

MINUTES
26th Meeting of the Retail Forum
2nd March 2022
10.30am – 12.30pm
(via video / tele conference & Room 110, Kildare Street)

Meeting held under Chatham House Rules

Chair: Damien English TD, Minister of State for Business, Employment and Retail.

Attendance list at Appendix 1.

1. Welcome and Opening Comments

The Chair welcomed those in attendance and provided an overview of the agenda and updated members on the recent launch of three of the [Regional Enterprise Plans](#). There are nine Regional Enterprise Plans in total and the Plans promote regional economic activity and sustainable employment in the regions. The Chair welcomed Ms. Pauline Mulligan as the new Assistant Secretary of the Indigenous Enterprise, SMEs and Entrepreneurship Division in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) replacing Mr Declan Hughes.

The Chair advised members that the minutes of the last Retail Forum meeting held on 1st December 2021 have now been published on the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) website and on gov.ie. Minutes of this meeting will be circulated to Retail Forum members for observations and approved under silence procedure.

2. Retail, Technology and Skills

- **COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme**
The Chair called on Ms. Deborah Dignam, Assistant Principal Officer, Retail and Sector Transformation Policy Unit, DETE to provide an update on the COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme (ORS). Ms. Dignam advised that feedback provided by Retail Forum members on the Scheme has been considered in a review of the Scheme in anticipation of a new Call for Q1/Q2 2022.
- **COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme - Case Study**
The Chair called on Mr. Mark O'Dwyer, Shoe Suite to provide an overview of his company's experience as a recipient of the COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme.

Mr. O'Dwyer advised that the grant had been a game-changer for his business. The ORS grant had been used to implement integration systems for ordering and stock control which in turn freed up approximately 40 hours administration time weekly. Mr. O'Dwyer said that the time freed up was used to build relationships with online customers and changed their focus from managing orders to dealing with customers. The portion of the business conducted online increased from 4% in 2019 to 22% in 2022. Ms. Dignam thanked Mr O'Dwyer for his feedback. She referenced the peer-learning opportunities created pre COVID-19 and how valuable they were for retailers and hoped to have continued input from retailers for mentoring in the future. Mr. O'Dwyer advised that he would be agreeable to be a mentor to provide peer-to-

peer learning to other businesses to share his experience in relation to the COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme.

The Chair thanked Ms. Dignam and Mr. O'Dwyer and asked Forum members to share relevant views on the COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme with the Secretariat.

3. Future of Retail

- Retail Sector Study update

Ms. Dignam advised that the Study is progressing although with some delays The Department are currently reviewing a raw draft of the Study and will provide a further update at the next Retail Forum meeting. The Department is endeavouring to ensure that the Study is a useful and valuable document that can be used to underpin a Retail Action Plan for the Forum.

The Chair thanked Ms. Dignam for the update.

4. Government Initiatives

- Town Centre First Policy

The Chair called on Retail Forum member Mr. Finbarr Filan, (ISME, Sligo Business Improvement District and member of the Town Centre First Advisory Group) to give an update on Town Centre First (TCF) – a Policy Approach for Irish Towns.

Mr.Filan welcomed the publication of the TCF policy and acknowledged that the completion of the TCF policy was the result of a collaboration between relevant stakeholders and Government Departments. The Sligo Town Team see the TCF as a much-needed mechanism for the horizontal integration of silos at a national level. The TCF report lists a number of distinct strategies and policies.

Mr. Filan advised that it is crucial that the right person with the right skills is appointed to the role of the Regeneration Officer as they will be responsible for leading the town team to achieve results. Collaboration and communication are key to achieving results and guidance should be sought from pathfinder towns for example Sligo for peer-to-peer learning.

Mr. Filan emphasised that across the country, a new mindset would be required, to see retail as an 'asset' and not just a 'function' of a town.

Mr. Filan said that he understands that the TCF Regeneration Officer would only be appointed to towns with less than 10,000 inhabitants and he was disappointed with this. He added that if this is the case, the TCF Policy should be renamed *Small Towns Centre First* as the needs of small towns and cities vary drastically.

Mr. Filan commented that managing the expectations of stakeholders will be vitally important as change will take time.

Comments arising:

- How can you encourage residential community buy in?

Mr. Filan advised it is very important to always consider the residential community in a town and to encourage locals to stay and spend their money in the town.

