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Theoretical Town Centre Management Framework: Setting the Agenda for a Sustainable Future

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the current Town Centre Management [TCM] practices within Ireland's rural towns since the abolition of Town Councils in 2014. This new study finds that Ireland's approach to TCM is much more complicated and multifarious, with varying practices across the samples. The findings highlight a fractured TCM partnership between the private sector (Retailers, Volunteering Groups, Citizens, and Business Owners) and the public sector (Local Government). This paper also presents findings that despite respected recommendations from semi-state bodies to drive town centre management by local 'dynamic leaders', no model has been developed to attract, support and retain such a person. This post-positivistic study with a descriptive qualitative design was drawn from a series of in-depth interviews with significant key stakeholders across a stratified sample of rural towns with experience in TCM practices. The results that emerge facilitate a theoretical management framework as a guide for town centre stakeholders to analyse the unique elements of their situation and implement a strategy towards a TCM scheme. This research demonstrates that TCM with the right leader (Town Manager/CEO) and support from local government is a viable solution to ensure the sustainability of our towns in rural Ireland.

Keywords

Town Management, Town Centre Rejuvenation, Rural Small Towns

Introduction

It is well documented that recent changes to the landscape of rural Ireland have significantly impacted town centres' commercial vitality and viability, and few would disagree that "healthy and vibrant town centres are important for the nation and its constituent communities" (Findlay and Sparks, 2009, p. 7). In an environment of a weakened rural economy and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, scholars and policymakers are increasingly looking at TCM schemes as an innovative solution to the rejuvenation of Ireland's rural town centres [IRTCs]. TCM as a concept has existed internationally for nearly thirty years with an array of contributions from academics and practitioners from disciplines such as place marketing, sustainable development, community engagement, placemaking, town centre regeneration and public-private partnerships (Coca-Stefaniak *et al.*, 2009; CocaStefaniak, 2012; Horgan and Dimitrijević, 2019; Medway *et al.*, 2000; Warnaby *et al.*, 1998; Whyatt, 2004; Zenker and Erfgen, 2014). At its core, TCM has gained global recognition as a mechanism for rejuvenating

urban centres (McAteer and Stephens, 2011). Towns in rural Ireland have been faced with many challenges over recent years, notably through the regression of traditional industries and associated job losses; through the emigration of many educated young people; through poor connectivity in terms of transport and telecommunications infrastructure; local government reforms; an increase of vacant buildings; the legacy of out of town shopping centres; consumer confidence; demographic changes; online shopping; and a lack of volunteers (Dept of Rural Affairs, 2017; Farrell, 2018; McAteer and Stephens, 2011; Ó Hadhmaill *et al.*, 2016; Retail Consultation Forum, 2017; SCSI, 2018).

Preceding 2014, Ireland adopted a highly publicly funded and formal structure of TCM (Coca-Stefaniak *et al.*, 2009) through a second tier of local government, namely Town Councils. In 2014, the Local Government Reform Act 2014 [LGRA14] was introduced, which brought about the abolition of 80 Town Councils and created a new standardised sub-county system of local government (Callanan, 2018; Quinlivan, 2017). According to Ó Hadhmaill *et al.* (2016, p. 15), the Act's principal objective was to provide greater alignment 'between local government and local development systems and agencies, particularly community and voluntary sector bodies'. Overnight implementing such reforms was the most significant change in structures, functions, operational arrangements and governance in the Irish local government system (Hall *et al.*, 2016), leading to the most noteworthy change in Ireland's approach to town management. According to Rylands *et al.* (2016, p. 9), the removal of Town Councils has led to a loss of stakeholder knowledge and civic engagement and that "significant changes in the modus operandi of local representation and rural development occurred". Howlin (2018a, p. 12) argues that the new tier of local government introduced with the LGRA14 "does not have the dedicated focus on town development that is required". There has been strong support for the restoration of Town Councils in response to the growing concern for Ireland's rural towns resulting in the Bill, *The Local Government Restoration of Town Councils Bill*. According to English (2017), along with opposition leaders, the Bill is premature, and if Town Councils were re-established, the flaws and weaknesses in managing towns that gave rise to their dissolution would return.

This research begins with an investigation into current TCM practices in Ireland since the removal of Town Councils in 2014. The paper then discusses the findings from the qualitative research conducted to explore the experiences of significant town stakeholders who have experience in TCM practices in Ireland. The result is multiple perspectives on the current methods of TCM in Ireland and various insights into the levels of public participation with

local governments. The study concludes with its aim to understand further how TCM can aid the development of rural Ireland.

Town Centre Management

TCM has been defined as the “search for competitive advantage through the maintenance and/or strategic development of both public and private areas and interests within town centres, initiated and undertaken by stakeholders drawn from a combination of the public, private and voluntary sectors” (Warnaby *et al.*, 1998, p. 17). The management model emerged in the 1980s as a comprehensive response to competitive pressures (Cook, 2008; Hogg *et al.*, 2004), with the first UK town centre manager in 1987 (Wells, 1991). The core responsibilities of many TCM schemes in their early stages mainly were ‘janitorial’ (Cook, 2009; Grail *et al.*, 2019; Warnaby *et al.*, 2004); however, as time progressed, TCM became characterised in many locations by a more long term, overtly strategic perspective (Warnaby *et al.*, 2004), encompassing management of the retail mix and place marketing & promotional activities (McAteer and Stephens, 2011; Whyatt, 2004). A wide variety of TCM partnership types exist, such as Business Improvement Districts, Voluntary Community Schemes, Chamber of Commerce Schemes and Trader Led Schemes and the balance of power and influence between public and private sectors varies between individual schemes (Coca-Stefaniak *et al.*, 2009).

