



Athlone Public Realm Improvements

Training Webinar - 28 November 2025

Q&A Sheet

Cllr Vinny McCormack

Questions

Responses

Topic: Traffic, Parking & Buy-In from Businesses & Elected Members

Cllr Vinny McCormack mentioned that with good planning, you can both improve the pedestrian experience and facilitate traffic flow. Being conscious that traffic issues can often be major stumbling block with public realm projects, what do you think helped with getting that balance right in Athlone?

Any advice on how to get buy in from businesses when car parking spaces are being repurposed?

Did you have any learnings in bringing on board the business community who came on board with the project?

In any regen project there is no longer the same priority given to vehicles in town cores with more priority given to pedestrians, but you also must be fair to car users and accommodate them. In the first 6 to 8 months after scheme completion, traffic signals were tweaked to optimise town centre junctions and improve traffic flow, while also ensuring priority for pedestrians and cyclists.

Also, Cathaldus' presentation highlighted an Area Based Transport Assessment was carried out for the town which looked at the entire circulation for the town, so it was a whole system approach rather than focussing in on just one street, which is crucial.

The regen team in Westmeath went above and beyond in terms of consultation and bringing people with them and in particular listening to the opinions of the businesses whilst devising the scheme which is crucially important in order to best use local knowledge and factor it into the scheme rather than arriving at their doorstep with a finished scheme with a take it or leave it kind of attitude. You must engage with people and make them feel part of the process and if they are feeding into the process, they'll be more likely to be on board with you. Also important to bring the local elected representatives with you and consult them and keep them on board. Overall, it is important to keep people on board and minimise the risk of people going against the scheme and engaging with the media in a negative fashion.



Lorraine Middleton	
Questions	Responses
<p>Topic: Stakeholder Engagement & Getting Buy-In</p> <p>How did you engage and consult with businesses on the street and was it hard to get their support for the pedestrianisation scheme?</p> <p>Did you have any learnings in bringing on board the business community who came on board with the project?</p>	<p>The key learning here was to get in first and early before hearsay took over. We took a back-to-basics approach – having a human face to the council and making sure businesses know that a decision is not being made in the council building without their input. They are the people directly affected and initially it was an informal door to door, going into businesses and having a chat. Highlighting that funding has been made available to regenerate the street and that the Council are working towards the betterment of the town centre and not to make life difficult for anyone. Having that point of contact and that human face to the Council at the very initial stage so they knew if they had any queries, they could come back to us rather than the rumour mill, so we carried them along with us, keeping them informed right up to the Part 8 process so there were no surprises there. That enabled us to control a positive narrative about what was happening rather than letting misinformation take hold. This good working relationship carried on through to Part 8 and there was a letter of support submitted to the Part 8 from the Athlone Chamber, which was evidence that the scheme had the support of local businesses and useful going into Stage 2 URDF so that money could be drawn down to implement the scheme. That buy in with businesses was carried right through then with Noel and Dermot during the construction stage, which was vital as trusted relationships were maintained with the businesses.</p>
<p>Topic: Impact on Businesses</p> <p>What were the major issues raised by affected business owners? How were they resolved as the scheme progressed?</p> <p>Was there a pushback from the local shop owners in the street because of the construction works might affect their business, how was this mitigated?</p>	<p>The main concerns raised by affected businesses related to the potential for adverse impact on their trading conditions during construction and post completion. We worked closely with them as outlined above, through all stages of the project, and with good communication and responsiveness and inclusiveness with the process, we managed to keep them on board. Specifically, in the design of the scheme, their input was listened to and taken into consideration. During the construction phase, a communications plan was in place which allowed them to raise issues as they arose and liaise with the Council to them addressed.</p>



Lorraine Middleton

Questions	Responses
<p>Topic: Working with Businesses & Councillors Was there much pushback from business owners and local councillors for pedestrianising the street as we have plans to pedestrianise the main street in the town but are receiving massive pushback?</p>	<p>We worked with businesses as outlined above and critically also engaged with local councillors from when the project was in its infancy and focussed on developing relationships with elected representatives and taking a partnership approach rather than just trying to achieve a consensus. Our approach was to work up a number of options for Councillors to consider, giving them the information and support to make an informed decision and allowing them to then choose the best option for the town. This collaborative approach continued right through from inception to design and construction and importantly also post construction review. This way of working has proven to be very successful in Athlone.</p>
<p>Topic: Active Travel Are active travel considerations included in the scheme, i.e. are cyclists permitted to cycle through Mardyke and Sean Costelloe Streets? Are they shared streets?</p>	<p>Yes, active travel is allowed within the scheme. Cycling is permitted, and pedestrians have priority.</p>
<p>Topic: Public Engagement Was there much engagement with the public more generally and not just the business owners as part of the engagement process? Was there a public relations strategy for the project - social media etc - was this in house or externally managed?</p>	<p>Yes – the project was promoted positively with the local media, firstly with a Press Release and then an interview with the local newspaper followed by social media. When we received the architectural illustrations of the scheme, we again promoted these via local press and media in advance of the Part 8. An important step in the public engagement was buy-in from Elected Reps who communicated with positives of the scheme with their constituents and wider public. The PR was managed in-house and the strategy was simple – open lines of communication and a positive stance; essentially a marketing exercise!</p>



