



A New Deal for our Towns and Villages

Our plan for revitalising
Ireland's urban centres

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Executive Summary

A New Deal for our Towns and Villages has been developed to revitalise our urban centres through the lens of business, rejuvenation, and life after Covid. This enterprise focused policy looks to tackle key issues that continuously stunt the growth of our towns and villages. There is no 'one size fits all' approach to regeneration, and delivery of our plan, but our policy proposals are structured around four key themes beginning with a return to real local democracy.

1. Optimising Town Development and Growth:

- » Expand Local Government and restore Town Councils.
- » Structured Development: each Town Council to have a designated Town Planner and the support of a Local Authority Architect to optimise plan-led, sustainable growth.
- » Establish an Irish Towns Partnership (ITP), an expert advisory panel solely to advise town councils on renewal.
- » Reignite the Co-operative model.
- » Tackle derelict sites and vacant units.
- » Map dereliction in our towns and villages.

2. Supporting Business, Retailers, and Enterprise in our Towns:

- » Encourage SME Start-ups to stay local so they keep business local and do not need to relocate.
- » Empower Youth Employment, Enterprise, and Entrepreneurship.
- » Support Female Entrepreneurs in Irish towns.

- » Support an online transition for local businesses.
- » Town Gift Cards to keep spending local.

3. Incentivise Central, Sustainable, and Green Development:

- » Incentivise town centre shops.
- » Disincentivise out-of-town retail park development.
- » Funding for environmental sustainability: Eco-tourism, green enterprise, and carbon footprint labelling.
- » Festival Week: recovering traditions after Covid to bring people back to the town.

4. Making Towns More Attractive and Inclusive Places to Live:

- » Facilitate remote working as a viable option post-Covid.
- » Guided development of remote working hubs: public sector, private, creative hub, connectivity.
- » Rollout of high-quality broadband in rural areas.
- » Improved public transport.
- » Remove the red tape for developing community spaces and community gardens.
- » Inclusive pedestrianised streets: universal design, increasing footfall, & reducing reliance on cars.
- » Casual Trading: food trucks and use of public space.
- » Make small towns Inclusive for older people: age-friendly villages, retirement living hubs.

Foreword

The Labour Party recognises the immense value and promise in Ireland's towns and villages, and we want to revitalise the thriving communities living there. It's why we are proposing **A New Deal for Our Towns and Villages** to develop a long-term vision for our urban centres that are the heart of our communities and an essential support to their rural hinterlands.

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way we think about life; the way we work, what we study, where we can live. Cracks have been exposed in Irish society. Our healthcare system was pushed beyond its limits, our housing system continues to fail to meet the needs of the people, and the socio-economic divide has never been so clear. As we look towards a recovery from Covid-19, we can't return to the old 'normal', as in many cases, 'normal' was the problem. While a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is not possible, our 'New Deal for our Towns and Villages' looks to tackle key issues that continuously stunt our town's sense of community, enterprise, and growth.

Alan Kelly TD

Labour Party Leader



We developed these policy proposals on the basis that we couldn't return back to normal as 'normal' was the problem. We believe our rural towns and villages have a great future but that negativity around them must be arrested. There is a great belief in our urban centres and that's why we must put in place a strategy to plot a way forward. This must be anchored in local democracy, a just transition, the importance of the public space and civic leadership. Life in our regional towns is positive and has a huge amount to offer families. Our young people can and must be the drivers of regeneration and the economy in these areas. In developing A New Deal for Our Towns and Villages we carried out an extensive survey with over 1,000 responses from the public and engaged with Labour Party representatives and stakeholders across Ireland. These enterprise focused policy proposals are structured around four key themes:

- » Optimising Town Development and Growth.
- » Supporting Business, Retailers, and Enterprise in our Towns.
- » Incentivising Central, Sustainable, and Green Development.
- » Making Towns More Attractive and Inclusive Places to Live.

In recent years there has been no shortage of plans, strategies, and proposals from government but what has been lacking is an urgency of implementation. The pandemic has changed our lives and our perspectives, and there can be no going back to the way things were. Over the months ahead the Labour Party will continue to engage with local communities and campaign for the solutions and real change needed to transform our towns and villages.

Aodhán Ó Ríordáin TD

Labour Party Spokesperson on Enterprise and Trade



Towns and Villages Survey: Results and Insights

Our policies are guided by the lived experience of people in Ireland. To better understand the needs and concerns of people in our towns and villages, we launched a national survey in April 2021. Results guided the development of this enterprise policy which not only identifies barriers to regeneration and growth within our towns and villages, but provides tangible solutions to tackle issues stunting the prosperity of our urban communities.

What became clear from our survey was the level of passion that people have for their local community and their hopes for a prosperous community.

Ireland's towns and villages do not have enough supports for people – and particularly young people – to succeed in enterprise. 61% of people believe that there are not enough supports in their town or village to start up a new business. A staggering 70% believe that it is not easy for young people to start a business. Locals deserve real opportunities to grow and succeed.

70% said it wasn't easy for young people to start a business

People living in towns and villages feel a disheartening sense of decline. Half of survey respondents (50.5%) believe that their town or village has been declining over the past 10 years, with another third (33%) stating that their area's attractiveness as a place to live will decline in the next decade. Derelict and unoccupied buildings are a clear concern, considered to be a significant problem by 79% of respondents.

Over half of respondents believe their town or village has declined over last 10 years

Inclusivity and accessibility need massive improvements. 77% stated that their town or village had many new residents moving in over the past 15 years. Despite this, 1 in 5 people felt that new residents did not easily integrate into the community. 66.5% gave disability accessibility issues as an issue in their local area, such as broken footpaths or obstacles to movement for wheelchair users. All people deserve a sense of home, security, and belonging. Towns and villages need to be examined through a lens of universal design and inclusivity to celebrate accessibility and diversity.