Town Centre Management: An Irish Perspective.

Ireland’s Rural Towns [IRTCs] are central to the development of local economies and provide various benefits to communities such as retailing, housing, entertainment and a mix of civic, administrative, and professional services (McAteer and Stephens, 2011; Ó Hadhmaill *et al.*, 2016). Very often, towns experience periods of growth, counterbalanced with periods of decline (Balsas, 2004), as was evident in 2008, with the banking crisis in Ireland. Rural town centres have been significantly affected by the recent economic downturn, and ‘the impact has been felt throughout Ireland with increasing vacancy rates and a decline in the vibrancy of many rural communities’ (SCSI, 2018, p. 1). According to Ó Hadhmaill *et al.* (2016) and SCSI (2018), ensuring the vitality and long term function of Irish towns is critical to ensure vibrant rural communities and making towns better places to live, work in and visit. Rejuvenating the vitality and viability requires a collaborative effort between private stakeholders that have a vested interest in the town (retailers, communities, special interest groups, property owners, police force, residents, local employers) and public stakeholders (Local Government) (McAteer and Stephens, 2011; Whyatt, 2004).

Ireland's current TCM schemes are defined under the category of "the public-informal scheme" (Coca-Stefaniak *et al.*, 2009, p. 78). This category is often a retailer-led scheme that relies heavily on the support and public funds from Local Government to champion initiatives. Coca-Stefaniak (2014, p. 78) considers this scheme "to be an effective and genuine way of improving the town's vitality and viability in terms of improved quality of life, community empowerment, the robustness of decision-making, place attachment, place identity and community pride". Studies demonstrate that Local Governments possess an array of statutory and non-statutory powers, which they can deploy to promote town centre revitalisation, but their use is inconsistent and often not sufficiently focused on issues affecting the vitality and viability of town centres (Quin *et al.*, 2019). According to Quinlivan (2017), the abolition of Town Councils has removed local decision making from the hands of individual towns, and the Municipal upscaling occurred with little debate and has created a loss of stakeholder knowledge and civic engagement. Murphy (2019, p. 19) believes "that there is a clear need to redress the democratic deficit related to the 2014 abolition of Town Councils . . . with a reconfigured sub country form of government with revenue powers to reanimate local government from the ground up". Ireland's current and historical approach to TCM is multifaceted and, as with most international TCM schemes is, "far from reaching a stage of homogenisation" (Coca-Stefaniak *et al.*, 2009, p. 79). Ireland has predominantly remained steadfastly dependent on volunteers anchoring retail-focused strategies. Research conducted by the Retail Association of Ireland and the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland both argues in favour of a more formalised strategic approach to town management as a mechanism to ensure the vitality and viability of our towns remain sustainable (Retail Consultation Forum, 2017; SCSi, 2018).

Heritage Ireland, RGDATA (Retail Grocery Dairy & Allied Trades Association), and the Retail Consortium are piloting an initiative that aims to "develop an innovative town centre-led retail, cultural heritage and tourism baseline, which will be recognised internationally as a best practice collaborative development model for regeneration" (Heritage Council, 2017, p. 1). Early findings of the scheme are positive and have proven invaluable to the ten pilot towns that took part in the study (Heritage Council, 2017); however, the project does not account for an individual such as a CEO or Town Manager (Hogg *et al.*, 2004), as opposed to a town team, who is accountable to develop and action a strategic vision based on a town health check. Studies have demonstrated that town health checks can drastically change in a short period due to "the vast majority of town centres being subject to global, regional, national and local socio-economic trends that will ultimately affect consumer behaviour and business, regardless of the size of the location (Coca-Stefaniak, 2013, p. 21). The need to collect data that can be translated

into Key Performance Indicators [KPIs] is fast becoming an integral part of the job function of “town managers as external stakeholders increasingly require this information in order to justify their continued existence”(Hogg *et al.*, 2004, p. 317).

Business Improvement Districts [BIDs] are now legislated by Local Government in Ireland as a recognised formal scheme for TCM. BIDs, in respect of place management, are regarded as a “precursor to what works” (Peel and Lloyd, 2008, p. 195) and are viewed as a means of overcoming some of the inherent problems arising from the mostly voluntary nature of stakeholder participation in TCM (Cotterill *et al.*, 2019; Medway *et al.*, 2000). There are five¹ BIDs in Ireland: Dublin, Dundalk, Dún Laoighre, Sligo and Sandyford, and their performance as a TCM model in Ireland is under-researched with little or no academic studies conducted. This current paper does not focus on BIDs as a place management model, as the emphasis of this study is on small rural places in Ireland. All five BIDs are located in areas that are densely populated and outside the scope of this research.

Methodology

This post-positivistic study with a descriptive qualitative design was drawn from a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews. Due to the geographical locations and time limitations, the researchers chose to conduct ten face to face interviews and one pilot interview.

After an extensive review of the relevant literature, two pertinent themes emerged:

- *Theme A: Ireland's current approach to town management.*
 - Respondents were asked to address the current social and economic status of their towns and strategy taken to ensure a vibrant and viable town centre.
- *Theme B: Past and current performance of local government.*
 - This theme explores the historical performance of Ireland's previous approach to TCM, Town Councils, and whether there is local support for reinstatement. This theme also focuses on the level of public participation in local government decisions or activities relating to town rejuvenation.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed utilising Nvivo X10.

Town Sample

The study involved a theoretical sampling of 10 town locations purposefully selected for homogenous delimiting criteria. Irish towns are vast and vary in characteristics and makeup.

¹ Five at the time of research. Current four now in 2020. Dún Laoighre was not renewed.

