



Submission

Letterkenny Town & Environs Development Plan

2009 - 2015

Submitted to
Letterkenny Town Council

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Contents

- 1.0 Executive Summary**
- 2.0 Current Situation**
- 3.0 Town Centre**
- 4.0 Traditional Town centre**
- 5.0 Transport**
- 6.0 Town Centre Health Check**
- 7.0 Car Parking**
- 8.0 Development trends**
- 9.0 Town Centre Strategy**
- 10.0 Concluding remarks**

1.0 Executive Summary

This submission from Letterkenny Chamber highlights the areas in the 2009 -2015 Letterkenny Town & Environs Development plan that are of concern and that it would like to see prioritised.

It should be noted that many of the elements in this plan were also highlighted in and consulted upon in the last plan but little movement has taken place. In its view Letterkenny Chamber would like to see this development plan becoming a reality however it would like to gain clarity on the funding situation for the specific council elements of the plan in particular considering the current economic situation in Ireland. More than ever a shared vision will be required to ensure Letterkenny future developments are planned and constructed within a coherent strategy owned and shared by all sections of the community.

The Chamber submission recognises that little development is likely to take place in the next two years however this gives all involved a huge opportunity to plan properly, to set down and agree policies that recognises a town that embraces and welcomes development and can achieve what many others aspire to in balancing old and new.

Citizens and visitors utilise Letterkenny for a range of uses so it is incumbent on us to create a town that welcomes all users, day and night by giving them an attractive town with ease of access across all areas.

The Chamber welcomes the planning and development policies that have been established within this plan for the commercial core. It wants to encourage implementation of these policies so that the town centre is developed sequentially from within and that infrastructure developments that could knit the town together in a coherent, attractive fashion are seen as a priority.

The Chamber agrees that an active, vibrant, diverse and attractive town centre is critical to its long term success and the Town Centre Strategy needs to encourage consolidation of the existing town centre to create critical mass and lead on a shared vision for a vibrant, strong and diverse commercial core.

Letterkenny is already becoming the commercial centre of Donegal making it a shopping destination but it also has the potential to be known as a centre for arts, culture and entertainment. All of these elements together give it its deserved pivotal role in the county.

The Town Centre Strategy and the elements laid out in the core document is essential however this needs to be lead by the council and must adopted to become a strategy shared and owned by all the key players.

2.0 Current situation

Letterkenny is often described as developer led. While this might not be strictly correct it is the perception held by many users of the town and is evidenced by the lack of cohesion between “old” and “new” and by the generally poor architectural quality of recent retail developments and poor quality public realm.

While Letterkenny has developed and is seen by many as the commercial centre of the county and there is no doubt that this development has brought economic prosperity it has unfortunately left a town that is fragmented and unattractive for workers, shoppers, pedestrians, visitors and local people.

In 2007 just over a year ago in it's balancing the change document the Chamber recommended the development of pedestrian linkages but as yet there has been little in the way of work on these extremely important linkages. We once again ask that these linkages are prioritised in this current plan so that we can see concrete evidence of implementation sooner rather than later.

During the life of the last plan unfortunately there was little in the way of achieving cohesion. This town plan offers an opportunity to see Letterkenny develop over the next 6 years with a shared and coherent vision.

The draft plan core document recognises the changing face of retail that is clearly obvious in Letterkenny. Over the past year we have seen major growth in high order retail brands concentrating in the lands east of Pearse Road. While much of this development is welcome and adds significantly to the retail mix in Letterkenny it is important not to lose sight of the traditional town centre, its linkages with the retail parks and indeed its linkages to the historical centre.

3.0 Town Centre

The Chamber recognises that the commercial core now includes the retail parks right out to Port Road Roundabout. However we urge the council to commit to inside out development and not to allow any retail development outside this area, in edge of area or out of town sites for the duration of this plan.

The town centre boundary covers a large area and it is clear from this plan and from the views of the Chamber that developments within the boundary needs development management principles and policies applied as outlined in the document. These policies will go some way in ensuring that developments contain mixed use and achieve a high architectural standard.

4.0 Traditional Town Centre

The Chamber supports this policy the reinforces the traditional town centre as the heart of the town. It welcomes policies TC 9 – TC13 that encourage sustainability and that applies improved design criteria. Encouraging vibrant street fronts and improved public realm will ensure a more attractive and pleasing environment in which to do business.

The core document outlines the healthy level of footfall in the traditional town centre however over the past year the retail trade sector reports better trading on weekdays

than weekends due to the reduced number of retailers in the traditional centre and the increased number of service providers/professional services that trade only 5 days per week. As much destination shopping is carried out at weekends there is a fear that the vibrancy and diversity that shoppers experience during the week will be lost and make the town a less attractive shopping destination. As we continue to develop Letterkenny as the commercial centre of Donegal this is a worrying trend.

