



To: Chief Executives, City and County Councils
Directors of Services for Economic Development and/or Planning for each City
and County Council
Senior Planners, City and County Councils
Directors of Regional Assemblies
Office of Planning Regulator
An Bord Pleanála

Circular Letter: NRUP 01/2022

11/02/2022

A Chara,

Launch of the Town Centre First Policy

I am requested by Mr. Peter Burke T.D., Minister of State with responsibility for Local Government and Planning, to bring to your attention the recent launch of the '*Town Centre First – A Policy Approach for Irish Towns*'– the Government's overarching strategy for the renewal and regeneration of Irish Towns.

The development of a Town Centre First (TCF) policy is a priority commitment of the *Programme for Government - Our Shared Future*, and the TCF Policy was published on 4th February 2022. The policy was developed jointly by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) and Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), with input from an interdepartmental group and a broadly based advisory group, including representation from the local government sector.

Town Centre First supports a more strategic and co-ordinated approach to the regeneration of Ireland's town centres. It includes a particular focus on measures to



tackle vacancy and dereliction, to create more vibrant and viable places, through greater occupancy for residential purposes and to encourage more business and footfall. The policy sets out 33 Actions to progress the regeneration of towns and can be viewed at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/473d3-town-centre-first-policy/>

Significant elements of the TCF policy include:

- **National Town Centre First Office:**

Supported by DHLGH and DRCD, this Office is being established by the CCMA and LGMA to co-ordinate and drive Town Centre First actions and engagement at a national level. The Office will also be a forum for best practice and provide capacity building for Town Teams, a Health Check Programme and other resources, as well as funding information and best practice models for developing Town Centre First plans;

- **Town Regeneration Officers:**

A network of Town Regeneration Officers (TROs) will be funded in local authorities at a senior level, to lead Town Centre First implementation and to liaise with the National TCF Office. Their role will include supporting local Town Teams in the preparation of TCF Plans, assisted by the wider local authority;

- **Town Centre First Plans:**

These will be non-statutory community level plans produced by local Town Teams, drawn from local community and business representatives, with the support of the local government sector. They will identify challenges, actions and integrated responses across a number of themes (such as business/commercial; community/cultural; housing; built environment; heritage). TCF plans will be action and project-orientated in nature and will assist towns in accessing funding and investment available for town regeneration across a number of government departments and agencies.



- **New Housing in Towns:**

Town Centre First recognises that an increased focus on housing in towns will be a critical part of their regeneration - providing homes for people close to local services and amenities. TCF identifies that there is potential to re-purpose existing underutilised buildings and sites to provide new housing. There will be specific new measures including funding schemes, to tackle vacancy and dereliction of existing buildings and to convert them into new homes.

Future URDF Call for Proposals:

It is intended that there will be a third call for proposals for the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF), in the second half of 2022. This will include proposals specifically focused on implementation of the Town Centre First Policy. Local authorities will be further informed on the details of this call in the coming months.

Current RRDF Call for Proposals:

It is also highlighted that there is a current 'live' call for proposals by the Department of Rural and Community Development as part of the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF), the closing date for which is 29th April 2022.

Statutory Plans and TCF

It will be important for there to be a strong interrelationship between the content of a TCF plan and the relevant statutory plans (e.g. development plans and local area plans). This integration should work both ways, meaning for example that the objectives and policies of the development plan may provide the strategic policy basis that is the impetus for a Town Centre First Plan. It may also be the case that the TCF First Plan will inform town development policies to be expressed in statutory plans.

Both approaches to alignment between the TCF Plan and statutory plans are critical to ensure that there are complementary initiatives and strategies to regenerate towns, while recognising that the TCF Plan may be focused on a specific core area and be more related to community and economic development, implementation, and investment.



Development Management and TCF

For the purposes of clarity, it is advised that for TCF objectives to be relied upon by planning authorities or An Bord Pleanála when exercising decision making functions for development management purposes, they must be included in a statutory plan, i.e. where environmental assessment and public participation form part of the statutory plan process, or alternatively, environmental assessment and public participation must have been undertaken as part of the TCF Plan.

The next steps in the TCF process are to establish the National TCF Office and to progress putting the network of TROs in place. Work on town regeneration that has recently been undertaken or is ongoing, should of course continue and is a critical point of reference for consideration of how implementation of the Town Centre First policy can be given effect through the development of TCF programmes at local level.

Further queries to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in relation to Town Centre First Policy should be addressed to Stewart Logan, Senior Planning Adviser Stewart.Logan@housing.gov.ie

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Hogan', is written over a horizontal line.

Paul Hogan

Chief Planning Adviser

Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage