

Minutes of the 5th Meeting of the Retail Consultation Forum

West Court Hotel, Drogheda, 27th April 2015

Chair: Minister for Business and Employment, Ged Nash, T.D.

The fifth meeting of the Retail Consultation Forum was held in West Court Hotel, Drogheda on 27th April 2015. This was a special meeting of the Forum to consider the report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, “Policy Options to Support Business Growth and Job Creation and Retention in Town and Village Centres”. Local traders from Drogheda were also invited to the first part of the meeting to outline their experience in reviving their town centre under the Local Heroes initiative.

The attendance list is at Appendix 1.

1. Presentation on Joint Oireachtas Committee report

Senator Feargal Quinn, a member of the Joint Oireachtas Committee (JOC), was invited to address the Forum on the key messages in the Committee’s report. He also drew, in his presentation, on his own extensive experience in the retail sector.

Senator Quinn summarised the JOC report which contains 15 recommendations; he suggested that it was not possible to deliver on all of them, but there were some recommendations that it was possible to achieve. Senator Quinn emphasised, in the course of his presentation, the importance of people taking action themselves, and not waiting for someone else to take the initiative. The Senator used examples from his own experience to demonstrate how progress can be made in revitalising shopping areas or individual outlets through co-operative action on the part of retailers.

The Senator highlighted a number of key issues for the retail sector that need attention going forward, including On-Line trading, the cost of rates and energy, the importance of listening to customers, the changing market, and capitalising on local tourist attractions. Different initiatives could be taken in each town. The overarching aim for retailers should be to get customers to return to their shops based on a good shopping experience.

Minister Nash thanked Senator Quinn for his contribution and underscored his remarks on the need for collaboration by traders.

2. Drogheda’s experience

Members of Drogheda Chamber of Commerce, the Chief Executive of Louth Co. Council and local traders had been invited to attend the meeting to outline their experience in revitalising Drogheda town centre during the recession as part of the RTE Local Heroes initiative. Senator Quinn was also involved in this initiative in Drogheda in a supportive role as a retail “champion”.

Eddie Phelan from Drogheda Chamber made a presentation to the Forum on the initiative. He stressed the importance of civic involvement in the project. As well as retailers, local community groups were involved in the process – all on a voluntary basis. Some early “wins”

were important for success. An audit was carried out of Drogheda's strengths and weaknesses at the outset to set the landscape.

Mr. Phelan emphasised the importance of partnership between the key stakeholders – business owners, Local Authorities, customers and central Government – for success.

Some of the obstacles encountered by the Drogheda group included regulatory barriers and the perception that customers are only interested in low costs. If people could be encouraged to live in town centres, it would also create additional retail activity.

Joan Martin, Chief Executive of Louth Co. Council, outlined some of the initiatives the Council had undertaken to improve Drogheda town centre. These included:

- a Business Incentive Scheme, providing a grant over a two-year period for taking occupancy of a vacancy premises. This scheme had a low up-take, but was linked to a requirement that the landlord of the premises also provide a reduction in rents;
- half-price parking fees in December;
- support for festivals such as the Irish Maritime Festival and Arts Festival;
- working with companies on energy usage;
- a new policing strategy for Drogheda, supported through the PEACE programme.

The Council had established a Steering Group to look at Drogheda, Dundalk and Ardee as a shopping cluster. The Group is carrying out market research on customers' views on the three towns. Other comments offered by Ms. Martin centred on the need for customers to be seen by businesses as stakeholders, and bringing life and energy back into the town centre – it was a case of re-imagining the town centre and what it could provide as an amenity.

In further discussion on the Business Incentive Scheme, Mr. Frank Pentony (one of the invited attendees) explained that in Dundalk, retailers who had been approved for the grant could not get start-up funding from the banks. Danny McLoughlin (CCMA) explained that while this type of grant was a helpful support, there was a range of considerations impacting on the success of its uptake, including the suitability of the site itself for a retailer.

