

“That Cork County Council would undertake a health check of the vitality and viability of town centres in all main towns in County Cork. Such regular health checks are a recommendation of the Retail Planning Guidelines (2012). That the results of and recommendations arising from the health checks would be incorporated into the revised Local Area Plans.”

“Town centres are assets; they need to be planned and managed just like shopping centres.”

This is what Alison Harvey of the Heritage Council said to members of the Irish Planning Institute. And she is right. Retail is the largest employer in the country, with over 275,000 jobs, 75% of which are located outside of Dublin.

Yet so many of our towns are showing high vacancy rates, dereliction and so many small shops and businesses are struggling to keep their heads above water. Last year, high street vacancy rates in all but two cities outside of Dublin fell. The Irish Business Against Litter survey found 20% of premises in Ireland’s town centres to be vacant. Socially and economically, this is untenable. Our towns are a focal point for our communities, they provide necessary services and they are a significant tourist attraction.

The slow death of our town centres right across the country is of such concern that in March last year, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation produced a report suggesting initiatives to promote business support, job creation and retention in town and village centres. Their recommendations are sound but most are dependent on government for funding.

Yet we as a local authority can take a kep step. The Retail Planning Guidelines are very strong on the need to enhance vitality and viability of town centres. They advise that the range and quality of activities in any town centre determines its strength and success. They suggest that:

“In order for town centres to achieve their full potential and continually improve as retail destinations it will be appropriate and necessary for planning authorities to adopt a pro-active role in enhancing the vitality and viability of their centre(s).”

~~Section 7.1.3 talks about the challenge of tackling vacancy and to work towards vibrant, dynamic and diverse town centres. Section 7.2.1 talks about the need for our towns to reinvent themselves and evolve. Section 7.2.3 talks about the need for creativity and innovation. And critically, Section 7.2.7 suggests that the Council may consider the preparation of strategies which address specific issues that affect the appearance or functioning of a town centre and its retail areas.~~

The Retail Planning Guidelines are quite clear: it is not sufficient for a planning authority to merely formulate policies which seek to preserve the present shopping hierarchy without addressing the key issues facing town centres. We have recognised this in the County Development Plan. They ask that we would carry out a health check assessment of the vitality and viability of town centres.

I am supporting their recommendation in asking that Cork County Council would carry out a health check assessment of the vitality and viability of each of the towns in the county. They don’t all have to be done at once: develop a hierarchy and set a goal for tackling an agreed number each year. The health check will examine rates of vacancy, empty sites, the diversity of uses in the town centre, how accessible the town is, the car

parking strategy, whether the town is safe for pedestrians, the quality of the public realm. Weaknesses and opportunities will be identified which the County Council can then help to address either through policy, planning guidance or targeted investment.

We have recognised the need to help our very valuable town centres. Active planning authority intervention is not just advised, it is regarded as necessary. I ask that the County Council would help our towns to become vibrant centres once more by initiating the health checks recommended by the Retail Planning Guidelines.