

# Town Centre First

## Draft Urlingford Town Centre Masterplan

*Observations on the Draft Masterplan*



**URLINGFORD TOWN TEAM**

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The Urlingford Town Team (UTT) warmly welcomes being selected to pilot phase 1 of the Government's Town Centre First Policy, for County Kilkenny. Independent consultants were commissioned by Kilkenny County Council to follow up on this Government initiative and the resulting Masterplan for Urlingford has been presented to the Municipal District Council as well as to the general public.

The UTT was happy to work with Turley, and to contribute to the development of this bespoke draft Masterplan for Urlingford, and we note that the Masterplan reflects the bulk of our input.

## General Remarks

1. As a general comment, the UTT would commend the Masterplan for its vision and ambition which if realised, will transform Urlingford into an attractive, vibrant and truly sustainable community where people want to live and work, grow up and grow old. While the Masterplan has a far broader scope and remit than has the UTT action plan, nevertheless the UTT is already engaged in delivering a number of the micro plans included in the Masterplan such as repurposing the former Bank of Ireland building as a remote working hub, and refurbishing the old community centre,
2. The UTT is broadly supportive of the vast majority of the 34 actions set out in the plan, which address the importance of social and economic purpose of the town as well as responding to emerging opportunities such as those linked to leisure tourism, remote working, digitalisation and climate action.
3. **The UTT is however both disappointed and concerned with the lack of economic focus of the Masterplan and believes that the economic priorities in the Masterplan must be increased and strengthened if Urlingford is to be a sustainable and resilient community.** Urlingford no less than any other rural community cannot become a truly sustainable community unless the economic dimension is also appropriately addressed.
4. While as stated above, there is a strong alignment between the goals and action plan of the UTT, **we are requesting that Masterplan include as a high priority action , the location of a Government agency led SME in the town , that can create sustainable high value jobs that can contribute to the regeneration of the community in a sustainable way.** ( see paras 34-38)
5. **The UTT would like to flag at the outset the critical importance of having an implementation and delivery plan, with clear indication of key roles etc and time-lines introduced where possible.** We believe that **it is essential to have some clear deliverables in a timely manner,** if there is to be a real local 'buy in' and support for this Masterplan. If this does not happen and if



the delivery and operation of our projects regarding the remote working hub and the refurbishment of the community centre, do not receive the appropriate and ongoing support from Kilkenny County Council, then there is a real danger that the collaborative Town Centre process being promoted by the Government, will not happen.

6. The keystone of sustainable development is effective infrastructural planning, as part of this masterplan there has been little or no analysis of this crucial component. Capacity and lack thereof in terms of electricity, potable water, foul sewers and broadband provision, should be identified as part of this masterplan. Without sufficient infrastructural planning, infill development as is the policy of councils across the country, will not be able to take place and further to this catastrophic failures can occur if existing infrastructure is overloaded. **The UTT would like to see capacity statements from ESNB, Irish Water as well as bandwidth statements from OpenEir in order to support the development of the town.**
7. Sustainability in mobility for a rural community is a challenge for policy makers as they acknowledge a critical mass does not exist for many forms of public transport to be feasible. Accepting this it is vital that provision is made to allow vehicular movement throughout the town as well as provision for pedestrians and cyclists. **Given the current Main Street is constrained on both sides it is imperative that a parallel street be provisioned to facilitate high levels of mobility throughout the town as well as being the only sustainable way to promote infill non-sprawling development within the existing planning boundaries of Urlingford.** Albeit a long term goal, the level of housing depicted in the masterplan scenarios demands this zoning now to ensure its existence when it's required.
8. As mentioned Urlingford is a linear settlement with its current focal point being the Main Street. For many years Urlingford has been behind the curve in relation to Streetscape. ESNB, Eir, NBI and as most recently a 5G mast clutters the Streetscape making it a very unattractive space. A holistic review and phased coordinated Streetscape Masterplan needs to be developed in order to facilitate execution of the Streetscape enhancement. This Masterplan provides no detail beyond concepts to execute this objective. Given the asset owners are Kilkenny County Council with utility operators, visitors to the town and most importantly residents and business owners being stakeholders, a detailed multifaceted approach is needed to realise tangible progress on this objective. If this supplementary plan is not compiled we will see further clutter such as the 5G mast and NBI hardware (only fitted in the last 2 years) further impeding the undergrounding of services and beautification of the Streetscape.