To achieve homogeneity and remove bias in a chosen sample, a criterion was developed (summarised in Table *i*), and a final sample was selected summarised in Table *ii*.

Table i Town Sample Criteria Summary

CRITERION	Justification	Source	Result
1. Starting Population	The total population size of towns and villages in Ireland was the starting point.	(CSO, 2016)	873 Towns
2. Population count between 5000 – 1000 people	The Local Government Bill 2018, for the restoration of Town Councils, states that the qualifying areas would be dwellings occupied by at least 5,000 residents (Howlin, 2018b). Towns chosen had a minimum population of 5,000, and to reduce the sample size further, a maximum population of 10,000 was applied. The researchers were also conscious of a recent report from the <i>Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland</i> [SCSI], whose recommendations relate only to towns with a population of less than 10,000.	(CSO, 2016)	40 Towns
3. Previously had a Town Council.	To generate a sample that has experienced the phenomenon of Town Councils before their disbandment in 2014, the sample had to have a Town Council before 2014.	(Government of Ireland, 2014)	22 Results
4. Political Representation	To avoid any political bias, any town represented by a current minister in the government (January 2018) was eliminated from the sample.	(Gov.ie, 2018)	19 Results
5. Close Proximity to City	The literature demonstrates that the proximity to major urban areas has a positive economic effect on towns in Ireland (O'Donoghue <i>et al.</i> , 2017). The final criterion applied was the proximity to the five central boroughs. To reduce the sample down to ten, those furthest from the five central boroughs were selected	(Google Maps)	10 Results

Table ii Final Town Sample

	Population between 5000 - 10000	Previous Member Town Council	Closest City	Distance Kilometres	Current Political Constituency
Ballinasloe	6662	YES	Galway	60.7	No
Bandon	6957	YES	Cork	31.5	No
Carrick-on-Suir	5771	YES	Waterford	28	No
Dungarvan	9227	YES	Waterford	45.7	No
Edenderry	7359	YES	Dublin	59.4	No
Fermoy	6585	YES	Cork	36.7	No
Gorey	9822	YES	Dublin	81	No
Nenagh	8968	YES	Limerick	42.7	No
Thurles	7940	YES	Kilkenny	47.8	No
Youghal	7963	YES	Cork	48.7	No

Participant Sample

A “clearly defined target population” (McGivern, 2013, p. 348) was chosen for this qualitative research study. The definition of this population was ‘influential stakeholders to town development’. A theoretic sampling approach was adopted, and the influential stakeholders were chosen based on their relevance to the research problem (Wisker, 2008). These significant stakeholders would include chamber presidents, tidy town project managers, business forum leaders, and medium-large enterprise owners. As with the town sample, the sample selection included only those who have experienced the phenomenon. For this research, the sampling criteria for participants were as follows:

- Actively involved in their towns for more than eight years. 4 Years before the removal of Town Councils and four years working with existing municipal councils.
- Actively involved in their towns at a senior level in either a private or voluntary capacity.
- Did not previously hold any political positions within their town, namely the position as Mayor.

Procedure

Suitable candidates were recruited, and each respondent was provided with an email invitation to participate in the research, which included both details of the project and a consent form.

Table 3 outlines the demographics of each participant, representing the minimum requirements of the criteria sought. Information is limited due to anonymity sought by some participants. One limitation within the selection process was the gender imbalance. 70% of participants were

male. Significant efforts were made to correct the imbalance, but the researchers were unsuccessful due to restrictions in time.

Table iii Participant Demographics

Participant Reference	Stakeholder Position in Town	Professional Role	Gender	Total Years Experience in Phenomena	Experience with Town Councils	Experience with Municipal Councils	Consent
P1	Chairperson of Business Association	Business Owner and Landlord	M	30	Yes	Yes	Y
P2	Company Manager of Enterprise Centre	Company Manager	F	11	Yes	Yes	Y
P3	Chairperson of Business Association	Business Owner	M	14	Yes	Yes	Y
P4	Managing Director of Business Association	Managing Director	F	13	Yes	Yes	Y
P5	Chairperson of Chamber of Commerce	Barrister	F	18	Yes	Yes	Y
P6	Project Manager of Tidy Towns	CEO	M	35	Yes	Yes	Y
P7	Chairperson of Business Association	CEO	M	11	Yes	Yes	Y
P8	President of Chamber of Commerce	Business Owner	M	24	Yes	Yes	Y
P9	President of Chamber of Commerce	Business Owner	M	25	Yes	Yes	Y
P10	President of Chamber of Commerce	Business Owner	M	27	Yes	Yes	Y

Research Findings

Theme A - Ireland's current approach to town management revealed the following categories:

1. *Economic Imbalance between Rural Towns and Five Main Boroughs*

The economic conditions category is consistent with the literature (O'Donoghue *et al.*, 2017) that despite Ireland's economic recovery, the impact is not being felt in rural Ireland compared to five central boroughs. Participants [P] attributed this to lack of parking and traffic congestion (30%), town infrastructure projects (40%), loss of Foreign Direct Investment [FDI] jobs (50%), flooding, which resulted in road closures (10%), the prevalence of German supermarkets (20%), out of town shopping centres (40%), increased overheads and insurance rates (40%), lack of tourist accommodations (40%) and online shopping (60%). Participant 8 suggested that these varying factors have had an insurmountable effect on the traditional retail model and believed that:

[. . .] those of us who are left in the retail sector are feeling almost like we are an endangered species. I feel we are probably the last generation of the shop keeper/owners.

The research supports the findings of the Retail Consultation Forum (2017), who contend IRTC are overly reliant on retail-led strategies. Despite the general opinion that retail was a struggling industry in IRTC, 50% of participants were optimistic that town centres would be replaced with more service industries and should "become a focal social space" (P1) for the local community. It was evident that state-owned companies were also conflicted between adhering to government values and consumer trends with participant 9, claiming that:

[. . .] they are not going to close the Post Office . . . but they are willing to move it down to the shopping centre outside of town . . . it is entirely against government policy and not in line with the 2040 plan to protect the rural town.

This study demonstrated the consequences (30% of the samples) of the loss of FDI, with one interviewee stating that they “went into recession in the early 2000s because we lost over two thousand manufacturing jobs” (P10). Two participants contested that a ‘build it they will come’ approach is required to attract FDI, with participant 7 arguing:

[. . .] what we have lacked in this county has been buildings to attract large multinationals . . . if units can be built and made available to commercial entities so that they are not just flying in from the US looking at a greenfield.

Participants (70%) reinforced previous studies stating tourism is a viable economic opportunity for rural Ireland. Participants (20%) noted that tourism campaigns led by central government have proven successful; however, there “is a shortage of accommodation” (P4), and towns cannot keep up with the demand. Interviewees (30%) were critical of state bodies carrying out workshops aimed at benchmarking prosperous tourism towns, with P8 claiming that these seminars are not fit for purpose:

[. . .] A lot of the presentations we have received always talk about towns that work and towns that have economic activity and vibrancy, but they are on the Wild Atlantic Way. They are tourist traps. . . I walk through our own town centre, and we have something entirely different.

Participant 8 was the only candidate that referred to the evening and night-time economy. The participant believed that “when six o’clock comes, it becomes a shutter town and they need some culture after six o’clock that attracts people”. When asked were they aware of the Purple Flag accreditation (ATCM, 2019), the participant admitted they were not.

2. Significant Lack of Town Strategies and Representation

Seventy percent of participants concurred with the literature (Retail Consultation Forum, 2017) that a core group of stakeholders are required to come together to develop a town centre development plan. There were contrasting current approaches to producing such a program. P7 and P9 were unaware of any current town plan, and P4 was “waiting to do a new one and will not be officially done until 2021”. Participants maintained that the ‘local area plan’ template developed by the Municipal Council was too broad to honestly assess the strengths and opportunities of individual towns, with participant five stating:

[. . .] there is no policy to look at the value of the town or to look at how economically it fits within the county. . . if you look at the local area plan, it is a set of paragraphs and statements that are so broad that anything can occur.

Participant two's approach was unique, where an independent place management consultant company was recruited to complete a town audit. The results of the audit acted as a starting point to develop a town strategy. Key performance indicators [KPIs] were set to measure the success of the plan on subsequent examinations. The candidate, however, indicated that despite achieving the short-term goals, they are:

[. . .] struggling with the long-term plans because we need the Council's support and backing. . . It is the more important project items that we cannot do from the bottom up; it needs to be from the top down.

When asked whether their towns had an official representative, all 10 participants confirmed that no one person acted in an official capacity as a town's spokesperson. The role was currently being conducted by business associations, local councillors, municipal chief executive officer [CEO], or the chamber of commerce president. This study cannot validate current recommendations (Retail Consultation Forum, 2017) to recruit a volunteer 'local champion' who actively drives town centre initiatives. Participants were sceptical of a town champion due to accountability of the position, availability of time and possible resentment and cynicism from other town stakeholders. This new study also refutes the recommendations of Murphy (2019) in supporting legislative changes to facilitate directly elected Mayors. Forty percent of participants contend that the position would be politically influenced and, despite the historical and nostalgic connotations with the reinstatement, do not see the long-term value to the town.

In line with the literature (Retail Consultation Forum, 2017; SCSi, 2018), 30% of participants recommended the appointment of a person, who has a strong understanding of place management, to drive positive change in IRTC. Participant 2 argued that "the ideal situation is to have a town manager". Participant 3 also supported a town manager but had some reservations relating to a government-led 'Town Manager Scheme'. They contended that introducing a town manager accountable to the CEO of the Municipal Council would be counter-productive and only exacerbate current problems.

Participants (20%) substantiated the significant positive effects that Emergency Social and Economic Groups [ESEG] have had on the viability and vitality of IRTC, with Participant 10 stating that "it has been hugely advantageous to the town". The ESEG was set up before the

LGRA14 and remained as part of the reform. The committees were made up of members from Fáilte Ireland, IDA, Local Enterprise Board, councillors, councils, business associations, community-based organisations, landlords and “it is an all-inclusive body of all different areas of the town” (P10). The ESEG appointed a Town Development Officer, a salaried position, who reports to the town team and “follows up on any strategic actions decided at the meetings. . .and they also solely concentrate on drawing down funding for the town” (P10). This appointment is in line with recent recommendations (Retail Consultation Forum, 2017; SCSL, 2018).

3. Overly Reliant on Volunteers for Town Development

In line with Farrell (2018) and O'Connell (2019) compelling arguments, this study confirms that rural towns depend on policies driven by dedicated groups of local volunteers. Sixty percent of participants believe people are still committed to sacrificing their valuable time to better towns and communities. However, participants discussed a diminution of volunteers for varying reasons such as the lack of support from local and central government, reduction in peoples time, lack of motivation, reduction in funding, and an overly complicated funding procedure. Participant 2 believed the sector was “struggling more because they do not see any light at the end of the tunnel for long-term projects”.

Due to the decline in volunteer applications, there was a “danger that people who may not be competent . . . may hold a position which they are not doing very well and because of the nature of the sector nobody wants to confront that issue” (P1). This study is consistent with the literature emphasising the threat of engaging in advocacy work (Ó Hadhmaill *et al.*, 2016) and the need to challenge flawed practices of the State, namely authoritarianism and censorship of voluntary organisations (Havery, 2014). This study attests that there is a serious challenge ahead for the local government to regain the sector's trust. According to Participant 4, volunteers were becoming frustrated and felt they could not pull anymore from them, stating that they are “struggling more because they do not see any light at the end of the tunnel”.

4. Town Funding – Overly Complicated and Questions on Value for Money.

In line with previous studies (Murphy, 2019; Quinlivan, 2017), participants (70%) claimed that subsequent to the LGRA14, local public spending has reduced significantly. Participants agreed that the volunteering sector should be accountable for the funding it receives, ensuring value for public funds, despite comments of frustrations. Candidates (50%) contested that the lack of funding was due to the lack of information, lack of resources and an overly complicated

application procedure. A significant insight and in line with Ó Hadhmaill *et al.* (2016) is how volunteer groups were “applying for everything, and it was beginning to pay dividends” (P1). Participant 6 outlined a haphazard approach to funding and demonstrated that there was no evidence of a ‘need for funding’ culture:

[. . .] we found out over the last twelve months basically how to play the game and fill as many forms as possible. I will apply for anything.

Forty percent of participants believed the most significant impact of the LGRA was the lack of a “level playing field” (P1) with the distribution of funds. As part of the reforms within local government, funds generated by the town were collated at the county level. Forty percent of the interviewees attributed their success to securing funds to having a dedicated person responsible for coordinating all funding applications. Participants (30%) relied on the Council to complete applications but argued that “nobody was driving it in the council” and submissions were “completed chaotically and very unclear” (P2).

There were examples of public finances misused due to lack of oversight, project management, misallocation of funds, and tender outsourcing. One interviewee referred to, in their opinion, was “a hundred thousand euro that was spent, but you cannot see a hundred thousand of works completed” (P4). The participant attributed this to a lack of project management and a “cowboy who was given the contract through public procurement because he came in at the lowest tender” (P4). Despite the merits of making the voluntary sector more accountable by central government policies, there was clear evidence that this was not fit for purpose. One participant, who was project manager of the Tidy Towns, was influential in securing a grant for one hundred and twenty thousand euros for a blueway project. Despite the Tidy Towns applying for the grant and being accountable on paper for how those funds were spent, they were not involved in the project. Participant 6 stated that:

[. . .] they saw (Local Government) that there was a hundred and twenty thousand that they did not use by the end of the year and just decided to put in this footpath before the year closed out. And they lied about it.

Theme B - The past (Town Councils) and current performance of the local government (Municipals) as a contributor to town rejuvenation revealed the following themes:

1. Town Council Restoration in Previous Guise not Supported

This study has refuted what has become a populist ideology (English, 2017) amongst government representatives in the restoration of Town Councils. There were divided opinions

on the restoration of Town Councils; however, 90% of participants fervently contended that they would not restore Town Councils in their previous guise. 50% of participants would not restore, 20% would restore, and 30% had mixed opinions.

In line with previous studies (Turley *et al.*, 2018), the abolition of Town Councils happened within the context of public service cost reduction. Participants (50%) believed this was a justified action, referring to Town Councils as a drain on financial resources, with one interviewee describing “Town Councils as talking shops that physically were not doing anything” (P10). Some participants believed it was a logical cost-cutting exercise but agreed with the literature (Quinlivan, 2017) that there was a lack of debate surrounding the disbandment. In line with O’Ferrall (2016), participants (60%) believed that the most significant impact of Town Councils was the loss of local town knowledge. Other effects included a focus on larger, more substantial projects, cutbacks in town cleanliness and maintenance, reduced funding, and less transparency.

2. Politics acts as a barrier to Town Rejuvenation.

Stakeholders (50%) believed that Town Councils, in their later years, had become “political animals” (P6) and not focused on the long term development of regions. It was suggested that the motivation to restore Town Councils was politically driven, with participant 10 stating:

[. . .] the reason the parties are looking to bring back the Town Councils is because they want foot soldiers on the ground . . . so when elections came, they could orchestrate the locals to get out and start canvassing for them.

There was evidence that politics still acted as a barrier to town development plans despite, according to participants (30%), there are “fewer representations at the moment per population” (P10). Participant 5 believed that there are

[. . .] great representatives out there with great ideas. . .but it is too politically driven, and you should have specific qualifications that allow you to be able to understand policies.

According to Participant 2, there has been a significant sway in people voting for smaller independent parties. From their experience, however, such a candidate, once elected, cannot form any real change, as they lack the number of allies within the district. They contended that independent candidates experienced frustrations around implementing any policy change due to:

[. . .] the major parties have the majority of the councillors in the districts, so if they want to get everyone to agree to get something pushed forward, they do not have the allies to rally support (P2)

Fifty percent of participants believed politics historically played too much of a role in community-based projects and argued that “politicians did not have the understanding, or the tools, or the time to make any significant impact” (P7). Participant 6 recently accepted the role of the project manager of the Tidy Town volunteer group, on the basis that there was:

[. . .] no politics allowed. . . I said I would on the provision that it is non-political . . . One of the first things I found was I could only get good volunteers on the basis it was a non-political organisation.