Improvements to public transport and pedestrian access are key to revitalising local areas. 62% believe that their town is not well served by **public transport** in comparison to neighbouring towns or larger cities. We need to **reduce reliance on the car** and make our towns for the people. 58% think that their town or village would benefit from having more pedestrian only areas. These changes would help drive footfall towards town centres and local businesses.

Broadband and connectivity are crucial steps in digitalising rural areas. 40% of people who are working remotely would use a **remote working hub** where you could work from instead of working from home or going into your office. Unfortunately, 24% do not have reliable broadband in their area; this issue needs to be eradicated if remote working is to become a reality.

24% didn't have reliable broadband

Our survey shows that activities, local initiatives, and basic amenities are important to the people in our small towns and villages and can help bring about a sense of pride in an area. Local Authorities and community groups need to be properly resourced to facilitate



these basic amenities; without them, it can be difficult for the community to thrive.

- 48% state there are not enough community playing facilities available such as sport pitches, and 65% state that there are not enough indoor community facilities available, such as community halls or meeting rooms provided by the local authority.
- 76% support the establishment or reestablishment of an elected town council.
- 82% believe that their local authority should provide more community playing facilities and recreational facilities, such as walking or running tracks.
- 75% feel that litter is a problem.
- While 42% believed their local Tidy Town was supported by their Local Authority, 27% felt more could be done.
- 39% state that there is a shortage of school places.

Respondents identified areas where people feel **improvements could be made to the leisure offering of the town**. The five most common suggestions were: Better public seating (63%), more outdoor leisure activities (61%), more indoor leisure activities (49%), more outdoor spaces (48%), and increased night-time socialising options (40%). These suggestions were not surprising considering Covid-19 and our new fondness for outdoor activities.

These results and engagement with stakeholders have guided and informed the development of this policy as Labour hope to better the entrepreneurial success and overall living standards in our towns and villages. It's why we have developed our policy proposals to deliver **A New Deal for our Towns and Villages**.

1. Optimising Town Development and Growth

Expand Local Government and Restore Town Councils

Our towns are the local and regional drivers of economic development, place-making and good, sustainable planning. Yet Ireland remains one of the most centralised states in Europe, with our local authorities having few powers and almost no real financial autonomy. According to 2018 OECD data, only 8% of Irish public spending occurs at local government level, compared to an EU average of over 23%. Too much power is concentrated in central Government, and not enough with local councils to be the engine of economic and social development in Ireland. A Town Council has a singular focus on the development, prosperity, and wellbeing of its town.

The decision to abolish Town Councils in 2014 was a mistake and Labour published a bill in 2018 to reverse this. The new Municipal Districts that replaced Town Councils have not worked as well as intended for towns. They are sub-committees of the County Council, with certain delegated functions, but they do not have the dedicated focus on urban development, and they often have much larger areas under their responsibility. This change has for example meant a loss of staff in towns to carry out maintenance and repairs which slows down the response time to local needs.

“Our survey identified that 76% of people support the establishment or re-establishment of an elected town council.

By expanding Local Government, we want to establish and move more public bodies outside the capital to generate more public jobs in regional areas and allow existing public servants to re-locate outside the capital. In

addition, by re-establishing Town Councils, we want to ensure that councils have real power and resources to regenerate, re-imagine and renew their areas and the surrounding hinterlands. To strengthen Local Government, the Labour Party would:

- » Redirect more power and resources from central government to local government.
- » Legislate to restore Town Councils and establish new councils in clearly defined urban areas as outlined in our Local Government (Restoration of Town Councils) Bill 2018.
- » Support the ambitions of urban areas such as Drogheda to achieve city status.
- » Provide more local jobs and opportunities for public servants to relocate outside Dublin.
- » Commit to a review of funding of local government.

To support regional towns, the Labour Party would:

- » Oblige councils to co-operate across local boundaries to promote better development.
- » Extend the Living Cities Initiative and expand the use of the Rural Regeneration Fund.
- » Empower Town Councils to act as rating authorities and planning authorities to reduce local commercial rates.

Structured Development

Societal growth and changing demographics have not been met with suitably adapted town structures. 77% of respondents from our survey stated that their town or village had many new residents moving into it over the past 15 years, yet 1 in 5 felt that these people did not easily integrate into the community.

With sound planning structures and guidelines,

Westport successfully reinvented itself through considerate sustainable planning that understood the needs of its growing population that ballooned from 3,688 in 1991 to 6,198 in 2016. The Action Plan considered factors unique to the local community including its historic core, tourism, control of peripheral development, residential and commercial development. The success of Westport's revitalisation has not gone unrecognised, receiving numerous awards such as the *Retail Excellence Best Town in Ireland* and the *Best Tourism Town 2014*, *Best Place to Live in Ireland* in 2012, *Ireland's Tidiest Large Town 2012*, *Ireland's Best Kept Large Town 2012*.



we believe that Irish towns can modernise while honouring local assets, history, and heritage. The Westport Integrated Action Plan is an excellent example of successful, guided development.

Labour would ensure that each Town Council has a designated Town Planner and the support of a Local Authority Architect to optimise plan-led, sustainable growth. This approach is also supported by the 2020 report of the Town Centre Living Initiative that recommended the appointment of a Town Centre Officer and/or Management team to drive renewal.

Establish a National Expert Advisory Panel

Towns and villages will need access to expert advice on best practices while rejuvenating their local area. Labour is proposing the establishment of an **Irish Towns Partnership (ITP)**, based on Scotland's Towns Partnership (STP) model. STP was established in 2014 as a national agency and 'go to' body for all those working to support towns in Scotland

recovering from the impact of the recession. STP has become a membership network of over 150 organisations and individuals in Scotland with a stake in their towns, including most local authorities, national and local private and third sector bodies, funding organisations, community organisations, development trusts, and many others.

“The Labour Party would set up an Irish Towns Partnership (ITP) that would be an expert advisory panel to support councils on renewal.

The ITP would act as a centralised body to coordinate planning, advise on best practice, provide access to a collaborative network of contacts and resources, and to raise the profile of towns. The ITP would build on and expand the reach of the established Collaborative Town Centre Health Checks to all small towns in Ireland.

Reignite the Co-operative Model in our Towns

The Co-operative model – first introduced to Ireland in the late 1800's – has flourished in the fisheries and agricultural sector. Under Labour's New Deal, the social enterprise model of co-operatives can be harnessed to support sustainable regeneration of our towns and villages.

The Irish Co-operative Organisation Society (ICOS) defines a co-operative as an enterprise owned and controlled by user members, and operates for the benefit of its user members. Co-operatives place considerable emphasis on the ethos of member benefit, member participation and member loyalty. This enterprise and business model is underused in Irish society outside of agriculture. Essential – and normally privately owned – services such as **childcare, renewable energy, creative services**, and especially **housing** can be locally developed as a co-operative, making it community focussed, economically sound, and democratically controlled. The co-operative model allows entrepreneurs to pool resources, spread risk and split the cost of developing innovative business models.

Cooperative Housing Ireland is an Approved Housing Body (AHB) that works successfully under the cooperative model. Housing services are locally owned and managed. Intertwined is Co-operative Children Ireland where children, parents and staff are treated as equal partners in developing the service. Engagement with the surrounding community here is seen as a crucial in supporting children and families to reach their full potential.

“**Reigniting the Co-operative model across a variety of sectors would boost the revitalisation of our towns and develop new social enterprises.**”

We would support community groups with the tools and knowledge-set to develop their

enterprise under a co-operative model. Each town should be equipped with the means to start a new co-operative by working with their local council and our Irish Towns Partnership to identify a need in their area that can be filled through the development of a co-op. Our objective would be for every town in Ireland to develop at least one new cooperative.

Tackle Derelict and Vacant Units

Derelict sites and vacant buildings have a hugely detrimental impact on the image, social cohesion, and prosperity of our towns and villages. Not only are they unsightly, but they inhibit development opportunities and contribute to a sense of decline. We can kickstart regeneration and support new enterprises by tackling this once and for all through proven models of redevelopment.

“**Derelict and unoccupied buildings were considered a significant problem for 79% of our survey respondents.**”

68% support tax relief to property owners who wish to upgrade their properties from commercial to residential use. An additional 84% believe that the council should be empower and resourced for the compulsory purchase of derelict buildings.

Local Authorities are responsible for dealing with and reporting on derelict and vacant sites in their area. Incentives are needed to actively reduce the number of vacant and derelict sites. We want restored Town Councils to be given the budget, targets, and support to make it easier to adapt and change the use of vacant and derelict sites between commercial, residential, social housing, retail, or community purposes in the best interest of the town. We must break down the existing silos between planning, housing, and economic development departments to facilitate community driven local projects to tackle dereliction.

We are proposing that local councils –

including restored town councils – have the power to increase the derelict sites levy and vacant sites levy so that they are brought back into use. Councils also need financial resourcing so that they are fully empowered for the compulsory purchase of derelict sites and vacant units.

Labour would seek to reduce the commercial rate discounts often granted for derelict sites in town centre areas and we would review the valuation system to look at ways to encourage town centre occupancy. Labour would also increase grants, reduce costs and streamline regulations for the renovation of vacant units into commercial or residential properties. The Living City Initiative must be expanded to cover all town and village centres to encourage the creation and refurbishment of new homes and workplaces.

There are substantial opportunities for funding through the European Structural and Investment Funds (e.g. the ERDF) and supports for green energy and retrofitting that must be

directed to supporting town renewal policies.

The Department of Housing and Local Government must facilitate cross departmental solutions to revitalise urban centres and increase the stock of energy efficient high standard accommodation alongside commercial and retail units creating a mutually beneficial and sustainable model for development of rural towns.