Lorraine Middleton	
Questions	Responses
<p>Topic: Disability Needs Did the walkability audits and consultation with the community involve targeted involvement of disability stakeholder groups?</p>	<p>Walkability audits are organised in conjunction with the WCC Community Section and PPN. All disability groups were consulted and involved in the scheme. The Elected Reps took part in the Athlone walkability audit with disability groups, it was a very participative process with ERs using wheelchairs and even blindfolded and guided to better understand the reality of people with disabilities navigating the town. This scheme was undertaken prior to the appointment of a Town Regeneration Officer who now undertakes walkability audits throughout the county in association with disability groups, and parents with young children and prams/buggies.</p>
<p>Topic: Scheme Design Was the scheme designed in-house by Westmeath LA, or was a consultant architect / landscape architect consultant team appointed?</p>	<p>The scheme was designed by McAdam Design Consultancy, which is a multi-disciplinary consultancy with expertise in all relevant disciplines.</p>
<p>Topic: Parking In relation to removing parking from the town centre to facilitate pedestrianisation, did Westmeath County Council provide parking in outer areas of the town to allow people to walk in or how was this managed?</p>	<p>Sean Costello St had a narrow carriageway and two-way traffic with no parking spaces along the actual street itself. The Council did not provide any additional parking spaces as part of the pedestrianisation scheme. The Council does however seek to rationalise parking provision within the town while also allowing for public realm improvements as well as good facilities for pedestrians and cyclists.</p>



Noel Beggan & Dermot Killeen

Questions	Responses
<p>Topic: Dealing with Utilities Did the issue with the combined sewer under the street, which needed upgrade, cause a significant delay with the works and how did you manage this with affected businesses?</p> <p>At what stage would you advise engaging with utilities such as Uisce Eireann and would you have any advice on how to get them on board with your scheme’s timelines and deadlines?</p> <p>What is the best time to do the process of locating existing services?</p>	<p>It didn’t cause too much of a delay to the works programme and as we were still able to keep pedestrian paths open it didn’t have too much of an impact on businesses either.</p> <p>During preliminary design stage is a good time to engage with utilities – ESB, EIR or UE. We recently received planning for the Mullingar Regional Sports Complex and during that process, when you get to an emerging preferred option and know the extents of your site, it’s a good time to bring in the various utilities, have discussion and see if any infrastructure needs to be upgraded and deal with connection inquiries etc at this stage.</p>
<p>Topic: Maintenance Issues Are any maintenance issues arising with the new public realm since it was opened?</p>	<p>One issue which has arisen has been the extent of growth with the new planting, which resulted in reduced visibility for some businesses. This has been addressed by maintaining the planting at a height which allows good visibility of all businesses.</p> <p>Other common issues include chewing gum & vape wrappers sticking to the pavement, which must be dealt with by the town maintenance and cleansing team.</p>
<p>Topic: Business Case How did the design team and council, navigate through the Preliminary and Detailed Business Cases, with respect to the Irish Context, given the lack of Public Realm enhancement (or associated data) for Public Realm projects in Ireland? Is there data available from Westmeath County Council that could be used by other LA's in the development of their PBC / DBCs?</p>	<p>The Design Team engaged an Accountancy Firm to prepare the Business Case. The structure of the Final Business case was as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Context • Assessment of Case for Change • Objectives and Constraints • Identification and Selection of Preferred Option as per OBC and Approval sought • Financial Case • Economic Case • Procurement, Implementation, Management, • Risk Register & Benefits Realisation • Implementation & Monitoring and Evaluation



Noel Beggan & Dermot Killeen

Questions	Responses
<p>Topic: Contract & Cost What was the contract value of the works, and what was the final total cost of the works?</p> <p>Did you experience cost overruns and what did that equate to percentage wise?</p>	<p>Contract value approx. €3.4M.</p> <p>There were some cost overruns due to client instructions and contractor claims.</p>
<p>Topic: Nature Based Solutions Were there many nature-based solutions incorporated into the works?</p>	<p>The corten steel planters are open bottomed meaning that the roots of the landscaping and semi-mature trees can extend down into natural ground. Tree pit under-sailing systems were constructed below semi-mature trees that are not in corten steel planters to allow the roots to spread.</p>
<p>Topic: Emergency Access Noting some of the pictures of the finished scheme, how did the design team navigate emergency service access to the pedestrianised street?</p>	<p>The corten steel planters are positioned to allow access to emergency / maintenance vehicles along Sean Costello Street. The Design Team did an “AutoTrack” analysis to check vehicle swept paths.</p> <p>There is an automatic bollard that can be lowered by pressing a fob. Fobs were provided to the Municipal District at handover.</p>
<p>Topic: Procurement Was green public procurement used?</p>	<p>Natural stone was used. The limestone kerbs were sourced in Ireland.</p>