## High priority - A Project of Strategic Importance to the Town

9. Two of these key priority actions are under the heading of Streets and Public Places i.e. 1. a comprehensive public realm enhancement scheme for the town; 2. development of town squares. The UTT would support both of these actions and the priority attached to them. **The**

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**overall objective of both actions is to create an attractive town centre which will facilitate people who want to stroll around the town, sit down and enjoy the atmosphere. A parallel street would facilitate creating a central square. Given the existing town is a linear settlement type, this street could provide potential framing of a town square.**

10. Actions 1 and 2 should take into account the circumstances of people who are living and working on Main Street to ensure that **the implementation is done in a way that is supportive and also enhances their ability to live and work on Main Street.**
11. The realisation of actions 1 and 2 are of course inextricably linked to the 2 priority actions under the heading of Movement; **5: a new town car park; 10: traffic calming measures.** The UTT would support the development of the new town car park as detailed in the plan – with entry points from the Main Street and entry and exit points on the Mill Road.
12. The UTT also believes that some **additional ‘pockets’ of mostly short term car parking adjacent to the Main Street** would encourage people to continue to use the services available on Main Street.
13. The UTT would support the Traffic calming measures and suggested interventions as outlined at 10.
14. The UTT would support the proposal and the priority attached to the preparation of a shopfront enhancement strategy as outlined at 12 under the heading Heritage and identity. The ongoing efforts of a number of shop owners to upgrade their shop fronts will be hugely supported by such a strategy.
15. **The UTT is already working to deliver the priority actions 15 and 16 under the heading Built form and land use, in relation to the use of the former Bank of Ireland building and the refurbishment of the community centre;**
16. Kilkenny County Council has been a key partner in the UTT ‘s efforts to establish a Remote Working Hub in the town by repurposing the former Bank of Ireland building. We are now at the final fit out stage and our intention is to open the doors of *Exit 4 Urlingford* by the end of October.
17. The UTT would point out that the reference to the future use of this hub would, at this early stage, need to be recast to reflect that the purpose of the hub has been clearly identified in the grant conditions and cannot therefore be used as suggested in the draft Masterplan.
18. In order to ensure **the long term sustainability of the hub**, particularly at the initial stage when the hub is establishing itself, **the UTT would underline the importance of the ongoing support**



**and partnership with Kilkenny County Council, Kilkenny LEADER Partnership and Kilkenny Local Enterprise Office.**

19. With regard to the **refurbishment of the Community Centre**, the UTT would draw attention to the fact that Phase 1 of its refurbishment with the support of the CCIF ( Community Centre Investment Fund 2022 Call), which is administered by the Department of Rural and Community Development, is underway . It had been our intention to apply for funding for Phase 2 under this year’s call under the CCIF: however that call is unexpectedly limited to new build community centres and **the UTT is now applying for funding under the current TVRS (Town and Village Renewal Scheme) call, administered by the County Council.**
20. The UTT would like to underline the importance of securing the necessary funding allocation from Kilkenny County Council to complete the refurbishment of the Community Centre. **Without this, the community centre will be ‘half finished’.** Prior to embarking on this project, the UTT undertook a comprehensive analysis of the centre to explore the viability of the refurbishment. The Department of Rural and Community Development was convinced of its viability and awarded the maximum grant to UTT for Phase 1 with the understanding that we would apply for funding for Phase 2 in 2023.
21. The UTT would support the efforts to promote Compact Town Centre Development, and the **exploration of the range of potential development sites- for employment, retail and residential** - as identified in action 19 in the Masterplan.The UTT would like **to add a reference to ‘business location’ to this action**, in line with our overall wish to see a stronger and more balanced reference to the economic sustainability of the community.
22. It is important that any sites designated as **potential development sites**, take into account not only their viability and suitability from an environmental and infrastructural perspective, but also **the impact on the overall sustainability of the local community which includes the social and economic dimensions.**
23. The UTT would support the top priority attached to the four actions under the heading **Vibrancy** dealing with; a programme to address Vacancy and Dereliction; Broadband; an events programme to celebrate the town’s identity; a marketing and branding strategy for the town.
24. We do however consider that action 23 on the prioritisation of the provision of Fibre Broadband in the Town should be highlighted as essential to enabling the town to capitalise on new economic opportunities from digital connectivity. ( see paras 34- 38)
25. Since its establishment the UTT has at central and regional government level, and with broadband providers, made strenuous efforts to secure high speed broadband which is essential for the successful operation of the soon to be opened remote working hub in the former Bank of Ireland building.( action 15). **The UTT would appeal to the County Council to support our**