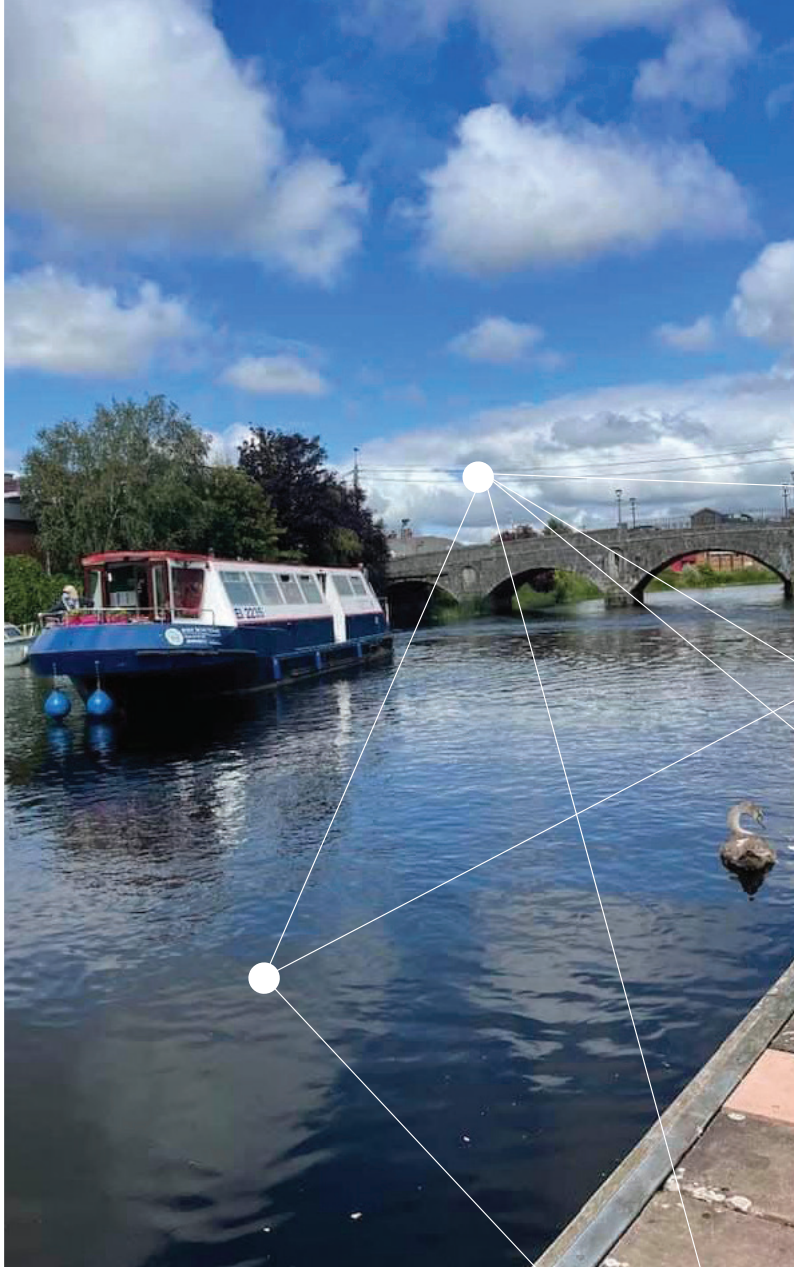
The Derelict Sites (Amendment) Bill 2021 from Seán Sherlock TD seeks to strengthen the hand of local authorities in recouping monies on dereliction where there is a liquidation. It is a crucial reform sought by councils to ensure that the LA is not left holding the bill for works to make derelict sites safe. This is a targeted piece of legislation to deal with a very specific problem of dereliction and not a silver bullet, but all tools at our disposal must be deployed.

The example of Stockton has relevance for our own towns and villages. Turning large empty stores into indoor markets for independent retailers, small producers and

Stockton-on-Tees – repurposing vacant and empty stores

In this northern English town with an industrial past, the council have bought a largely vacant 1970's shopping centre on the high street and it will be demolished and repurposed as a park with a new library and leisure centre. Remaining stores are to be relocated to another shopping centre to backfill empty units there. The new green space will link the town centre to the river and provide new cultural spaces for festivals and events. This will be financed with support from the UK government's Future High Streets Fund. The council has also restored a 25-year vacant theatre that will now host gigs again increasing footfall, and it financed a new town centre hotel. As in Ireland, the decline of British high streets, accelerated during the pandemic with the closure of many large department stores and well-known clothing shops. In Stockton an empty department store was transformed into an enterprise arcade with space available at rates of as low as £10 a day for start-ups. 15 former tenants of the arcade have already moved into larger retail units in the town centre with the support of council grants to refurbish vacant shops.





micro-enterprises with peppercorn rents could be transformative. There is no shortage of case studies or examples of regeneration nor is there a one size fits all solution. Our aim is that councils adopt a well-being approach focused on developing spaces, amenities, and social infrastructure in our town centres that people want to visit, that supports the local community and provides room for enterprises to develop and grow.

Map Urban Dereliction

Under section 8 (Part II) of the Derelict Sites Act 1990, each planning authority is required to maintain a register of derelict sites, including derelict houses and structures, in their respective functional areas. In addition, some planning authorities publish their register online, although this is not required by statute.

Labour would expand the scope of this reporting by requiring councils to map their dereliction rates over time and have it publicly available. Increased and more detailed

reporting on the issue will make it easier to identify prolonged problem areas within the community in relation to dereliction.

Mapping dereliction rate over time will increase transparency and act as a marker of progress as towns work towards rejuvenating their communities.

Labour would ensure Local Authorities are resourced to meet set targets in reducing derelict sites, ensure that this information is available to the public, and subject to review and inspection.

2. Supporting Business, Retailers, and Enterprise in our Towns

Encourage SME Start-ups to Stay Local

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) offer great potential for our towns and villages. OECD data estimates approximately 250,000 active enterprises in Ireland in 2016; 92% of which had less than 10 employees (micro), 6.8% had between 10-49 employees (small), 1.2% had 50-249 employees (medium), and only 0.2% had 250 or more employees (large). SMEs account for as much as 56% of manufacturing employment and 74% of services employment in the country.

Enterprise start-ups vary significantly across Ireland. OECD data shows that start-up rates are most common in Dublin and significantly lower elsewhere, even after adjusting for population differences:

Roscommon	21
Laois	22
Sligo	25
Mayo	25
Tipperary	25
Leitrim	25
Donegal	26
Kerry	28
Longford	28
Kilkenny	28
Monaghan	29
Carlow	29
Wexford	29
Waterford	30
Offaly	30
Cavan	31

Galway	33
Westmeath	34
Kildare	35
Limerick	35
Wicklow	35
Meath	36
Clare	36
Louth	40
Cork	42
Dublin	71

OECD: New company formations per 10 000 population by county (Average 2015-17)

Drastic variations reflect differences in the quality of local entrepreneurship ecosystems across Ireland as some areas are better equipped to offer supports to developing SMEs. Decentralising SME development away from major cities will revitalise Ireland's towns and villages.

“**Our survey found 61% of people believe that there are not enough supports in their town or village to start up a new business.**”

Labour would decentralise SME development by helping towns to become more attractive to entrepreneurs to encourage SME start-ups and growth. Town Councils would have a critical enterprise role in fostering best practise supports.

Empower Youth Employment, Enterprise, and Entrepreneurship

Ireland's youth have been disproportionately affected by the economic strain caused by Covid. As we look towards an economic recovery, we cannot force young people back to insecure, low paid employment; they deserve more. A staggering 71% in our survey believe that it is not easy for young people to start a business.

According to the Department of Social Protection, 477,665 people were in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) on Feb 16th 2021. Of those, 23.64% (112,940) were under 25; the largest age group represented. Under 25s also represented the highest percentage (33.18%) of people receiving the lowest rate of the PUP payment (€203) and had the lowest representation of people (12.81%) of those in receipt of the highest PUP amount (€350). These figures reiterate young people's gross over-representation in low paid, temporary, and insecure employment that was worst hit by the pandemic such as accommodation and food service activities. On 16 February 2021, 111,280 (23.3%) of people from these sectors were in receipt of the PUP.

Young people have a lot to offer in terms of entrepreneurship, enterprise, and innovation, and this potential is currently underutilised. Ireland has the lowest self-employment rates for 20-29 year olds in the OECD at 2.9% compared to around 14% of all working aged adults, despite 40% of Irish youth having the knowledge and skills to start a business; indicative of the lack of support for young talent. We recognise that young people face greater obstacles towards self-employment than older generations due to market and institutional failures, including greater difficulties in accessing resources such as finance and housing.

“Economic recovery needs to stem from supporting our youth, including recent graduates.”

Labour would support small towns to retain young people with supportive youth enterprise and entrepreneurship policies such as:

- » Promoting a dedicated youth support fund to help young adults climb the employment ladder and engage in meaningful employment.
- » Fostering the Co-operative model as an option for young people venturing into enterprise.
- » Launching entrepreneurship programmes to help young people develop transferrable skills that will help them in their career, regardless of whether they go on to start a business.
- » Including entrepreneurship as part of our formal education system and informally through Youth Entrepreneurship Programmes like the GINOP and VEKOP in Hungary.
- » Creating localised networking opportunities that will allow young people to draw on experiences of others and access a wealth of resources.

Support Female Entrepreneurs in Irish Towns

Ireland's untapped potential is female owned businesses. Throughout the EU, women are almost half as likely as men to be involved in starting a new business. According to OECD data, women's self-employment rate in Ireland's towns is around 12% compared to 15% for men. This gap widens in rural Ireland, where women's self-employment rate sits at around 9% compared to 30% for men.



“Female entrepreneurs tend to operate different types of businesses than men, in different sectors, and work fewer hours.

Only 23.3% of self-employed women in the EU had employees in 2018 compared to 30.9% of men. Limitations and differences are explained by many factors, including greater barriers faced in the areas of skills and finance. For instance, female entrepreneurs are only 75% as likely as men to report using bank financing. Unsupportive social attitudes – including poor quality, unaffordable childcare– can also reduce the ambitions and prosperity of women entrepreneurs.

Labour would do more by cultivating women's entrepreneurial aspirations, addressing market failures in the areas of skills and finance, and improving access to networks and support for growth-oriented entrepreneurs.

Labour wants to implement our National Childcare Policy that would ensure universal, publicly provided affordable access to high-quality childcare services.

Support an Online Transition for Local Businesses

Online shopping provides SMEs with access to a wider market without relocating to densely populated cities. The pandemic has accelerated our online shopping and e-commerce. According to 2021 Wolfgang Digital reports, e-commerce revenue for retailers grew by a seismic 159% in 2020. For context, average annual growth between 2017 and 2019 had been 32%. Similar CSO trends saw online shopping for groceries double in March 2020 compared to January.

JP Morgan studies valued Ireland's E-commerce market at €7 billion pre-COVID-19. Regrettably, much of this is not spent supporting Irish business. A 2018 PayPal study on shopper insights across 31 countries showed that Ireland was least likely to shop

domestically – with only 16% of shoppers buying exclusively from Irish sites – and most likely to only buy from abroad at 19%. The remaining 65% of Irish shoppers buy both domestically and overseas. Compared to a Western European Average of 43%, 9%, and 48% respectively, Ireland's online shopping market operates in a unique way that does not support local enterprise. This is fuelled by a lack of choice and unique market types available online from Irish retailers.

Moreover, the OECD shows that Ireland's direct SME export levels are very low by international standards; only about 6% of Irish SMEs directly trade across borders. A high share of existing SME exporters trade only with the neighbouring UK market, although this could be hindered by Brexit.

An online presence for locally based businesses is now more important than ever. A recent report from .IE – the company that manages the Ireland's country online domain .ie – shows that the number of SMEs who invested in an online presence increased from 21% in 2020 to 55% in 2021. The Labour Party wants to ensure that business owners with a physical premise in small towns have the knowledge and resources to compete online.

Supporting businesses to expand into the e-commerce market will help to adjust Ireland's online spending habits to #ShopLocal by increasing awareness and choice of Irish enterprises.

“Through Town Councils, Labour will create 'Town Shopping Sites' such as IntoKildare.ie to provide centralised, accessible information for local businesses and services.

OECD data shows that 55% of the adult population in Ireland have low digital skills, 25% score at or below level one for numeracy, which means they may have difficulty doing basic addition or calculating a bill, and 18%

score at or below level one with reading literacy meaning 521,550 adults struggle with reading a leaflet, bus timetable or medicine instructions. Financial skills and numeracy, along with computer skills, are vital to ensure the success of the entire community, but particularly entrepreneurs looking to make the move online. Town Councils should assess and meet digital literacy needs to support businesses and services who need help setting up an online presence.