- Concern that different plans may be drawn up by consultants in each of the 26 counties which will lead to plans that can't be shared. Could the 26 counties work in a co-ordinated way?
- The Regeneration Officer needs to be at an appropriate level and understand rejuvenation.
- Data and co-operation across sectors including public/private understanding are two key issues for success.
- The importance of data collection on behalf of the local authorities was highlighted and how it should be used to good effect to assist and provide evidence of change.
- Liaise with Purple Flag groups around the country to learn from their experiences re Town Centre renewal.

The Chair advised that the Department would link the LGMA with Forum members who can assist with making results happen.

- LEO update- Green for Micro Scheme

The Chair called on Mr. Padraic McElwee, Head of Enterprise, LEO Clare County Council and Chair of the Network of Local Enterprises, to provide an overview of the Green for Micro Scheme. The Scheme is available to businesses with under 10 employees (including retail businesses) through the Local Enterprise Offices nationwide.

A pilot of the Scheme was undertaken in 2021. Approximately 9% of participants on the Pilot programme were from the Retail Sector.

The objective of the [Green for Micro Scheme](#) is to assist small businesses to transition to the low carbon economy? - amore resource efficient economy of the future. The Scheme provides two days of mentoring, at no charge to the business, from a Green Consultant.

Mr. McElwee encouraged retailers to contact their Local Enterprise Office.

Comments arising:

- The Chair advised that Mr. McElwee is available to engage with Retail representative bodies to promote the Scheme.
- Further awareness of the Scheme amongst eligible businesses is required.
- Member requested that the YouTube video promoting the Scheme be circulated.
- Some large retailers are concerned that if they promote all the work that they are doing on the Green agenda that it will be perceived as Greenwashing.
- A Forum member who is active on the Green agenda offered to provide peer-to-peer learning / mentoring / workshop opportunities to any interested Retail Forum member.
- Members were reminded of the [Climate Toolkit 4 Business](#) which is a free online resource.
- Mr. McElwee drew members' attention to Local Enterprise Week taking place from 7th to 11th March 2022.
- Members were urged by the Chair to engage with their Local Enterprise Office to learn more about the resources available for retail businesses.

Action

- **Follow up email issued to Retail Forum members containing:**
- **Presentation made by Mr. Filan**
- **Information and link to YouTube video ([Green for Micro: What You Need to Know - YouTube](#)) on the Green for Micro Scheme**
- **Link to the [Climate Toolkit 4 Business](#)**

5. Retail Forum Working Groups

The Chair called on Ms. Maedhbh Cronin, Principal Officer, Retail and Sector Transformation Policy Unit, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment to provide an update on proposed Working Groups of the Retail Forum:

- Future of Retail - Night-Time Economy and Town Centre First
- Future of Retail – Digitalisation and Skills
- Future of Retail – Green Transition

Ms. Cronin provided an overview of the Structure and operation of the Working Groups. Members of the Forum and representatives from outside the Retail Forum will be invited to join the Working Groups to ensure that there is a balance of views, skills and experience. Each Working Group will have Terms of Reference and a bespoke Work Programme with clear actions and timelines. A DETE official will chair each Working Group and DETE will provide the Secretariat.

Members were asked to forward any feedback on the [Climate Toolkit 4 Business](#) to the Secretariat.

Comments arising:

- Several members expressed an interest in joining Working Groups.
- A number of reports are already published on the area of Skills and Digitalisation. Need to ensure that the Working Group is not examining the same areas that have already been considered.

Action

Secretariat to follow up with Retail Forum members re the establishment of Working Groups.

6. AOB

- The Chair called on Retail Forum member Ms. Sinead Watters, Department of Social Protection (D/SP), to provide an update on the recent online careers event hosted by D/SP that focused on employment opportunities in the Retail Sector. Ms. Watters advised that three retail employers participated in the event outlining their vacancies and career development opportunities. Retail Ireland Skillnet also participated in the event.

Comments arising:

- Labour shortages: Members advised of their difficulties in fulfilling rosters
- Some Members have responded with pay incentives to retain staff
- An observation was made that a lot of students left retail jobs during September to go back to their studies.
- Concern that younger members of staff will leave to travel over the summer months.
- The lack of staff is leading to a reduction in retail offering, which is reducing the asset value of the sector, which in turn is damaging town centres. It's all connected.
- "Auctioning" of jobs is becoming a more common practice.
- Prospective employees see alternative employment opportunities where they can work from home. There is a need to make working in retail a more attractive prospect.
- Shop owners taking on more hours due to staff shortages. Stressful environment.