**efforts in this regard as it has been definitively confirmed that despite the NBI network passing through the town, the Main Street and its associated premises are outside the intervention zone.**

26. The UTT would support Action 21 regarding a Targeting Programme to Address Vacancy & Dereliction This is a key priority under the national Town Centre First policy framework. We welcome that a Vacancy and Dereliction Survey has been prepared alongside this plan. Feedback from the local community also revealed the issue as a local priority for those who live and work in the town.
27. The UTT recognises the importance of action 27 and Enhancing the town's programme of events and activities which celebrate aspects of the town's identity and 28 -marketing and branding strategy for the Town - but feel that these must be implemented in tandem with those actions that will create a vibrant town centre- social, economic and cultural.
28. The UTT would support the two high priority actions under the headings of Vibrancy and resilience; 29 governance support groups for the town; and 31 promoting the health and well being of the town.
29. The UTT has been established for the last two years and the Tidy Town Team is a long-established local group. **While both groups are committed to delivering improvements for the town they both face major capacity issues particularly in the area of human and financial resources. Both groups are entirely voluntary with all the usual challenges that face all voluntary groups.**
30. The UTT would point out that there is already a **Neighbourhood Watch network** supported by a community managed CCTV network ( action 29) in the town but its operation is challenged by the fact that **there is not a permanent Garda present in the town.** In this context, the UTT welcomes the reference to close cooperation with the Kilkenny County Council and local Gardai in action 19.
31. The UTT fully supports the high priority of action 31 on **Health and well-being** and that the town should have the spaces, buildings, services, facilities and amenities necessary to support the health and well-being of its residents and visitors.Indeed many of the actions in relation to the new streetscape with increased pedestrian access, new town park, developing the Islands loop for leisure access, bicycle hub, the refurbished community centre, all support this action.
32. In this context the UTT would however, **underline our concern at the lack of adequate consideration of recreational space in the Masterplan particularly given the expected increase in the local population.** It appears for example, that there is no facility provided for the expansion of the GAA footprint in the community and that **housing plans are envisaged for sites that are currently providing much needed recreational spaces.** We would point out that this is



**not consistent with good urban development** and given the acknowledged importance of responding to the needs of young people who constitute a very substantial local demographic, is certainly not in line with the *National Recreational Policy for Young People*.

33. We would also welcome the Health and Well-being Audit referenced in this action but would again underline the importance of follow up to any such audit. **In this context the UTT believes that the local community would greatly benefit from the location of a Primary Care Centre in Urlingford and would request that this be explicitly referenced under this action 31.**

## Economic Dimension of the Masterplan

34. The UTT has already alluded to the need to considerably strengthen this aspect of the Masterplan in our general comments above.
35. The development of the remote working hub will contribute to the regeneration of the town socially, by facilitating people who wish to remain living in Urlingford and who can now realise this ambition through the Government's new approach to promoting hybrid working. It will also have a direct impact on helping Urlingford contribute to the achievement of Ireland's climate goals. **The hub will also contribute to the local economy by increasing daily footfall in the town and attracting people who will use local services.**
36. The UTT's strategy and action plan includes the objective of securing a Government agency ( e.g IDA, EI) led, location of an SME in the town. The failure of any State supported enterprise in the locality is a long-standing challenge that has yet to be addressed. **The recent findings in our Health Check (Turley) in relation to the extremely high level of unemployment in the community and also the very high level of social deprivation, underline the need for a State supported SME to try and address these twin problems. The UTT is disappointed that this important goal has been omitted and would request that the final Masterplan include this action and this action should be labelled as high priority.**
37. The UTT very much welcomes action 22 to **appoint/recruit a Business Development Officer for the Town**. The UTT would propose that in the final Masterplan, **action 22 be given the top priority rating i.e High priority - a project of strategic importance**. This Business development Officer would encourage and support new and existing businesses, individuals and organisations in the Town. **The Business Development Officer would play a key role in liaising with the LEO. The UTT would very much welcome that this new Business Development Officer role would operate from one of the office spaces that will be available in Exit 4 when our remote working hub opens its doors this autumn. Such a tenancy would be an excellent support for the hub which like all other such establishments would very much welcome an anchor tenant.**



38. The UTT has already underlined the importance of the action 23 on the prioritisation of the provision of **Fibre Broadband in the Town** which should be highlighted as essential to enabling the town to capitalise on new economic opportunities from digital connectivity. The UTT would propose that this High priority be included in the section on economic development.