3. Municipal District Operations Sporadic and Require Improvements

There was significant evidence that Municipal Districts do not follow any standard operating procedures to govern, with one interviewee contending that the operations reflected the CEO’s management style. The results substantiated previous studies (Murphy, 2019; O’Ferrall, 2016; Retail Ireland, 2017) on the apparent disjoint between local authorities and town stakeholders. When asked what improvements Municipal Councils could make, 70% of participants referred to communication, specifically relating to general decision making, throughout infrastructure projects and on building awareness of supports available. When questioned on whether there were any formal communications, 40% of participants confirmed that they met as a ‘town team’ at which the Council attended. Participants’ views were varied, referring to the meeting as very “structured and actionable” (P6), while another described the meeting as ineffective and attendance by the Council was sporadic. There was frustration amongst participants that the Council did not take ownership of what was statutorily their responsibility. Participant 1 described a very chaotic situation, where a building had collapsed on the main street, and the Council refused to take ownership of managing traffic up until law enforcement officers “went down to the council to make them aware of their responsibilities” (P1).

Participants (30%) criticised the stringent governing of the Municipal Councils, which deterred stakeholders and businesses from getting involved in local promotions or grants. Participant 6 believed local governments had an overwhelming level of bureaucracy. He outlined one experience where they:

[. . .] encouraged businesses to paint their premises. . . We got in contact with Dulux, who gave a 20% discount off the paint and also sent a designer to the town free of charge to complete

drawings. Business response was fantastic, especially when they heard there was a grant available. . .The Council, however, did not like the designer's drawings. They asked to see the colours the businesses wanted to use and how they might look at other colours. Eventually, the business owners said, "I will be doing my own thing, thanks very much. . .it's not worth the hassle."

Twenty percent of participants described their working relationship as positive with the Council, attributing it to the Council being approachable and reasonable. Participant 7, following the local government reforms, noted that their business associations were in the process of replicating the municipal structure and that:

[. . .] there is a project ongoing at the moment to amalgamate all of the four chambers and to put one CEO in place of one county chamber. . .the chamber CEO engages closely with the local authority CEO. . .that would be two influential people who would achieve a lot.

The participant contended that despite a further reduction in a prominent town representative, they were confident that the structural change to the Chamber of Commerce would be a success and result in positive actions.

4. Public Participation is Limited, And Public Submissions Are Being Ignored.

This study is consistent with the claims of federalisation (Murphy, 2019; Rylands *et al.*, 2016; SCSi, 2018), where decision-making has become centralised and removed from where it is required. Participants (80%) believe that the Local Government is dictatorial and suggests a disregard for consultations with town stakeholders. Sixty percent of participants believed decisions come directly from the Municipal CEO who does not have the 'experience in the mechanism of the town; in what makes a town breathe; what brings life to a town and in what makes a town a hive of activity as opposed to a graveyard' (P8). Participants (50%) argued elected representatives had very little real power to influence real change, with participant 1 stating:

[. . .] they have zero power. They are told what to say or what to do by the county manager [CEO], and if they do not do it, then they do not get the funding for their small projects that got them elected in the first place. . .we have a total dictatorship in local government.

This finding was impactful to the research as, ultimately, the accountability mechanism in local government is the accountability of the elected Council to the electorate (Callanan, 2018). The CEO as head of the local authority's administration is responsible to the elected Council;

however, in line with (O'Connor *et al.*, 2015), this study purports that CEOs are in positions of real power, and this de facto centralisation of power compromises towns in Ireland.

Statutory provisions such as 'Part 8 Planning' are in place to ensure that Municipal Councils collaborate with local stakeholders to build a culture of inclusivity to rejuvenate town centres (Callanan, 2018). According to participant 5, there was a complete disregard of legislative provisions that require local authorities to consult with the public before planning or adopting specific plans or policies. Participant 5 described their experiences, which illustrated that participation was not welcomed nor encouraged by local government:

[. . .] I met the town engineer, and he said to me that it will not make any difference to the project and that they are going ahead regardless. . .this was despite the fact that the submission date had not closed. . .On that particular project, they received 153 submissions. I drafted submissions for section 38, which was about 11 pages long, which contains various observations, which were quite serious about safety and breaches of regulations.

The researchers followed up with participant 5 in June to confirm whether the Council had responded to the 153 submissions. Participant 5 confirmed in writing the following:

There was no acknowledgement or response made, and not one of our submissions or letters to the Council have been answered; we did not even receive an acknowledgement.

This study has proven MacLaran *et al.* (2007)'s theory that the participatory process is limited in engaging with the public and may be viewed by local authorities as a pressure valve to let local stakeholders 'let off steam'. Participant 8 outlined their experiences of what they described as a 'prepare-reveal-defend' approach by the Council when they:

[. . .] were presented with what was to be done. . .they invited submissions at that stage, and we submitted between a hundred and two hundred submissions on the plan. . .but despite all of that, It seems that the plan in its original form is going to be implemented as a trial

One of the underlying assumptions that can be taken from this study is the lack of awareness of the Local Community Development Committees [LCDCs], which is a significant component for citizen engagement to function. Many participants were not aware of Public Participation Networks [PPNs], least of all, LCDCs. The lack of discussion from participants is sufficient evidence in itself; however, one participant embodied the overall perception of PPNS and stated that they were:

[. . .] involved with other groups on a voluntary basis, and I know the people I work with do not have a clue who or what the PPN are. They are members of the PPN, but I know if I were to ask them what the PPN was, they would not know anything about them (P2)

Discussion

Keeping a small rural town vibrant and responsive to the community's needs is an ongoing challenge, one that requires a large number of stakeholders to devote a significant amount of time and effort. In conjunction with current theories, the interrelationships between the emergent themes in this paper facilitate a discussion surrounding a theoretical management framework as a guide for town stakeholders to analyse the unique elements of their situation and implement a strategy towards Town Centre Management [TCM]. Based on the evidence from this research, five recommendations are made in relation to developing a TCM framework for Ireland's Rural Town Centres [IRTC].