- Need to make Retail a career option.
The Chair said that the area of promoting Retail as a Career of Choice needs to be improved with better communication around the career development / training opportunities / apprenticeships that are available. The opportunities available need to be communicated clearly and effectively to those already in the sector but also to those who are seeking employment so as to attract job seekers to the Retail Sector.
- Member actively engaging with Rehab to establish more inclusive pathways to work.
- Member advised that they would be interested in engaging more with D/SP to examine more ways of linking employment opportunities with those on the live register.
- Work Permits – member commented that this area needs to be explored along with labour shortages and believes that the reason why workers not coming to Ireland is the high cost of living.
- Member asked if the limitations on working hours for non-EU Students with work permits could be increased from 20 hours to 28 or 30 hours per week.
- Members raised an issue about the significant shortages of pharmacists and asked about the critical skills list

The Chair advised members that a meeting with Retail Forum members would be convened before the end of March to get their input on issues around labour shortages and work permits. Relevant officials from DETE and D/SP will be invited to attend. The Chair stressed that it would be preferable not to look at employment permits as the solution but to be proactive to make the sector more sustainable.

Action

Meeting held re Labour Shortages in the Retail Sector.

- The Chair called on Mr. Owen Brennan, Chairman, Devenish to provide a presentation on *Sustainable Food Supply – A Retail Perspective*. Mr. Brennan spoke about agricultural technology as it applies to sustainable food supply. He advised that the focus should be on high quality sustainably produced food. Mr. Brennan advised that Devenish would be happy to facilitate a visit of the Retail Forum to their site.

The Chair thanked Mr. Brennan for his presentation and said at a customer level there is a role for the retail sector in providing good quality information and labelling of products.

Action

Presentation circulated to Retail Forum members after the meeting.

Additional comments raised under AOB:

- A member of the Forum offered to support, in whatever way they can, Government efforts to assist the people of Ukraine.
- A member advised that greater numbers of their employees are attending their office, with mask wearing at under 50%. They advised colleagues were still happy to have perspex screens in place.
- The representative from Skillnet advised that there will be 240 apprenticeships participating in their training organisation in 2022.

Appendix 1 – Attendance List

Company	First Name	Last Name	Title
RGDATA	Tara	Buckley	Director General
CSNA	Vincent	Jennings	CEO
Hardware Association of Ireland	Aoife	Kinsella	Business Development and Marketing Manager
Irish Pharmacy Union	Jim	Curran	Director of Communications
Retail Excellence	Duncan	Graham	Managing Director
Chambers Ireland	James	Kiernan	Director of Relationship Management
Retail Ireland	Arnold	Dillon	Director
Retail Ireland	Shane	Flynn	Chairman of Retail Ireland (MD Food Services, Aramark)
Dublin Town (BID)	Richard	Guiney	CEO
Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)	Gerry	Light	General Secretary (MANDATE)
Retail Ireland Skillnet	Sean	Carlin	Manager of Skillnet
Musgrave	Edel	Clancy	Director of Communications & Corporate Affairs
Ecco Ireland	Keith	Rogers	Head of Retail
Fishers of Newtownmountkennedy	Rebecca	Harrison	Director
Primark	Emma	Ormond	Head of Government Affairs
Technological University Dublin	Damian	O'Reilly	Senior Lecturer - Retail Management
D/Taoiseach	Fiona	Curran	Economic Policy
D/Taoiseach	Jerome	Wholihane	Economic Policy
D/Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	Michelle	O'Mahony	
Waterford City and Co. Council (Local Government Management Agency Rep) – will join at 11am	Michael	Quinn	Director of Service
D/Housing, Local Government & Heritage	Eoghan	O'Brien	
D/Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands	Sinead	Watters	Key Account Manager - Employer Support Services Unit

Presenters

Shoe Suite	Mark	O'Dwyer	Retail Director
ISME	Finbarr	Filan	
Local Enterprise Office	Padraic	McElwee	Head of Enterprise
Devenish	Owen	Brennan	Chairman

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment

D/Enterprise, Trade and Employment	Pauline	Mulligan	Assistant Secretary
D/Enterprise, Trade and Employment	Maedhbh	Cronin	Principal Officer, Retail and Sector Transformation Policy Unit
D/Enterprise, Trade and Employment	Deborah	Dignam	AP, Retail and Sector Transformation Policy Unit

Additional

Enterprise Ireland	Kasia	Sobków – Czajka	Retail, Consumer & Online Unit
--------------------	-------	-----------------	--------------------------------