainable Business Programme for South Dublin (a free business support programme from South Dublin Chamber and County Council), a series of local retail fora will be carried out during 2015, in your local area.

South Dublin Retailers Forum

website to display quality images of their towns. The Dublin Town website commissioned by the Dublin Business Improvement District (BID) and supported by Dublin City Council is an example of an effective website focussed specifically on business and retail promotion.

Many local authorities have supported local branding campaigns such as “This is Cavan” by Cavan County Council and “Monaghan has it” by Monaghan County Council. The North Mayo Promotion Office and the Killybegs “Cruise Centre of Excellence” are examples of local initiatives where the local authority has also taken the lead. The four Dublin authorities publish a quarterly Dublin Economic Monitor that includes retail sales as one of its key indicators. Tourism websites have also been used to brand locations with a positive impact on retail, including examples such as www.intokildare.ie and “Destination Athlone”.

City Authorities including Limerick and Waterford have collaborated with business in relation to data collection, footfall counters, and mystery shopper initiatives. Footfall counters have been used to good effect as a mechanism for measuring the impact of other city centre initiatives. Limerick City Council has established its own city marketing company, while Tipperary County Council funds a part-time marketing executive position for the town of Clonmel.

1.4 Collaborative Networks

All of the initiatives referred to in this report require collaborative approaches involving local business, Chambers of Commerce, traders associations, local communities and the local authority. Local authorities are central to the enabling of supportive networks and collaborative arrangements. In some cases this may simply involve the initial bringing together of the appropriate agencies and partners. In other cases the provision of direct financial support or premises to Chambers of Commerce, Tidy Towns associations and various economic fora. The best examples of retail initiatives and town centre improvements are underpinned by the coming together and collaboration of all interested parties, including the local authority, the business sector and the local community.

Chapter 2 - A Welcoming Environment

The look, feel and visual amenity of any town creates the memorable images that enhances its reputation and makes people want to return. Quality footpaths, public realm, street furniture, floral displays, shop fronts and window displays all add to the colour and vibrancy of our town centres to create a welcoming environment, and makes a vital difference between shopping being a chore and a leisure activity.

2.1 Public realm and streetscape

Successful towns need a heart, a centre, a town square, a focal point that people can identify with and from which people can radiate and enjoy the various streets as a part of their retail experience. Local authorities over the years have focussed specifically on this point and created fantastic public spaces in our cities and county towns. Examples including Eyre Square - Galway, Kennedy Plaza - Navan, Market Square - Dundalk, John Roberts Square - Waterford, Emmett place - Clonakilty, are all fine examples of public realm, while pedestrianised streets such as Grafton Street, Dublin; Thomas Street, Limerick; and Main Street, Wexford, offer similar examples of quality public realm. Quite apart from the visual and pedestrian amenity offered by these public

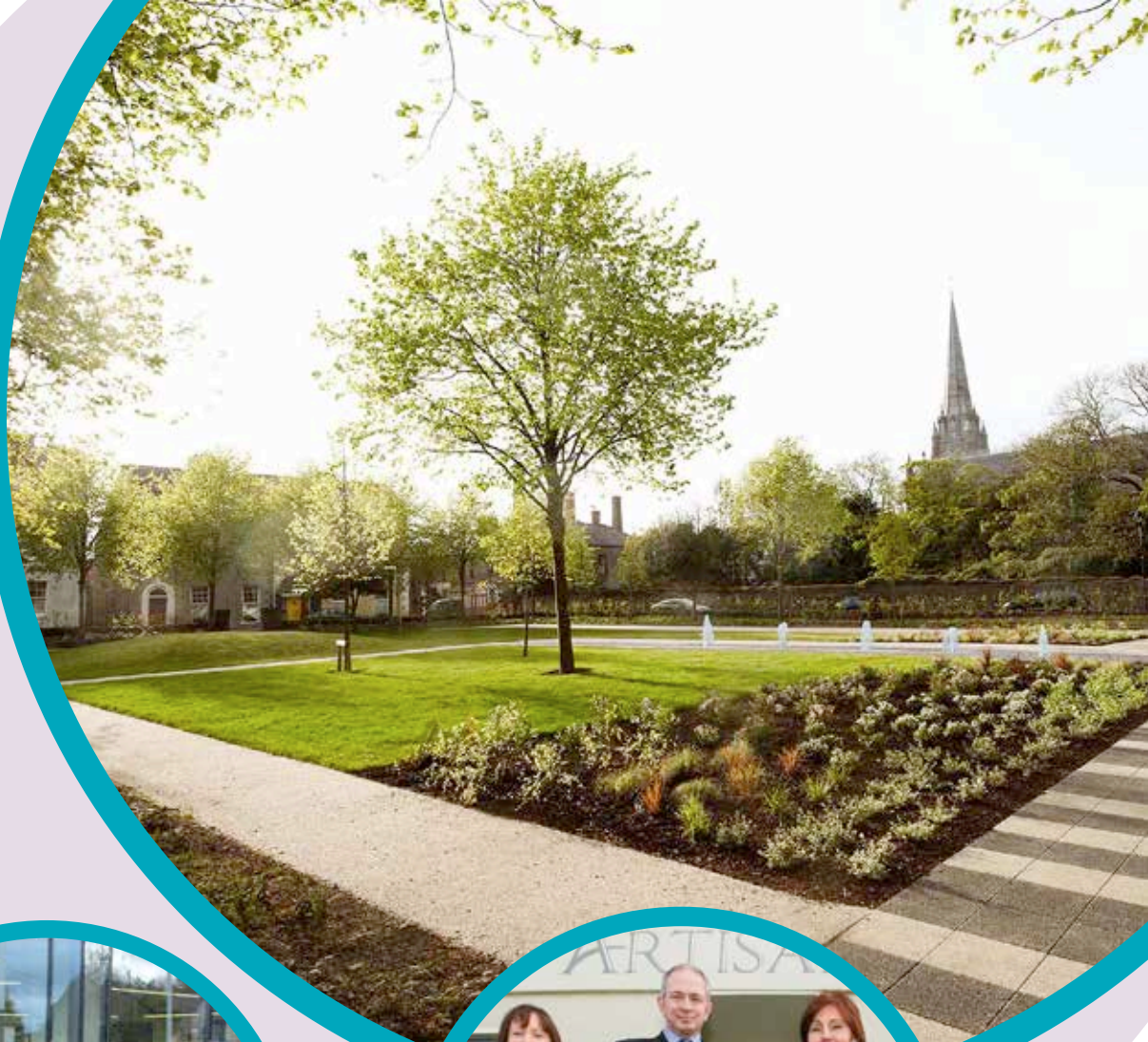
spaces, they can be used for entertainment during festivals, farmers' markets, pop-up shops, free family entertainment and animation, all of which contributes to the vibrancy of the town centre. Pedestrianisation schemes, likewise, make streets more accessible and shopper friendly, while all of the spaces have been adorned by quality street furniture to make the retail experience more relaxing. Some local authorities, including Dublin City Council and South Dublin County Council have added free WIFI to these areas in conjunction with business, which has proven to be very popular.





Howth, Co. Dublin

Emmet Square,
Clonakilty



Smart Bin,
Dún Laoghaire



Shop Front Grant Scheme,
South Dublin County Council

All local authorities provide shop front design guidelines in order to promote the development of quality shop fronts. Numerous local authorities including Cavan, Mayo, Clare, South Dublin, Tipperary and Wexford offer shop front grants. The grants are mostly accompanied by 'free paint' schemes. A number of towns including Mullingar and Ballina have window display competitions supported by their local authority. The widening of footpaths and the provision of associated quality street furniture has, in some cases, facilitated outdoor dining. This adds to the vibrancy and quality of town centres and contributes to the leisure nature of the retail experience.

2.2 Cleanliness

All of the investment in public realm, streetscape, and quality environment is of little value if litter is not kept under control. The very fact that local authorities participate in the IBAL litter league is a clear indication of the litter problem in this country. Local authorities invest heavily in daily street cleaning, weed control and litter bin collection. Each local authority adopts litter bye-laws which are implemented by litter wardens. Some local authorities, including Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and Laois County Council, have invested in smart litter bins. The work of local authorities is supplemented throughout Ireland by local tidy towns efforts and national anti-litter campaigns such as Spring Clean.

Elimination of Dereliction, Cork
(before and after)



In the same vein, the elimination of dereliction and derelict property by local authorities is vital in ensuring that town's visual amenity is not impaired and that retail activity is promoted. Local authorities have used their compulsory purchase powers to acquire derelict sites for infill housing, car parking and civic buildings and continue to work with property owners to eliminate or mitigate dereliction.

2.3 Visual Amenity

The visual amenity of our towns is greatly enhanced by landscaping and floral displays. These activities have in the past gone hand-in-hand with Tidy Towns campaigns supported by local authorities throughout the country. Towns crowned national winners include Westport, Trim, Kinsale, Ennis, Ballyjamesduff, Kilkenny, Killarney and Clonakilty. Similarly villages such as Glenties, Abbeyshrule, Moynalty, Keadue and Terryglass have received the same honour. This competition has been fundamental to the enrichment of our towns and villages lead by local authorities with the support of outstanding communities. These achievements have enhanced the reputation of towns and likewise their retail tradition.

Quite apart from these campaigns, local authorities have invested carefully in the visual amenity that is provided by landscaping and floral displays. In many instances this involves collaboration with street traders and local businesses.