Town Gift Card

Innovation is key to thriving regional high streets. Naas Regeneration Group established a first of a kind project in Ireland by collaborating with a gift card company and local businesses to produce a Naas Gift Card Scheme. This creates a closed loop, retaining expenditure and profit within the town as the gift card can only be used in local retail outlets and businesses.

Labour would work with councils and our proposed Irish Towns Partnership to develop a Town Card Gift Card Scheme to support local enterprise and promote revenue within the town.



3. Incentivising Central, Sustainable, and Green Development

Incentivise Town Centre Shops

Approximately 121,000 businesses – roughly 80% of rate-paying businesses – had their local authority commercial rates waived between March and December in 2020 due to the impact of lockdown restrictions. This has been extended into 2021 and has been a vital support. Labour believes that Public Bodies should have to pay commercial rates as this exemption reduces the revenue available to local councils.

Disincentivise Out-of-Town Retail Park Development

The growth of retail parks has damaged small retailers and the sense of community in our towns. Retail parks drive footfall – and therefore revenue – away from town centres home to local SMEs. Known as the ‘Doughnut Effect’, this phenomenon causes activity to rise on the margins of towns, while the town centres and main streets are hollowed out of their commercial activity.

According to the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland (SCSI), there were 202 purpose-built shopping centres throughout Ireland in 2018, with Dublin accounting for a third of the overall stock (32%). Since 2013 there has been very little development in this area. Retail parks offer a product driven experience; however, consumer behaviours are beginning to shift which may lead to the natural decline of retail parks.

“**People are now spending more on experiences than on items in shops.**

Town centres can harness this shift by promoting the array of enterprises and

experiences on offer such as cafés, restaurants, unique retail options, and leisure activities such as beauticians.

Our Acquisition of Development Land (Assessment of Compensation) Bill 2021, would effectively eliminate the ability of land speculators to pocket enormous profits in building such retail parks that drive revenue away from town centres.

Along with an increased levy, Labour would further disincentivise these developments by introducing planning guidelines that restrict the construction of any further out of town retail parks to protect our towns.

Funding for Environmental Sustainability

The economic resilience of our towns is intimately linked to its environmental quality. In general, what is good for the environment is good for the economy in the long term. The same can be said for a local town’s enterprise. Labour would support small Irish towns to reinvent their area and build a reputation of environmental sustainability.

“**Eco-tourism is becoming increasingly influential in holiday planning as people become more aware of their carbon footprint.**

‘Going green’ has huge potential to improve a town’s long-term sustainability, increase tourism prospects, and better the quality of living for all in the community. Ballina, Co. Mayo, implemented a community led initiative aimed at making Ballina Ireland’s Greenest town which proved very successful.

Our Carbon Footprint Labelling Bill 2021



if enacted, would ensure products declare their carbon footprint. Allowing consumers to make informed decisions, this Bill is the future of green consumerism and offers small town enterprise the opportunity to promote their business as a local, clean, eco-friendly part of the community. The introduction of nutritional information on food packaging reduced people's calorie intake by almost 7%; consumer habits will again begin to shift once the carbon impact of goods is known.

Labour would also provide grants and informative supports to help villages, towns, and their businesses grown their sustainability potential.

Festival Week

Festivals offer towns the opportunity to celebrate their unique heritage, history, and future through the engagement of locals and tourists. They offer support to local business, incentives for tourists, and staycation inspiration for others in Ireland. So many towns have taken the initiative to develop a strong annual festival tradition, such as Killaloe and Ballina's Féile Brian Ború festival, the Sligo Jazz Festival, and Cape Clear Storytelling Festival. Covid-19 health restrictions put a halt to many

local festivals and traditions. We look forward to life-after-Covid when locals can reboot their festivals and we will support villages and towns to reignite their traditions.

“ 1 in 5 respondents from our survey felt that new residents did not easily integrate into the community.

Festivals create a unique integration opportunity by celebrating the identity and traditions of locals from a kaleidoscope of backgrounds, while being mindful of the existing local culture and community. West Cork's Castletownbere incorporates interculturalism through their annual Spanish Fest that celebrates the Spanish community who migrated to the town due to its large successful fishing port. The annual festival commemorates the cultural diversity and history of the town.

Through Town Councils, Labour would ensure funding for annual festivals, with an aim for every town and village to have one festival week and monthly 'mini-festivals' where possible such as Fleadh Beag and other celebrations.

4. Making Towns More Attractive and Inclusive Places to Live

Facilitate Remote Working

The Labour Party has consistently been at the forefront of advancing workers' rights, including the right to work remotely where possible. In January 2020, Labour launched Getting Ireland Moving that outlined our plan to cut congestion, promote regional jobs, increase flexible employment, and create liveable communities. Little did we know, the pandemic would accelerate remote and flexible working for the entire country in such a short period of time.

According to the CSO's Labour Force Survey, home or remote working has expanded dramatically due to Covid-19; 28% of workers now consider their own home to be their main place of work, compared to just 5% before the pandemic.

Remote and home working will help small towns and villages to retain educated and talented youth by expanding employment opportunities available to them. Young people who have been worst hit by unemployment during the pandemic now face into a challenging housing market. 2019 Eurofound research saw that young adults aged 25-29 living with their parents in Ireland increased from 36.0% in 2007 to 47.2% in 2017; the largest increase seen in Europe. For 16-24-year-olds, 92.2% lived with at least one parent/guardian in 2019 compared to 80.8% in 2011. Increasing remote working options could allow young people to take up meaningful work in their own hometown where housing options may be more affordable than urban centres.

As we recover from the pandemic, Labour would ensure that those who enjoy and benefit from remote working will be able to continue to do so, particularly for people living in small towns away from industry-based city centres.

Guided Development of Remote Working Hubs

The Government's Rural Development Policy Our Rural Future aims to establish a national integrated network of 400 remote working facilities throughout the country, looking to repurpose local pubs – either completely or partly – as remote working spaces. While Labour supports positive development towards remote working facilities, we believe that more needs to be done to ensure development is evidence based, sustainable, and acts as a central part to local communities, particularly considering the demand; our survey showed that for those who are capable to work remotely, 40% stated that they would utilise a remote working hub if it was available.

Public Service Working Hubs: The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly found that one in four (387,000) private sector workers are capable of successfully working remotely. Towns and villages with a high proportion of remote private sector workers would benefit greatly from Public Service Working Hubs. Labour would work with council areas with a notable amount of private sector workers who have been able to engage with remote working to develop Public Service Remote Working Hubs.

Labour would pilot Public Service Remote Working Hubs in Local Authority areas with 5,000 or more identified remote working public-sector employees. Following implementation and assessment of the pilot, further rollout to smaller communities would be planned. Local Authority areas with 5,000 or more remote working public sector staff identified through the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly report:

- » Dublin City (84,702 remote workable private-sector workers),



- » Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown (39,982),
- » Fingal (34,178),
- » Cork County (29,074),
- » South Dublin (27,614),
- » Kildare (18,475),
- » Meath (14,659),
- » Wicklow (12,887),
- » Limerick City and County (10,555)
- » Cork City (10,333)
- » Galway County (9,739),
- » Louth (8,478),
- » Donegal (8,001),
- » Wexford (7,163),
- » Kerry (6,775),
- » Galway City (6,620),
- » Tipperary (6,396),
- » Clare (6,350),
- » Kilkenny (6,061),
- » Waterford City and County (5,761)
- » Mayo (5,043)

Private and creative Working Hubs: Labour wants to support private sector employees to pursue remote work where possible. Through Local Authorities, Labour would expand the availability of high-quality, affordable, and well-equipped working hubs throughout

small towns, such as Clare County Council's DigiClare initiative. We would ensure there are a variety of hub styles, including Creative Working Hubs – such as Old School in Limerick – to promote varied working options in our towns and villages. Labour would aim to have 30% of the workforce working remotely or partly remotely as we recover from Covid-19.

The following would be central to Labour's Remote Working Hubs development plan. Town Councils can work to determine the best action based on the needs of their local town:

- » **Connection:** create a connective online database that will allow connectivity between hubs and easy access for remote workers.
- » **Stakeholder Engagement:** engage with employers, employees, trade unions, and other stakeholders to best guide local development based on need.
- » **Sustainable Development:** hubs will be developed within key growth areas such as town centres, utilise vacant or derelict buildings where available, and minimise environmental impact through, for example, renewable energy use, high BER building ratings, and energy efficient appliances.
- » Allow for flexible development models to create new hubs or expand on existing working hubs, for example, through a



cooperative model, private investors, or directly through State supports.

- » Locations and equipment used to develop the hubs will be sustainable in the long term both from a running point of view and from an environmental perspective.

Rollout of high-quality Broadband in Rural Areas

High speed and reliable broadband will be central to the success of remote working both in the home and in hubs.

“**Our survey identified that 1 in 4 people living in our towns and villages did not have reliable broadband in their home.**

The European Commission's 2020 country report Ireland shows that although rural Ireland's 'fast broadband' has reached almost 90% (well above the EU average of 52%), ultrafast broadband is only available to 5% of rural premises (well below the EU average of 29%). Overall (including both rural and urban premises), at 56% ultrafast coverage in Ireland is also below the EU average (60%). Along with this, Ireland is also one of the EU's most expensive countries for fixed broadband.

Labour would make the necessary investment

to ensure that high speed Internet is available across rural Ireland as quickly as possible, through what should be a publicly owned network, and we would ensure that access to the Internet is affordable, including for pensioners and other people on low fixed incomes.

Improved Public Transport

Investment in public transport holds numerous advantages to small towns by reducing congestion, reducing pollution, making towns more accessible, and increasing footfall to support local enterprise.

“**62% of survey respondents stated that their town is not well served by public transport to neighbouring towns or larger cities**

There is a clear demand for public transport in our towns and villages; it needs to be developed in a way that is accessible, affordable, adaptable, and sustainable.

Leap Card: The Leap Card is only available on certain services within Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Waterford, Athlone, Kilkenny, Sligo, and Drogheda. Labour will expand the Leap Card across Ireland to make public transport more accessible through affordability.

Green Public Transport: According to the

EPA, transport was responsible for a fifth (20.3%) of Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions; the second highest source of emissions. Public Transport is key to fighting this issue by reducing our dependence on single occupancy cars. We must decarbonise our public transport system. To promote greener travel by bus, the Labour Party would fast-track the delivery of 600 hybrid buses to be rolled out on key commuter routes.

Accessible Public Transport: Public transport needs to be redeveloped through a lens of inclusivity to ensure full access for people with disabilities. The Government must immediately reinstate the Motorised Transport Grant and Mobility Allowance schemes that remain closed after a review was recommended over eight years ago in 2013. This will provide financial assistance to disabled people to access more expensive transport options while public transport remains unsuitable.

In the long term, we are calling for an accessibility audit to be conducted on public transport to identify accessibility issues on all services including pick up points (train stations, bus stops, and so on). Once identified, the Government needs to put in place an accessibility action plan for Ireland's transport system. In tandem with this, the 24-hour notice period required for wheelchair users to access public transport needs to be scrapped through anti-ableist policies. Above all, disability groups and activists need to be consulted, informed, and included in the process of reforming Ireland's transport.