As the paper acknowledges Letterkenny still has a number of independent retailers keeping diversity in the retail mix however during current economic trading conditions it is important that the town can support these. If all development centres on the Retail Parks we may be left with a decimated traditional town centre and Letterkenny losing its unique and diverse retail offering not experienced in many towns of its size in Ireland.

This is a large area that needs a focussed Town Centre Strategy in order to ensure new developments are part of a coherent plan and add to the commercial core. This strategy as outlined in the plan will go some way in managing development on a phased basis.

This strategy if adopted and adhered to will:

- Consolidate retail development within a defined town centre
- Promote higher density and greater diversity of development
- Focus developments and promote relocation to more appropriate locations
- Apply the urban design framework improving overall form and layout of future development
- Deliver high quality architectural standards

5.0 Transport

The plan in Map 4 Identifies the location of the transport hub at Neil T Blaney Road near the edge of the town centre boundary. The Chamber strongly recommends that the location of this hub is re-considered before the draft plan is adopted. There is no doubt that the current bus station location at Station Roundabout is unsuitable and unfit for purpose. Letterkenny needs a transport hub that allows access to public and private operators and in so doing gives access to services for consumers, workers and tourists.

The Chamber is concerned that if the transport hub is located at the edge of the town centre boundary new development will focus on this area creating even worse fragmentation than is the case at present and it will draw footfall from the current retail centre. Letterkenny currently fails to attract pedestrians to explore the historical or retail areas, the transport hub if located at this site will make a bad situation worse. Letterkenny acts as a pivotal hub linking it to Dublin, Co.Donegal, Sligo, Galway and Northern Ireland, the location of this hub is fundamental to the future development of Letterkenny given its gateway status.

The Chamber recommends that the transport hub be located on Pearse Road possibly in the Community Centre site. Furthermore it recommends that it must enable all public transport to come to one location to include public and private operators. In creating this transport hub it also gives a focus for taxi transport and private car pick up with more ease than is currently possible. It would also provide a transport facility within easy walking distance of town amenities day and night.

In making this recommendation the Chamber recognises that there is more to this than simply moving the bus station from its current location. It acknowledges that it must link in with the strategic route corridors outlined in the plan that will effectively enable people to by pass the town. More importantly to Chamber members it must be developed alongside the proposed development of the road and linear parks that will link Pearse Road and Blaney road. This particular linkage is of crucial importance to Letterkenny and is pivotal to this development plan, however these plans must be worked at together and given the priority they deserve to avoid any further fragmented development. A relocated transport hub will knit together with the transport strategy that will be developed from the transport and land use study to be published in 2009.

Transport is key to Letterkenny's future development. As a designated gateway town it needs to have efficient and integrated transport links internally and externally. Bus services to and from Letterkenny are well used and need to work from a central area within walking distance of town centre amenities.

6.0 Town Centre Health Check

The Chamber acknowledges the work put in to the health check contained in this document. This again highlights the diversity and vibrancy of the traditional town centre. The very vibrancy that is severely lacking in the retail parks. It should be acknowledged that this health check was carried out prior to the current economic crisis however translating this vibrancy to the newer retail areas represents a real challenge to planners.

Letterkenny is promoted by the Chamber and others highlighting the number and variety of independent retailers, they must be encouraged and supported in this plan going forward so that Letterkenny can retain its unique product offering.

However one of the key issues is the low environmental quality on streets and roads linking the traditional town centre and indeed within the town centre. This development plan, if adopted, will encourage higher specification public realm and the Chamber will continue to challenge the council and private developers to adhere to the guidelines to improve urban design. Consultation in this regard is vital and we encourage the council when planning works to contact the business community to ensure they also adhere to and agreed with the shared vision.

Another unique aspect of Letterkenny is the residential development in the town centre. This sets the town apart and adds to its social fabric, making it a safer and friendly environment. The Chamber applauds any policy to encourage "Living over the Shop" as retaining this residential element is integral to the development in the future character of the town.

7.0 Car Parking

It is reported in this plan that there is adequate car parking in Letterkenny however the current situation does nothing to encourage pedestrians, cycling or use of other forms of transport rather than the private car.

It is imperative that work gets started on the very important pedestrian linkages highlighted in the plan. The linkages between Main Street, Pearse Road and Blaney Road are critical to this development plan. Current linkages are not accessible, pedestrian friendly or obvious to the general public and particularly the visitor. The

town bus is under utilised and while this is not strictly a planning issue it is important the town is developed in the future with an emphasis on other transport and walking rather than the use of the private car.