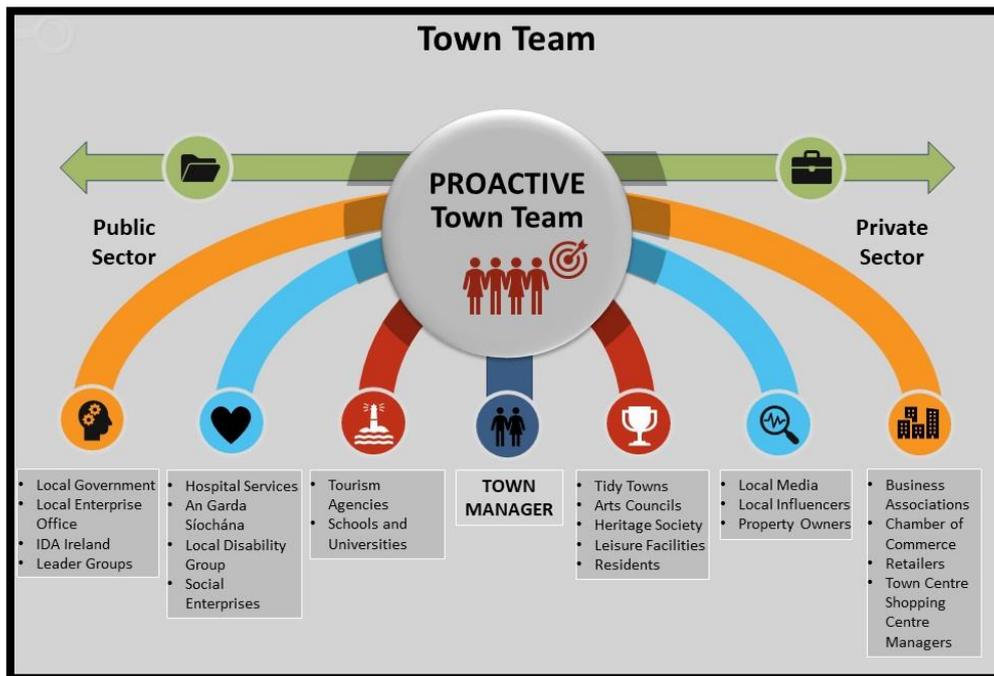
Firstly, discussions surrounding the restoration of Town Councils, such as the Bill presented to the Dáil by Deputy Brendan Howlin, is premature. The majority of participants confirmed that the recent reforms of local government have the support of town stakeholders and to roll back on the current system would be counter-productive; however, in line with Murphy (2019), a need to redress a democratic deficit is required and is the basis of the study's second recommendation.

There is a need to introduce a system used to measure the levels of public participation (Quinlivan, 2017; Zenker and Erfgen, 2014). This study provides evidence that there is a deliberate diminution of civic voices. Any public participation mechanisms in place are insincere and viewed by some local authorities as an instrument for residents to communicate their opinions with no follow-through action. Trusting residents in being part of the decision-making process and truly adopting a participatory approach to TCM (as suggested by Zenker and Erfgen, 2014) can contribute to TCM realising its greatest potential. One such KPI that could be utilised and measured by the National Oversight & Audit Commission² committee could include; Total Number of Submissions Received; Total Number of Submissions Rejected; Total Number of Submissions Accepted and Implemented; and Acknowledgement of Submissions.

² The National Oversight & Audit Commission [NOAC] was established in 2014 to independently oversee the local government sector

Third, this study strongly recommends that radical measures are taken to devolve decision-making back to the town’s citizens, in the form of a Town Team [TT]. “All parties that have an interest in improving the experience for the town’s users must act in partnership to achieve their objectives” (Whyatt, 2004, p. 346). It is evident from the research that successful TT have been operating covertly in IRTC, known as ESEG (discussed above). The question arises as to why such a reactive successful government policy cannot be replicated across other towns as a mechanism for town rejuvenation. Participants proposed a balance of State Bodies, Semi-State Bodies, and the Private Sector stakeholders to be TT members. Utilising these recommendations and in line with previous studies (see Hogg *et al.*, 2004; Retail Consultation Forum, 2017; Retail Ireland, 2017; SCSi, 2018; Whyatt, 2004; Zenker and Erfgen, 2014), a suggestive TT model (Figure 1), can aid as a checklist to prepare a database to seek and engage volunteers.