Sean Murphy (Retail Excellence Ireland) suggested that every Local Authority should look at the model of the English Market in Cork to support artisan food producers. It also appeared that Drogheda could benefit from the presence of a larger retailer in the town to create a better mix.

Vincent Jennings (CSNA) spoke of the impact which too many charity shops and pop-up shops can have on retailers.

Conor Whelan (Easons and Chair of Retail Ireland) felt that the lack of a Strategic Plan continued to be a problem for Drogheda. Thomas Burke (Retail Ireland) felt that if the Forum could

provide direction in the area of Strategic Plans, it would be a good outcome. Mr. Burke indicated that Retail Ireland would be happy to support a sub-group of the Forum to do this. Minister Nash welcomed Retail Ireland's offer on this point and agreed to follow up with further discussions.

In concluding this agenda item, Minister Nash thanked the Drogheda Chamber and the County Council members for their input and wished them well in their continued efforts to revitalise the town centre.

3. Recommendations in Oireachtas Committee report

The Forum returned to the Joint Oireachtas Committee report and considered each of the 15 recommendations it contained. These are summarised at Appendix 2. There was a detailed discussion on these recommendations and some of the key messages arising were:

- The need to better promote Business Incentive Schemes provide by the Local Authorities. Ian Talbot (Chambers Ireland) suggested that a small number of succinct messages was the key.
- Every town in Ireland needs a Town Manager (though this might depend on the size of the town).
- The Trading On-Line Voucher scheme is beginning to see good take-up. Stephen Brennan (DCENR) explained that the scheme is half-way into its two-year lifespan; statistics in relation to outcomes will be available shortly. The focus is on supporting businesses that have put time and effort into their business plan for digital trading. The voucher scheme is limited to micro-enterprises and about 40% of the successful applicants are retailers.
- In relation to energy costs, the CER has a role in setting the PSO levy, which is costly for business.
- There is a need to have a balanced mix of retail in town centres. Too many similar outlets is not a good approach.
- Affordable parking is a critical issue to enable access to town centres. Danny McLoughlin (CCMA) stated that the CCMA will publish its work in June on best practice by Local Authorities in supporting retail. This will include a variety of initiatives around parking in towns.
- If Town Teams are critical, they should be backed up by a strategic blueprint to avoid piecemeal initiatives.
- Town Team initiatives could potentially be part of the Regional Action Plans for Jobs which are being developed. Competitive funds will be announced soon to support the regional Action Plans. Views were also expressed that Town Teams are not the only solution - different approaches work for towns of different type or size.

- The BIDS model has been introduced in some areas, but it involves an additional levy on business, so may not be appropriate everywhere.

Recalling the earlier comments by Senator Quinn that it was not possible to delivery every one of the proposals in the JOC report, the Minister summed up the main areas identified for further progress through the Retail Consultation Forum, with suggested action points:

Recommendation 6 (On-Line trading):

Establish a Working Group of the Forum to look at developing training in on-line sales and social media (this is broader than the Trading On-Line Voucher scheme).

Working Group to look also at how to develop a shared e-commerce infrastructure for towns and villages.

Possibility of the CSO providing information on the scale of on-line sales to be explored by DJEI.

Recommendation 7 (Bank charges):

Minister Nash to raise with Minister Noonan the issue of increased cost of bank charges for retailers, as well as administrative banking arrangements that are not supportive of business (e.g. only accepting cash lodgements on certain days).

Recommendation 8 (Switch Energy providers):

Set up a Working Group of the Forum to see how retailers might get the best deal from providers. The Working Group might also look at how best to develop a comparative website (e.g. Switcher.ie).

Recommendation 9 (Market towns as a shopping destination):

Discuss further with the Dept. of Transport, Tourism and Sport the inclusion of retail representation on the Implementation Group for the new Tourism Strategy.