Cathaldus Hartin

Questions	Responses
<p>Topic: Collaborating Across Administrative Boundaries Similar to a number of towns around the country, Athlone straddles two counties and you have highlighted the importance of that shared vision for Athlone with Roscommon CC – What advice would you have for other Councils who may be struggling to get a shared vision across administrative boundaries?</p>	<p>The most important thing is to build relationships, not just when you want something, but to be engaging with your counterparts on mutual issues, identifying shared challenges. When you engage before you require a particular development, both sides will see mutual benefit and the cooperation becomes much more natural. Important to focus on the lived experience of people who don't care about administrative boundaries. On a practical level, the use of joint committees or working groups with equal representation can help ensure trust and that neither side feels dominated. The approach in Athlone was to try out some strategies such as the first ever joint retail strategy for the town as well as joint economic strategy and joint transport strategy. Each process and outcome built confidence and trust in both sides as we worked together from shared funding streams and with both areas having skin in the game, both were more invested in achieving success. From there it is possible to develop a unified message across the two local authorities.</p>
<p>Topic: Impact on Vacancy & Business Viability Have the public realm improvements over recent years had much impact on reducing vacancy especially with ground floor business units and has there been evidence of an increased uptake in 'living over the shop' as a result of the public realm works? Has the project had an evidence based economic impact / improvement i.e. have new shops opened or existing shops experienced increased business?</p>	<p>Yes, from preliminary findings we've seen an increase in dwell time and footfall, which makes units more attractive to retailers. There's been a significant increase in planning permissions sought in the area with a number of vacant units coming back into use. Public realm alone though rarely solves vacancy issues and other government initiatives are crucial such as the town centre living scheme, the built heritage investment scheme and business support from the LEO for example. As Lorraine mentioned, since the works were completed there has been an uptake in the shopfront enhancement scheme and perhaps that's as a consequence of the confidence that we've shown in the area but ultimately I would say that the most successful schemes typically combine physical improvements with business supports and active business engagement programmes is really what you need to do to get a really successful scheme together is to integrate all of those and there is evidence of that here already.</p>



Cathaldus Hartin

Questions	Responses
<p>Topic: Other Public Realm Projects Are any other public realm improvements projects proposed for Athlone?</p>	<p>Yes, there is a strong pipeline of public realm projects for Athlone, including Market Square, Castle Gardens & Connaught Gardens. Details of these and other public realm projects are available at ... <i>(we will include link to Athlone Urban Design and Regeneration Framework)</i></p>
<p>Topic: Obstacles What were the biggest obstacles to delivering this project?</p>	<p>Getting buy in across a range of key stakeholders can present serious obstacles to delivering such projects. In this instance and as outlined in each of our presentations, we took great care to build relationships with key stakeholders, right from the outset, and adopted a very collaborative and inclusive approach to working with everyone. This continued right through from initial concept to design, planning and implementation as well as post construction follow up. Adopting this approach really paid dividends and allowed us to address issues as they arose and ensure that they did not develop in obstacles.</p>
<p>Topic: Anti- Social Behaviour Has there been an increase in anti-social behaviour with the covered outdoor picnic tables?</p>	<p>To date there has been no evidence of any significant anti-social behaviour associated with the public realm improvements or outdoor tables and seating.</p>



General

Questions

Responses

Topic: Funding Sources

There is a lot in this webinar that is food for thought, especially around collaboration. Our town has grown over the 15,000-population mark so we cannot avail of Town and Village renewal funding. What funding streams should we focus on to try to get projects moving?

The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) supports regeneration in large towns and cities. More information at ... <https://www.npf.ie/urdf/>

Where projects include active travel measures, funding may be available from the National Transport Authority. More information at ... <https://www.nationaltransport.ie/planning-and-investment/transport-investment/>

Where projects include the restoration of heritage buildings in urban areas, funding may be available through THRIVE – the Town Centre First Heritage Revival Scheme. More information available at ... <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-housing-local-government-and-heritage/press-releases/thrive-projects-announced-90-million-government-eu-co-funding-awarded-to-restore-derelect-heritage-buildings-in-urban-areas/>