Figure 1 Proactive Town Team Model



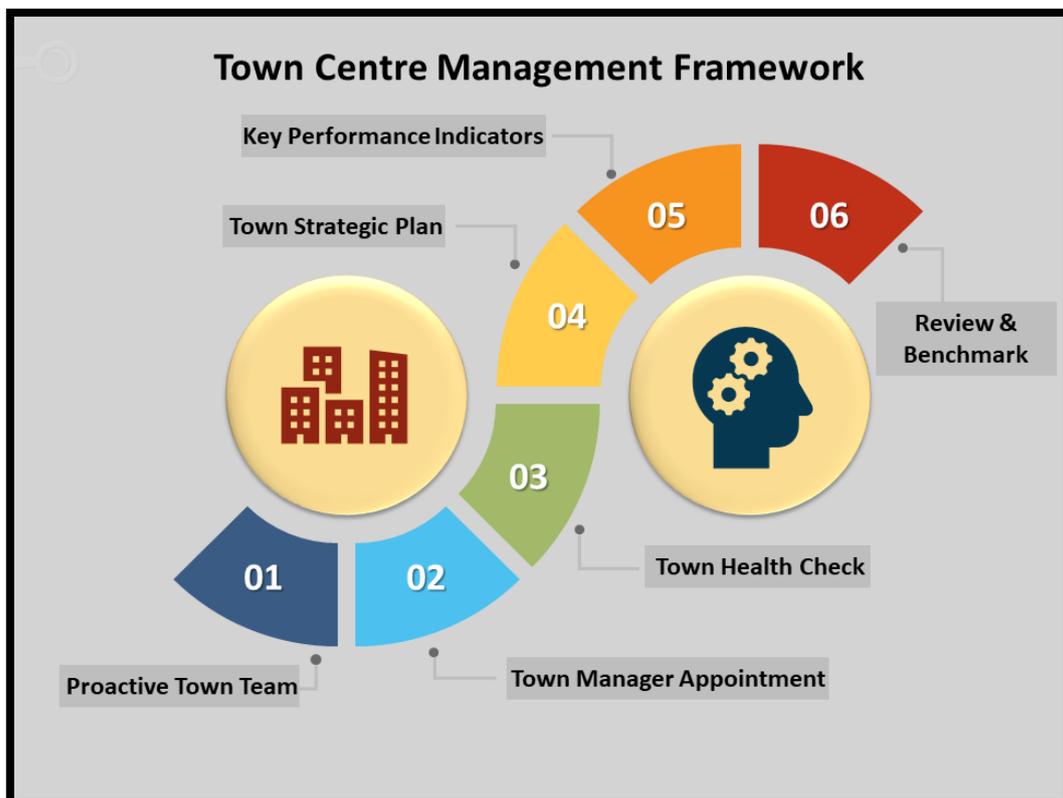
Fourth, the research supports the finding of SCSi (2018), who recommend recruiting a Town Manager to lead and drive positive change. A town centre manager “plays a major role in being an objective supporter and facilitator of building relationships within the team” (Whyatt, 2004, p. 351). The responsibilities and duties of a voluntary TT should be restricted to what is deemed realistic, and the findings in this research suggest it would be reasonable for the TT to recruit, monitor and mentor a non-political representative who can manage, promote and act as an ambassador for the town. Towns within the sample that had a designated salaried person

responsible for certain tasks normally adopted by a town manager demonstrated more success than other towns in drawing down funding, completing town strategic plans, and communicating with town stakeholders.

Fifth, finally and in line with Whyatt (2004, p. 348), “all strategic planners should first identify what the customer wants, then consider how the town’s competencies can create a better fit between these needs and the town’s assets”. As part of this recommendation, it would be essential to introduce a unified framework to evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of a development plan, such as the use of KPIs to assist in tracking the impact of the Town Centre Plan (Hogg *et al.*, 2004; Hogg *et al.*, 2007). As discussed earlier in this paper, Heritage Ireland is conducting a pilot trans-disciplinary ‘National Town Centre Health Check Programme’ in conjunction with participating towns across Ireland. Such a scheme (in conjunction with other recommendations) would significantly enhance the rejuvenation of our small towns.

Through the absorption of the current theories, findings of this study and taking into account the recommendations provided, a theoretical town centre management framework was conceptualised (Figure 2). A simple six-step approach evolved with each step referring to results of this study, international best practices and what is practical and realistic to ensure the sustainability of small towns in Ireland.

Figure 2 Theoretical Town Centre Management Framework



Limitations

Within all research studies, there are potential limitations that impact the research findings and the ability to answer the research question. When conducting a study, it is essential to have a sufficient sample size to conclude a valid research result (Wisker, 2008). The researchers were concerned with the sample size and potential difficulty to reach saturation in significant findings in the data. A clearly defined sample was chosen with a specific criterion to ensure a homogenous sample to address this limitation.

Secondly, an intensive investigation into local government and public participation networks was required. Being unfamiliar with the subject matter and the overwhelming volume of publications, the researchers found it difficult to gather the most appropriate literature to review. According to the Research and Development Sub-Committee on Qualitative Research (as cited in McGivern, 2013), the skill and experience of the qualitative researcher is the most critical determinant of the value of the study. The researchers had to become familiar with the material to have the knowledge to interpret responses received so that the quality of the data gathered was not open to interpretation.

Despite the study sample being restricted, the research provides the foundation to start a conversation on how TCM can aid the sustainability of rural town centres. A further study to include a larger sample would be recommended and a more detailed qualitative investigation into public participation practices. Further research could include the viability of BIDs as a TCM scheme in rural towns.

Conclusion

This research is timely, as it supports the Programme for Government's commitment to a 'Town Centre First' policy approach, founded on the Town Centre Health Check research, to ensure that our cities and towns become vibrant places for living and working in. Therefore, in this paper, recommendations are aimed at central and local government, policymakers, private sector and local stakeholders of Ireland's rural towns. This paper set out to examine Town Centre Management [TCM] practices in rural Ireland since the removal of Town Councils in June 2014. The paper makes a strong argument that despite TCM models proliferating internationally, Ireland's approach is much more complicated, multifarious, and fractured. The findings of this study highlight a fractured TCM partnership between the private sector (Retailers, Volunteering Groups, Citizens, and Business Owners) and the public sector (Local Government). Wholly relying on our rural communities to enhance the vitality and viability of

town centres is precarious and impractical. Communities and volunteers alike are innovative, generous, and brilliant at being self-sufficient. Still, they need the support of a leader (Town Manager/CEO) and an aligned TCM partnership to foster growth and productivity for town rejuvenation. This paper makes a strong argument for investing in developing a TCM collaborative framework to guide town stakeholders to analyse the unique elements of their situation and implement a strategy towards a TCM scheme. As the concept of TCM in rural places matures, evolving frameworks, such as the one presented in this paper, will add to the understanding of place management and public participation in small towns and rural areas.

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