Recommendation 10 (Town Teams):

Retail members could look at forthcoming funding to support the Regional Action Plans for Jobs to develop proposals on Town Teams. A collaborative approach by retail organisations to identifying towns that might be suitable for a pilot approach would be in keeping with the spirit of the funding schemes.

Recommendation 14 & 15 (Policing):

An Garda Síochána will be asked to make a presentation at a future meeting of the Forum on town centre policing and dealing with anti-social behaviour. Seam Murphy (Retail Excellence Ireland) asked that the issue of methadone clinics be addressed at the same time.

4. Preliminary discussion on Budget 2016

Forum members had asked that a preliminary discussion on Budget 2016 be included on the agenda for the meeting. It was agreed that a co-ordinated submission on Budget 2016 would be prepared for transmission to the Department of Finance, reflecting the proposals of the retail members of the Forum. Members of the Forum were asked to submit their proposals to the Secretary to the Forum, Catherine Curran, by 18th May. These would be discussed at the next meeting of the Forum in June with a view to finalising the submission.

5. Updated Work Programme

At the March meeting of the Forum, the Secretariat was asked to update the Work Programme for the Forum for 2015. An updated programme was circulated in advance of the April meeting and is at Appendix 3 to this report. The Secretariat will be guided by members of the Forum if any changes are considered necessary to this programme.

6. AOB

Ian Talbot (Chambers Ireland) referenced the Registration of Lobbying Act, 2015, which had just been enacted, and queried if the Forum would be regarded as a lobbying vehicle which needed to be flagged. The Secretariat undertook to look further into this.

The next meeting of the Retail Consultation Forum will take place on 15th June 2015.

Secretary to the Retail Consultation Forum

Appendix 1
Retail Consultation Forum Meeting, 27th April 2015
Attendance List

Name	Organisation
Minister Ged Nash	Minister for Business and Employment (Chair)
Linda Barry	SFA
Stephen Brennan	D/CENR
Tara Buckley	RGDATA
Thomas Burke	Retail Ireland
Aidan Candon	Euronics
Paul Carroll	D/Social Protection
Catherine Curran	D/Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Secretary to Forum)
Jim Curran	Irish Pharmaceutical Union
Mary Daly	Louth Co. Council
Colin Fee	MACE, Blackrock, Co. Louth (President of RGDATA)
Mark Fielding	ISME
Deirdre Grant	Press Advisor to Minister Nash
Fenton Howell	D/Health
Vincent Jennings	CSNA
Joan Martin	Chief Executive, Louth Co. Council
David McCloskey	Drogheda Chamber group
Daniel McLoughlin	Chief Executive, SDCC, representing the CCMA
John Murray	DIT
Seán Murphy	Retail Excellence Ireland
Con O'Donoghue	Drogheda Chamber group
Phil O'Flaherty	D/Education & Skills
William Parnell	D/Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation
Eddie Phelan	Drogheda Chamber of Commerce
Senator Feargal Quinn	Member of Joint Oireachtas Committee
Keith Rogers	ECCO shoes
Ian Talbot	Chambers Ireland
Conor Whelan	Easons
Patricia White	Drogheda Chamber group

Apologies: Helen O'Donnell, Rebecca Birchall, Eoin Fitzpatrick, Anne Marie Harte, John Foy, Ray Heran, Edel Clancy