Car Sharing: Car sharing has expanded rapidly throughout the EU in recent years as an alternative to private car ownership. Unfortunately, Ireland has been slow to catchup with the expanding market and has one of the lowest numbers of co-sharing organisations in Western Europe. Car sharing works in conjunction with public transport by reducing issues such as congestion, fuel consumption, and air pollution. In a bid to reduce the reliance on private cars, Labour supports the growth of car-sharing options within Irish towns allowing for a variety of car

sharing models to help meet varied market requirements. Labour also supports the reduction of VAT on car sharing companies to encourage growth in the sector.

Public Bike Schemes: Public bike schemes introduced by the Labour Party have proven to be very successful in Irish cities. DublinBikes in March 2021 expanded to now include hybrid electric bikes, making the scheme more inclusive for people with mobility issues who may struggle, for example, cycling up hill. Labour, through Local Authorities and Town Councils, wants to trial Bike schemes in more towns, with the aim of expanding the scheme across the country over time.

Remove the Red Tape for Developing Community Spaces

We were asked to enjoy an 'outdoor summer' in 2021. People living in our towns and villages deserve the development of – and access to – community green spaces. Our survey provided some interesting insight into the passion of people in developing their local area.

- 48% state that there are not enough community playing facilities available (e.g. sport pitches).
- 83% believe that local authority should provide more community playing facilities and recreational facilities, such as walking/running tracks.
- 75% see litter as a problem.
- 27% believe that their Tidy Town group is not given enough support by the Local Authority.

Respondents identified areas where people feel improvements could be made to the leisure offering of the town. The five most common suggestions were: Better public seating (63%), more outdoor leisure activities (61%), more indoor leisure activities (49%), more outdoor spaces (48%), and increased night-time socialising options (40%).

In a bid to optimise the use of outdoor public space and maximise community engagement,



the Labour Party is calling for measures that will support the development of community gardens:

New Funding System: Community Garden Ireland's National Survey showed that current community gardens sourced funding from a huge variety of sources including County Councils, CLÁR programme grant, SICAP Programme, Community Environment Action Fund, CEAF, CEP, Heritage Lottery Fund, Fundraising, and many more. This is indicative of the huge level of work needed for a community garden to survive. Recent increases from the Department for funding and inclusion of Community Gardens and Allotments was welcome. However, it is only available to specific rural communities in population decline. Labour is calling for a funding scheme specific to Community Gardens and Allotments to be developed and available to all councils.

Long-term Security: 80% of survey respondents in a study by Community Gardens Ireland stated that their licence is

not permanent. Short-term leases limit the success of a community garden; it not only hinders its development, but it can affect the type of additional funding and support available. For example, LEADER funding requires organisations to have at least a 5-year lease; with similar funding requirements for the Farming Biodiversity €1.25 million initiative under the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's Rural Development Programme. Most community gardens and allotments would therefore not be eligible for these schemes. Labour would ensure permits granted to community gardens are long-term and granted with a minimum 10-year lease. Our aim is for each local authority to develop at least one permanent community garden.

Inclusive Pedestrianised Streets

Adapting streets to become more pedestrian friendly puts the needs of the people in our community first. In 2015, Age Friendly Ireland and the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design at the National Disability Authority published a report which examined the

walkability of Irish towns: many older people, wheelchair users, and people with disabilities experienced difficulties navigating footpaths in their towns as they were not in good repair (68%), were not ramped, or easy to negotiate (53%). Some key issues identified in the report showed:

- » Footpath surfaces were uneven and in a bad state of repair (over 70% said they were bad)
- » Footpaths were very often just too narrow
- » Footpaths were not sufficiently ramped, and where ramped, sometimes the ramps were too steep and difficult for wheelchair users to negotiate.

Labour believe that the needs of the community should be prioritised in the development of our streets and footpaths. Our survey showed that 83% of people did not have a pedestrian street only area

“58% think that their town or village would benefit from having more pedestrian only areas.”

Along with this, 67% see that their town or village has disability accessibility issues, such as broken footpaths or other obstacles to movement for wheelchair users. A Universal Design policy is needed to guarantee every town is inclusive to people of all ages and abilities. Labour proposes for towns in Ireland to develop at least one pedestrianised street. Pedestrian streets reduce the dominance of cars within our towns which has an abundance of benefits including increasing footfall, reducing harmful pollutants that affect our environment and health, and reducing traffic congestion in town centres.

Casual Trading

Expanding pedestrian streets and public areas also creates an opportunity for casual traders such as food trucks, coffee vans, craft makers, farmers markets, arts performers, and so many

more areas. Labour wants to sustainably use our public space for self-employed workers and local enterprises.

The Labour Party is calling for a standardisation of casual trading bye-laws across Local Authorities to ensure current and future traders have ease of access to licenses and information both in their own local area and in neighbouring counties. Labour would aim to have at least one regular casual trader market in every town and village in Ireland.

Make Small Towns Inclusive for Older People

Due to improvements in health and quality of life, people in Ireland have longer, healthier lives. It is estimated that by 2041, 22% of the Irish population (c.1.4million people) will be 65 or older. Our aging demographic will have unique needs that we need to prepare to meet; towns and villages need to implement a strategy inclusive of this shift. 54.9% of people who took our survey stated their town or village does not have enough health services available to meet the needs of the community. We need to ensure that smaller towns are a safe place for older people to age.

Labour, in our 2020 General Election Manifesto committed to developing and implementing a national strategy for age-friendly villages, and bespoke retirement villages in larger towns and suburbs, so that older people can enjoy independent living in close proximity to all the shops and services they might require. We want to expand this to ensure our policies are more inclusive to the needs of those living in rural and small towns.

Labour would develop a 'retirement living hub' scheme in towns to allow older people the option of moving away from rural or isolated areas if they choose to do so. The scheme will focus on repurposing vacant sites.



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