A management plan for car parking is required urgently and should be introduced into this draft plan. Users of Letterkenny Town centre increasingly are not local and if more visitors are to be encouraged to use the town services and amenities and as we strive to encourage pedestrians, drivers entering the town centre need to clearly see where to park and the current availability of public and private parking spaces. While parking habits are ingrained in the culture of Letterkenny the correct planning and management at this stage will go a long way in ensuring this cultural shift can be achieved.

In tandem with advance notification parking signage the Chamber supports the need for strict enforcement of parking in all on-street areas. It also recommends a change in the bye law to provide one hour free parking on the Main Street to allow people to use services and to allow for convenience shopping. Proper and strict enforcement in towns and cities north of the border through private sector involvement has enabled free flow of traffic in town and city centres and has increased the use of car parks. In Letterkenny's case this would bring in added revenue to both the council and private car park providers.

8.0 Development Trends

Over the past 10 years Letterkenny has seen much new development particularly in areas south east of Pearse Road. Much of this has been ad-hoc with poor architectural character and highly dependent on the private car. Letterkenny has attracted high order retail but has put up physical barriers through unsuitable road networks such as the Pearse Road/Paddy Harte one way system.

This development plan offers a perfect opportunity to implement much needed pedestrian friendly measures.

In the view of the Chamber this plan offers much to developing Letterkenny. It contains many policies if implemented correctly will greatly improve the quality of architecture and the environment, help avoiding the current developer lead growth of recent years and will reduce the chance of further fragmentation into self contained pockets hindering a coherent town centre.

9.0 Town Centre Strategy

The town centre strategy outlined in the plan concentrates on various points with which the Chamber are in agreement.

It aims to:

- Manage development on a phased basis
- Consolidate future retail development so as not allowing fragmented adhoc developments for single use purposes.
- Focus development on town centre
- Implement an improved urban design framework.
- Encourage high architectural standards and a quality public realm.

The development management policies mentioned in this plan need to be adopted and implemented for all new developments to ensure Letterkenny achieves its vision.

The Chamber welcomes the following points within the plan:

- Focus certain development within the town centre and promote relocation of other uses to more appropriate locations. Implementation of this policy will test new developments for their suitability for the town centre. Development within the commercial core will be limited and strict policies will be applied to all planning applications.
- Development of derelict and underutilised sites. Letterkenny has been criticised many times for its number of derelict sites, policy TC1 will go some way in addressing this issue. Due to the previous ad hoc development there are many pockets of underutilised sites leaving Letterkenny unattractive. A policy to firstly backfill these sites before opening up new ones would go some way in addressing this issue.
- Mixed use in town centre (TC4). It is of the utmost importance that the town centre allows for mixed use. Each new development site will be required to offer a range of unit sizes to encourage mixed rather than single use development.

Of great importance is the application of design criteria to all new developments. This will go some way in creating a distinct sense of place and facilitating the re-location of lower order activities.

Within the Town Centre Strategy the Chamber welcomes Retail Objective 7.5 that sets out to achieve:

- Critical mass
- Diversity
- Design and public realm
- Strong competitive retail environment

The Chamber welcomes this retail objective in that it acknowledges the importance of the retail sector to the Letterkenny economy. The Chamber also would like to emphasise that the plan incorporates an integrated retail environment with various transport modes. We also welcome the conservation and enhancement of the built heritage and look forward to the character appraisal of the historic streetscape and the specification detailing design of shop fronts.

There is a need to develop a strong urban structure and quality townscape and adhere to the objective of creating a vibrant and mixed use town centre.

10.0 Concluding remarks

Letterkenny Chamber spends much of its time and resources promoting Letterkenny, supporting local shopping and local jobs. The Chamber has always welcomed new development. However it is important now that we move to developing Letterkenny to become an attractive town capitalising on its current built heritage and ensuring high quality urban design is applied to all new developments.

This development plan offers an opportunity to achieve cohesion and to improve the built environment of Letterkenny. As the town continues to grow this plan will limit Out of Town development while still encouraging development within the town centre boundary.

The Chamber acknowledges that mistakes have been made in the past but that policies need to ensure balanced development into the future. If all new development is set against a managed development plan and policies are adhered to we may get close to balancing the change in the future.

The current dispersal of retail activity across the urban area needs to be halted and this draft plan should go some way in achieving a strong competitive retail environment.

Regional planning guidelines require sequential location testing in assessing the sustainability of all sites for retail development. This will allow retail development to concentrate in the large town centre area.

Letterkenny Chamber accepts that funding many elements of this development plan will be a challenge in the current economic climate. The Chamber commits to put its weight behind any representations made by the council to Government to ensure Letterkenny can implement these plans and rightly take its position as a Gateway Town.