Consistency of street furniture design, presentation of signage and the avoidance of clutter are important considerations in streetscape presentation. Another initiative which adds to the visual attractiveness of towns, particularly at night time is the external lighting of public buildings, bridges, railway viaducts and other points of interest. This is a common feature of our cities and towns.

At Christmas time, local authorities contribute financially to take on direct responsibility for the Christmas lighting.



Illumination Programmes, Dublin City



2.4 Orientation and getting around

There is nothing more frustrating and damaging to the visitor experience than getting lost or being unable to find your way. Poor orientation or inadequate signage are the primary causes of such frustrations. In this context, local authorities have invested significantly in signage and way-finding systems, including parking information that displays real time information on parking availability, directional sign posting, and specific sign posting for key features including hotels, shopping centres, heritage and cultural facilities. Local authorities are conscious of making streets and paths accessible for all and through regular disability audits they ensure that streetscapes are mobility-friendly.

All of our larger cities have invested heavily in way-finding systems including the mapping of all major focal points. The Dublin Bikes initiative, which has recently had its 10 millionth user, has been hailed as an outstanding success, and has now been replicated by similar bike schemes in other cities.

Local communities are vital to maintaining retail spend in all of our towns. Local authorities have been increasingly conscious of the advantage of local communities being able to shop locally without having to use their cars, which has a significant positive impact on traffic management. In this context, the nationwide smarter travel program has focussed on the development of sustainable transport links between neighbouring locations and town centres including the development of cycle ways, riverside walks, and permeability projects. The riverside walk in Castlebar is an example of a local initiative in this context.



Way-finding signage, Waterford



Dublin City Bikes Scheme

Chapter 3 - Adding to the Retail Experience

A positive retail experience is often sufficient reason for people to return to a town. However, the provision of added attractions impacts the overall visitor experience, and contributes significantly to footfall. These include heritage and civic buildings together with ancillary activities such as festivals and events, which are all critically important to provide that added value and boost retail trade.

Walking History Tour, Cavan



3.1 Heritage and Culture

In the context of tourism promotion and supporting the local economy, local authorities have been heavily involved in the provision of cultural and heritage attractions in addition to civic buildings. Civic buildings, by way of public libraries are commonplace in town centres, and provide additional footfall. The provision of specific heritage facilities such as the Michael Collins museum in Clonakilty, the Kerry County Museum in Tralee, the Medieval Mile in Kilkenny, the Mary Robertson Centre in Ballina, Wicklow Gaol, the Viking Triangle in Waterford, and Athlone Castle, are all valuable contributors to increasing visitor numbers. Visitors also avail of the opportunity to experience the retail offer in addition to visiting these attractions. Many towns have provided heritage trails and historic walks, which are linked to these facilities.

The night-time economy is helped by bringing people into the town centre to visit cultural facilities such as art centres the Rua Red in Tallaght, the Solstice in Navan, the Dunamais Art Centre in Laois.

Solstice Centre, Navan





Christmas Market, Galway



Rua Red, South Dublin Arts Centre

3.2 Festivals and events

Festival and events of regional, national and international scale are an important contributor to local economies and retail trade through the additional footfall that they provide. Local authorities assist in the promotion and development of national festivals and events such as the Tall Ships, Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, the Rose of Tralee, St Patrick's Day Festivals, City of Culture, racing festivals, the Wexford Opera Festival, and Dublin International Literary Festival to name but a few.

At a local level, local authorities have been to the forefront in the promotion of local events and festivals throughout the country. While of local importance, the retail sector is a substantial beneficiary of the increased footfall and festive spirit associated with these festivals throughout



Tall Ships, Waterford

the calendar year. Festivals such as the Taste of Carlow Festival, Errigal Arts Festival, the Bram Stoker Festival, Listowel Writers' Festival, Drogheda Bonanza Festival, Waterford Winterval Festival and the Sea Breeze Festival in Arklow are all typical examples of local festivals which have a place in the annual calendar of events for their towns, and provide a welcome boost to local retail trade.



Fleadh Cheoil, Sligo



Patrick Street, Cork

3.3 Tourism and the night-time economy

The development and promotion of tourism has a direct positive impact on retail business and the night-time economy. All local authorities, through direct engagement with the trade, financial support and the provision of visitor attractions, such as those enjoyed at Athlone Castle, the Rock of Cashel, the Cliffs of Moher contribute significantly to tourism development. Many local authorities maintain tourism website while some, including Donegal, Wicklow, Meath, have established and maintain tourism companies. Increasingly local authorities are engaged in the development of way-marked ways of national and international importance, including the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East, the Dublin and Wicklow Mountains Way and the Dublin-Galway Cycle Way. The local authorities are key to the provision of these valuable amenities, which broaden our tourism offer, and are of great value to the focal points and towns along these ways

Towns such as Killarney, Bray, Sligo, and Galway and Waterford cities have applied for and been successful in attaining Purple Flag status, an award that recognises the quality of your night time economy. Likewise many local authorities have worked closely with the hospitality sector in promoting and attracting national and international conferences to their area.