## Medium priority- an important local project

39. There are eight actions identified as of medium priority for the town- an important local project - which are important elements to aspects of the Masterplan that have a higher priority. E.g the UTT would support action 3 regarding the developing a green loop along the River Goul, and action 4 regarding the development of a New Town Park A new park located close to Main Street, along the proposed Green Loop and connected to the Community Centre as important contributory elements for actions 27, 28 (branding and marketing) 31, (health and wellbeing)
40. Likewise the UTT would also support action 14 on preparing a Culture and Heritage Strategy for the Town (Identify, adapt, conserve / restore and reuse historic buildings and use interpretation and heritage trails to tell the story of the Town) as a key element in defining and marketing the 'identity' of the town as per actions 27 and 28.
41. With regard to action 13 Town Gateways , **the UTT fully supports the redesign of the Northern Gateway and the Southern approach to the Town in order to provide an attractive approach to the Town.** The use of sculpture and / or public art in combination with planting would be ideal but would have to be installed in a way that would protect the installation. The implementation of action 13 would again be hugely significant in defining and marketing the 'identity' of the town as per actions 27 and 28.
42. The UTT would support action 8 which proposes that a 'School Street' on the New Road at certain times of the day creating a safer and calmer route to school for children travelling to school. Much of the feedback to Turley identified this particular bottleneck and the need to address it both from a safety and operational point of view. While the walk connecting Chapelfield to New Line is welcome, we would also like to see the ambition of connecting Riverside and Mount Finn drive reflected in the plan. **The UTT would also draw attention to the safety issues arising from bottlenecks created by the current routing of traffic to and from the Community Creche which is located adjacent to the Homes for the Elderly, through Assumption Place.** The affected community is in favour of a set down area and safe walking route to the Creche from Main Street. In this context, all remedial actions must be implemented in a way that is coherent with other plans from actions 5 and 10.





43. The UTT notes action 20 to provide a mix of well-designed range of housing types and adjacent workspace development which creates a new direct walking link from Main Street and to the School. **Any new housing must be supported by the appropriate infrastructure and be coherent with the overall ambition of the Masterplan to turn Urlingford into a community that is truly balanced and sustainable with the necessary balance between the social, economic and environmental dimensions.**
44. Action 20 should also take into account action 30 on ensuring sufficient school capacity and designating sufficient lands surrounding the existing National School in order to allow for extension of the same.
45. This action should also be consistent with existing needs. The UTT would again refer to its concern at the weakness of the economic dimension of the Masterplan particularly in the context of the very high unemployment levels in Urlingford. It is critical that the various plans that make up the Masterplan are coherent and consistent. **If provision is being made for additional housing, then provision also must be made for the creation of additional quality jobs. Failure to do this will only undermine the overall objective of the Masterplan which is to help to create a vibrant, attractive, resilient but above all, sustainable community.**

## Lower priority -desirable but not critical

46. The UTT would have the following comments to make on the remaining twelve actions in the Masterplan which are considered as Lower priority desirable but not critical.
47. The UTT notes that action 17 calls for engagement with national businesses in order to understand the feasibility of establishing a grocery store / supermarket at the site of the former Josephine's Restaurant. The UTT welcomes the recognition of the potential for the community from alternative uses of this site, **and would hope for a wider range of possibilities to be explored particularly to ensure that any services located there contribute to quality employment and to the viability of the town centre, rather than to undermining it.**
48. The UTT would support actions:
  - 6 providing street parking spaces in a more compact arrangement, allowing the use of these spaces for short-stay visitors.;
  - 7 Pedestrian and Cycle Network Improvements on Mill Road to provide safe access to the Community Centre and beyond to the proposed Green Loop and existing heritage assets such as Urlingford Castle;



- 9 Exploring an Urlingford 'Bike Hub' that would promote sustainable travel and enable visitors to explore the Town by providing a bicycle hire / shared bicycle facility with appropriately located parking/docking stations and
- Action 11 on improving signage, facilities and services which support sustainable movement, interpretation of heritage including through technology.
- 24 Cycling and walking trails –consider inclusion of off-road biking areas within the proposed Green Loop.
- 25 Heritage Trail Tell Urlingford's stories using interpretation, signage, wayfinding.

These are all 'smaller wins' that are relatively achievable, but which will contribute significantly to sustainable leisure tourism and leisure activities in the town.