Appendix 2

Summary of Joint Oireachtas Committee recommendations

Recommendations from JOC Report:
<p>Recommendation 1: The Committee recommends that Central Government support local authorities to introduce grant relief schemes, similar to that piloted in Limerick, to incentivise new businesses to take up vacant properties on high streets and in town and village centres.</p>
<p>Recommendation 2: The Committee recommends that local authorities consider rate reductions for small, independent businesses in town and city centres to ensure a retail and hospitality blend is offered to consumers</p>
<p>Recommendation 3: The Committee recommends that action be taken to relieve businesses of the burden of the Upward Only Rent provision which is suffocating many struggling businesses at present. This would go a long way to encouraging recovery and further growth in many business sectors.</p>
<p>Recommendation 4: In recognition of the openness of examining the valuation structures as evidenced in the Valuation (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2012 currently awaiting committee stage, that the Committee recommends the Government invest in local authorities powers to vary rates to take into account the size and scope of businesses and to enable the provision of targeted measures to make commercial rates fairer and more flexible.</p>
<p>Recommendation 5: The Committee notes the Government's aim to provide 2,000 further Trading Online Vouchers to small and micro businesses in 2015 and calls for further countrywide information sessions and promotion by Local Enterprise Offices to improve take-up of the scheme.</p>
<p>Recommendation 6: The Committee recommends Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) work closely with local Chambers of Commerce and other industry bodies to develop further training in online sales and the benefits of social media for their business and consider the development of shared e-commerce infrastructure for towns and villages.</p>
<p>Recommendation 7: The Committee recommends continued dialogue between Government and pillar banks on charges being levied on small and medium businesses for banking services.</p>

Recommendations from JOC Report:**Recommendation 8:**

The Committee calls for a co-ordinated campaign between Government and industry bodies to encourage businesses to switch energy providers and provide a platform to allow businesses to compare prices from providers more easily.

Recommendation 9:

The Committee recommends that Tourism Ireland and other bodies strongly market our towns and cities as shopping destinations in the course of their work.

Recommendation 10:

The Committee recommends the wide-spread roll-out of the Town Teams model, as advocated by Retail Excellence Ireland, to bring joined-up thinking, management and co-operation to our town centres involving LEOs, Chambers of Commerce and other local stakeholders.

Recommendation 11:

The Committee recommends the business improvement district (BID) model should be more widely adopted in towns, including urban towns, around the country and should be promoted by Local Enterprise Offices and other bodies.

Recommendation 12:

The Committee recommends introducing a High Street Innovation Fund, which provides funding to local authorities to carry out improvement and regeneration projects for the high streets in town and village centres.

Recommendation 13:

The Committee considers free parking periods for several hours during a day in town and village centres an important measure that should be considered by local authorities.

Recommendation 14:

The Committee recommends a wider use of such strategic policing operations in urban and town centres to create a safer environment for consumers and businesses to operate in.

Recommendation 15:

The Committee notes the importance of high visibility policing in town centres and shopping districts and considers it a policy which should be encouraged in co-operation with local Town Teams and other stakeholders.

Appendix 3

Updated Work Programme for Retail Consultation Forum, April 2015

The Retail Consultation Forum will examine issues relevant to the sector on a thematic basis. Additional stakeholders may be invited to attend the Forum to contribute to its proceedings, where appropriate. This draft Work Programme is based on the themes discussed at the first meeting of the Forum in June 2014 and has been amended to reflect scheduling changes.

March 2015	Skills for Retail, including promoting retail as a career Presentations by EGFSN (DJEI & SOLAS), Skillnets, DIT School of Retail & Services Management
April 2015	Special Meeting In Drogheda to consider the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee Report on Town and Village Centre retailing Initial discussion on Budget 2016 proposals for the retail sector
June 2015	Pre-Budget submission from retail members of the Forum Actions to support Town Centre retailing- update Report from Local Authorities on best practice initiatives to support retail Presentation on “Building the Retail Industry: North and South”, joint report by Retail Excellence Ireland and the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association (NIIRTA) Follow up on Skills for the Retail Sector
Sept 2015	eCommerce Update on Business Licencing Application Portal Proposals for Action Plan for Jobs 2016
Nov 2015	The Black Economy, including Casual Trading, smuggling (of fuel and other goods) and “Personal Use” limits for duty-free or duty-paid imports.

A number of other themes have been identified for discussion by the Forum members, including initiatives from the Department of Health and implications for the retail sector, credit worthiness database, the impact of the National Payments Plan and innovation as a means of improving competitiveness in the sector. It is proposed that these be scheduled for future meetings of the Forum.