Purple Flag Initiative, Bray



People's Park, Limerick

3.4 Parks, Playgrounds and Promenades

Retail is defined as a leisure activity which can be enjoyed by all of the family where the retail experience is accompanied by additional leisure opportunities facilitated through the provision of playground facilities, quality town parks, and riverside promenades. From St Stephen's Green in Dublin to Ballymacool Park in Letterkenny and The People's Park in Limerick, local authorities have been directly involved in the provision of quality public spaces, which can be enjoyed as a recreation opportunity.

Town parks, centrally located in the heart of towns are a valuable attraction and amenity in their own right, and add to the footfall and vitality of town centres, as well as being a source of relaxation taken together with a shopping event.

Similarly, riverside walks and promenades enhance the sense of space within towns and facilitate ease of pedestrian movement. Some promenades and quays are part of the town's natural fabric, such as in Wexford, Limerick and Waterford, while others have been directly provided and retrofitted, such as along Dublin's Liffey, Sligo's riverside, New Ross quayfront and Carrick on Shannon waterfront.

Liffey Boardwalk, Dublin



Chapter 4 - Community, Wellbeing, Safety and Vitality

4.1 CCTV and policing

A sense of safety, security, community and wellbeing are important and significant contributors to the quality and reputation of town centres. Local authorities, conscious of the safety issue have worked closely with business associations and An Garda Síochána in the provision of CCTV systems, Garda Watch schemes, such as that in Carlow, and text alert schemes, such as the Safe City Initiative in Waterford. Limerick City & County Council has piloted an initiative with the Limerick City Business Association for the provision of a constant Garda presence in the core retail area of Limerick City. In addition to CCTV and a strong Garda presence, good quality public lighting is critical to the feeling of security and safety at night time, and local authorities play a key role in such provision.

4.2 Civic Pride Programmes

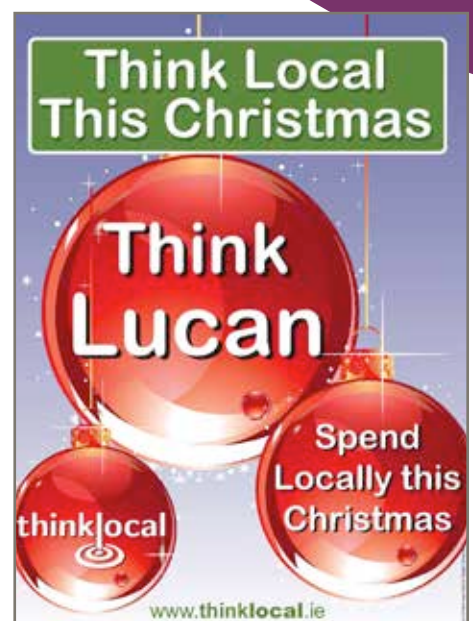
The sense of community in towns is often tangible and reflects itself in the presentation and appearance of towns and the pride with which local communities express their views on their town. National Tidy Town campaigns have contributed significantly to this sense of pride of place, but more and more local authorities are engaging with local communities in developing specific local initiatives including Shop Local campaigns, and Clean Up campaigns such as "Glan Suas Gaillimh".

Dublin City Council is involved in a clean up program in Temple Bar with local retailers entitled "Reclaim the Lanes". Leitrim County Council sponsors a night time ambassadors' programme in Carrick-on-Shannon that involves litter pickers cleaning up surface litter once the nightclubs and takeaways have closed for the night.



Public lighting, Tallaght

Glan Suas, Gaillimh



Think Lucan



Letterkenny, Co. Donegal

4.3 Town centre management initiatives

Many of the collaborations between local authorities, retail businesses and communities have been established over many years to good effect. In more recent times these collaborations have been structured into town teams, such as in Carlow, where the local town team has focussed on the promotion of local events such as Art Exhibitions, Artisan Food experiences, litter management and the elimination of dereliction. Likewise in Roscommon, town teams have been setup in six towns, while in Waterford City, a City centre management group has been established and a similar initiative in Tipperary has been branded as town centre forums.

Both Sligo and Letterkenny part-fund town centre management positions, while in South Dublin, the local authority funds a sustainable business officer position within the Chamber of Commerce to network directly with retail businesses and to liaise with the local authority on issues raised. The Business Improvement District Program was established some years ago in an effort to target town centre activities through additional fund raising. Official B.I.D.S programs are in place in Dublin City and Dundalk.



Main Street, Cashel

Westport, Co. Mayo



Dromod, Leitrim

Longford



Dundalk, Co. Louth



Plaza, Portlaoise



New Ross, Co. Wexford