49. The UTT would support action 18 on a Hotel Accommodation Feasibility Study, which while longer term, is critical in supporting potential tourism initiatives in the Town.
50. Likewise with regard to action 26 on Exploring Potential for a New Culture and Events Centre. As indicated in the Masterplan this is potentially related to Action 16 (not 17) on the community centre. While recognising that this action is for the longer term, the UTT would point out that more immediately, this proposal underlines the importance of Kilkenny County Council supporting our efforts to complete the refurbishment of the community centre as a multi-use centre for the entire community with the capacity to stage cultural events.
51. The UTT welcomes action 32 on preparing a plan to introduce, greening, planting, growing and sustainable drainage to create an attractive streetscape, improve biodiversity, create shaded areas, and help mitigate the effects of climate change such as flooding and extreme heat. The UTT considers that this should be an integral aspect of any implementation of action 20 on housing types.
52. This action also links to paragraph paragraph 28 which refers to the difficulty faced by groups such as the Tidy Towns in attracting the appropriate level of local support to enable it to function. There is also the issue that the role of Tidy Town groups such as that in Urlingford, must now encompass an understanding of biodiversity and how to contribute towards the mitigation of the impact of climate change.
53. The UTT considers that action 33 on EV charging at e.g key locations on Main Street and within the new Car Park, as an essential element of any public realm enhancements. This however will need to be coordinated with Low Voltage network capacity as well as undergrounding of the existing network with ESNB.



54. The UTT would support Action 34 on embracing the circular economy approach to prevent, minimise and recycle waste, as a basic framework for the town.

## Implementation – Delivery Action Plan

55. As flagged under our general comments, the UTT believes that this is one of the most critical aspects of the Masterplan. Without a practical and deliverable implementation plan, with at least an indicative time-frame, the local community may very well consign this plan to that shelf, which holds previous plans for the town which have never been realised.
56. The UTT very much welcomes the vital role to be played by local authorities – Kilkenny County Council in our case- in working with towns to shape their futures under the Town centre policy. The UTT believes that this close collaboration is essential if the Town Centre First policy is to have a real chance of success, and that furthermore this close collaboration must be the cornerstone of any actions to deliver the actions set out in the Masterplan.
57. We would point out that Urlingford as a ‘pathfinder town’ that will act as a demonstrator of the Town centre approach, is very conscious of its role as a leader in best practice. The Masterplan has very helpfully identified the relevant funding streams required to support the delivery of the majority of the projects set out in the Masterplan. **The wide range of potential funding sources reviewed however serves to underline the extent of the challenge for a small local community group such as the UTT which comprises a number of individuals who are giving of their free time to undertake this work.**
58. The UTT is very anxious that Urlingford be an excellent ‘Pathfinder’ but the UTT would strongly underline that because of the many challenges it faces, challenges that are well known to Kilkenny County Council, **Urlingford requires very considerable support with local stakeholder collaboration and in accessing investment programmes.**
59. Of course, the Government recognises these challenges and in order to support the delivery of this policy has set up a network of Town Regeneration Officers to support local town teams, such as the UTT. We particularly welcome the appointment of Annette Fitzpatrick by Kilkenny County Council as Town Regeneration Officer (TRO) for Kilkenny, and we are confident that this role will deliver the coordinated approach that is essential, at all levels, for the success of the Town Centre First approach. This is a new role and the UTT is ready to support Kilkenny’s TRO to the greatest extent possible given the limits of our resources , both human and financial.
60. The UTT also looks forward to the support that the National Town Centre First Office will provide. Our understanding is that this new Office is being set up to drive implementation of Town Centre First actions and to coordinate stakeholder engagement at a national level and across the local government sector.



61. As soon as all views have been collated and analysed and the Masterplan has been finalised, the UTT is ready to collaborate with Ms Fitzpatrick and Kilkenny County Council in identifying the next steps in operationalizing this Masterplan. These next steps should clearly identify:

- the ‘what’ ie. which of the menu of options are being prioritised;
- the ‘how’, including how sites can be secured, agreement on which funding lines are relevant and on how the applications will be completed and submitted;
- the ‘when’ indicative deadlines are key and are also likely to be required by the various funding streams.

62. We would again like to underline the importance of working on the various high priority actions identified in this blueprint, for the future development of Urlingford, as a matter of urgency. The UTT is already progressing a number of these high priority actions - the remote working hub, the community centre, the broadband issue- and we look forward, with the continued support of the Kilkenny County Council, Kilkenny LEADER Partnership, and Kilkenny Local Enterprise Office, to delivering these projects as key elements of the overall Masterplan for Urlingford.

## Revision History

Revision	Description	Date
00	Initial Issue	01/09/2023



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