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16 March 2017

BUILDING PARTNERSHIP CAPACITY IN IRELAND'S TOWNS AND CITIES

Dear Minister Coveney,

We welcome the vision you and your department are showing by asking the question, "What will Ireland be like in 20 years' time?".

We agree that we can make informed and strategic choices now about what kind of challenges and opportunities we will face in the future. The cities, towns and villages of Ireland will be at the core of the strategy that emerges from the Ireland 2040 dialogue.

These urban centres are hubs for commerce, community and civic life. They are critical for supporting diverse activities such as retail, leisure, tourism, hospitality, creative industries, arts and culture, public services, transport infrastructure, housing and many other activities. Good placemaking means inclusive wealth creation, attractive places to live and is a foundation for inward investment and attraction and retention of talented people.

We write to you to offer our support in terms of increasing understanding of how investment can be allocated to ensure public money is spent where it is most needed. It is essential that for any city, town or village centre where investment is planned, that the

initial step taken by the Irish Government and supporting agencies is to ensure that there is a strong local partnership in place.

Businesses, local government and other key activists are already taking a lead in towns of various sizes across Ireland. ATCM, an organisation first founded 26 years ago in the UK, is proud to say that today, we benefit from representation from Ireland on both our Advisory Council and our Board of Directors. Despite the relative youth of town and city management in Ireland compared to the UK, the flow of information on best practice has become a two-way process, demonstrating just how quickly Ireland's towns are maturing and professionalising. The seeds of regeneration are there, it must now be for ATCM and the Irish Government to join forces and ensure that these benefits are universally shared across the whole country.

With local government, businesses, public agencies, landlords, residents, and others, there are many diverse interests in towns and cities. We have seen with first-hand experience how difficult it can be for national governments to have any tangible impact at a local level without working through a local partnership to bring the necessary stakeholders around the table.

There are three key assets that a local partnership can offer which support a national government in its regeneration aims.

Local Knowledge and Expertise: Local partnerships mean local knowledge. Every city, town and village centre is different. 'One size fits all' policies are rarely successful as they fail to appreciate the unique characteristics of each town centre. It is town centre partnerships that are able to translate national policies into something meaningful locally. It is town centre partnerships that are best placed to advise on how investment and resource should be allocated to benefit the town centre.

One Voice: A local partnership provides a forum for the diverse stakeholders of a town centre to come together to speak with one voice. When it comes deciding on a future for the area, whether its housing and planning, retail-led regeneration or changes to transport

infrastructure, having a unified voice from the community is a powerful asset that provides clarity and makes consultation easy.

Engagement: Some of the most important stakeholders in town centres can be challenging to engage without local support. Small businesses, for example, can be difficult to reach for both local and national government. They are time poor and resource poor and it is often the case, that even when a government is trying to provide them with much needed support, achieving large-scale take up is difficult.

The Potential of BIDs

There are different forms of town centre partnerships that we feel the Irish Government should consider in order to adequately support its towns and cities. One model that is enjoying international success is that of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) – where businesses vote for a self-imposed levy on top of their commercial property tax to pay for services in addition to that provided by local government. In terms of local knowledge, a unified voice and engagement, BIDs have been excelling for decades across North America and the UK. They provide an important private sector-led solution to town and city management. They meet the ambition set out in the EU and UN Urban Agendas, to give businesses a voice in shaping the areas they are located.

We provide the following case study as an example of how partnership in Ireland has taking root in Sligo, leading to an innovative, proactive, BID that is delivering placemaking that Ireland can be proud of.

How Partnership in Sligo is Transforming a Small Town with Potential into a Coveted Destination

There is a real challenge in ensuring a return to economic growth is equally shared across Ireland. Supporting the smaller towns in both retaining the talent they have and attracting new people as residents, visitors and investors remains key to ensuring these towns can thrive, a challenge made all the more pressing given the uncertainty over a potential UK withdrawal from the Single Market and the knock-on impact this could have on trade and tourism.

A proactive business community and local authority in Sligo decided to take matters into its own hands, building a platform for the revival of the town. And it's working. Sligo is quickly becoming recognised as a hub for best practice in partnership development for small towns, not just in Ireland, but across the UK as well.

Together, Sligo County Council, with the support of its businesses, applied for INTERREG funding in 2013 to support the development of partnership capacity and implement the building blocks of good placemaking. Performance monitoring for the town, strong place marketing and branding, high quality videos and vignettes, a dedicated mobile app for the town, attractive illuminations for Water Lane and the town centre bridges and relationship building with other town partnerships across Ireland and the UK were successfully developed. These initiatives have helped begin a process of changing perceptions and deliver a sense of 'place' and civic pride.

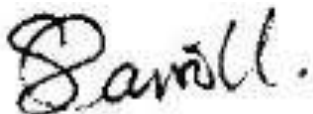
A combination of private sector energy with public sector oversight and guidance has created a movement that is transforming Sligo into a desirable destination. Not only have the businesses decided to take on funding for a sustainable partnership model by forming the West Coast's first ever BID, but Sligo has also achieved recognition by winning the internationally recognised Purple Flag accreditation.

Recently, Sligo was also awarded the status of Coach Friendly Destination, the first town to receive this recognition from the Coach Tourism Transport Council of Ireland. This was thanks to improvements to Markievicz Road, the designated drop off area for coaches. The work includes new footpaths, lighting, maps, signage and the installation of a CCTV system that will allow drivers to view their coach from their phone. The small initiatives taking place in Sligo add up to something transformational. This must become a national effort.

ATCM is keen to support the Irish Government in creating a framework for developing partnership capacity to support town and city regeneration. We are a not-for-profit membership organisation led by private, public and voluntary sector bodies that all value placemaking in urban centres. Our members cover Ireland and the UK.

We would be delighted to share our experience in placemaking with you and your department so that you can best plan for the development of Ireland's urban centre's to 2040 and beyond.

Yours sincerely,



Shanaaz Carroll

Chief Executive
Association of Town & City Management



Richard Guiney

Chair of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Network
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