

My Carlow

A Vision for a living Town Centre



Submission by:

County Carlow Chamber of Commerce, Industry & Tourism CLG

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Carlow

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Foreword

County Carlow Chamber of Commerce, Industry & Tourism CLG wish to make a submission on the “My Carlow, A vision for a living town Centre” as designed by Nicholas de Jong. The Chamber recognise that there is a great need for the development of the town centre of Carlow and beyond, something that is long overdue and if not undertaken will continue to have serious implications for the town. With that in mind, it is vital that the works and plans are correct for Carlow, its people, its businesses and of course its future.

Carlow has seen numerous plans over the years, however many of them have never been brought to life despite receiving accolades, this has resulted in a certain amount of scepticism in our members in relation to plans for developing the town. The Chamber have and will continue to work with all stakeholders to ensure that the plans are right for Carlow, its businesses and the wider community; we are also focused on ensuring that any plans agreed upon are delivered for the businesses and people of Carlow.

County Carlow Chamber

The County Carlow Chamber was established over 71 years ago, working on behalf of member businesses to assist in the social and economic development of Carlow. The Chamber has lead on many projects over the years and continues to work on behalf of members on a range of policy priorities.

The County Carlow Chamber currently represents over 175 businesses throughout the County including many of the county’s largest employers. In total, Chamber members employ approx. 4500 people across the county operating in a range of sectors including tourism, retail, manufacturing, services and education. Carlow businesses also contribute over €14m annually in commercial rates towards the local economy, that is in addition to the contributions from employment, taxation and significant contributions through community support and sponsorship.

The members of the chamber operate in a range of sectors, these member companies and individuals bringing a wide range of skills and expertise to the organisation which assists in defining the direction and focus of the Chamber.

My Carlow – Views in General

The unified view from everyone is that the centre of Carlow is overdue development works to enhance the public realm, access, surfaces and general fabric of the streets and areas. There are however mixed reactions from our members towards the plans proposed.

- Some comments to the Chamber in relation to the plans show delight in what is proposed. Members have commented that the proposals look great and will really help Carlow now and into the future but only if the plans are adopted.

- People who currently frequent the centre of Carlow and those who are operating businesses either directly in the areas covered or in the vicinity, have advised that they have serious concerns in relation to several aspects of the plan, particularly parking, connectivity and use of the space.
- There are also concerns about the development of new buildings and questions have been asked as to whether there will be regeneration of the premises that are currently in situ
- Carlow is the county town and the 14th largest urban area in the country. However, we must also remember that it is also a very strong rural community and the town serves a wide catchment within a 10km radius and beyond. The town is dependent on this rural community and as such needs to be able to cater for their needs and requirements as well as catering for its urban residents.

Parking

The proposed plan brings major concerns for everyone in relation to parking and the number of available spaces near commercial units. The reduction in spaces across the streets will severely impact businesses who depend on the rotation of these spaces to allow patrons to frequent their premises.

- Across the four streets covered in the plan, Kennedy Avenue, Tullow Street, Potato Market & Barrack Street there are currently in the region of 118 car spaces, 4 loading bays, 3 accessible bays and 12 bays designated for a stay of max 30 minutes. The proposed plan would (assuming the number of loading bays, accessible bays and max 30-minute bays remains unchanged) see a reduction of approx. 70% in the number of on street parking spaces down to 37 spaces.
- The plan while allowing for a reduction in car parking spaces on street and acknowledging the potential future developments to be carried out in Hadden's Car Park, Old Penney's sites, and Tullow Street Upper does nothing to address where additional spaces would be located to ensure that the commercial premises are well serviced in the area of Tullow Street, Potato market, Kennedy Avenue.
- Regrettably the Old Penny's site has yet to be developed and until such a time as it has been developed the site cannot be relied upon to provide parking, retail spaces or any other service.
- In relation to the potential future developments of Hadden's Car Park, Old Penney's site and the Old L&N site, we do not have any certainty in retaining sufficient space in these areas for car parking. The number of car parking spaces provided in the town currently is below the level required and reducing this further without a clear plan for replacing these spaces within the centre is not an option.
- Under the County Development Plan and planning guidelines all developments are required to provide adequate provision within the site for the servicing of the proposal and for the parking and manoeuvring of vehicles and for the provision of bicycle parking. With the proposed reduction of on-street parking facilities, any potential change of use plans for units where such requirements are imposed would mean a considerable cost burden to the business in order to secure and provide the facility to meet the planning requirement.

- Furthermore, we have concerns about accessibility for persons with physical and mental health disabilities. The reduction in parking greatly reduces access for the most vulnerable in our society. Should these persons be unable to access services there is a loss to the person, to society and furthermore to the economy.

Connectivity through the town

The inclusion of the linkage from Fairgreen to Carlow Shopping centre is something that is well overdue and that the Chamber have asked for over numerous years. It will help to open the town up more and hopefully encourage more pedestrian traffic around the town.

The plan is focused on the removal of the car from the town centre in several ways, and this in itself will have a big impact on the viability of many businesses:

- Reduction in on street parking as discussed earlier
- Cars entering and leaving the Fairgreen site would do so only from the east of the complex with the closure of the entrances on the west of the complex. The plans outlined fail to show in detail the projected routes for cars to access the east entrances. One would have to suggest that for stakeholders to provide an opinion they must be furnished with all of the relevant information.
- With cars entering and exiting the Fairgreen from the east side of the complex, it is highly probable that most of the traffic will be removed from the town centre areas as they may head directly for the N80.
- The proposal to close the vehicular entrance of Carlow Shopping Centre onto Kennedy Avenue side would have a big impact on any patrons arriving from the west of the town. This would also see patrons arriving from the Laois side, being directed around the N80 to the east of the Fairgreen and missing out on the centre of town.
- If traffic is being re-routed out of the town centre how are our businesses to show case their products? Passing trade shall be greatly diminished.

My Carlow – The Narrative

At the onset of the drafting of the My Carlow plans, it was advised that the outputs from the work carried out by Studio Weave on behalf of Visual and the Heritage Council would be used to feed into the plans for developing the Carlow Vision. The work by Studio Weave was about discovering the narrative for Carlow and it highlighted some of the key assets in Carlow.

At the top of the list was The River Barrow, followed by Innovation, Culture, Green Pockets, Heritage and the Unique Location. The plans “A vision for Carlow”, fail to include reference to many of these aspects and while we acknowledge the area covered by the vision is not directly beside the River Barrow, there is scope to bring it into the design, a design that needs to continue to showcase Carlow and what we have to offer and tell the story of the people who call Carlow home.

My Carlow - Local

The works that come out from the vision must ensure that we highlight the great heritage and strengths of Carlow. We need to ensure that local ingredients/products like Carlow limestone are used as the plans are not just about building and developing for now, rather planning, designing and developing for a sustainable future for the town and county.

Tullow Street

The plans for Upper Tullow Street would have a big impact on the street and the premises on the street in several ways.

- The reduction in the number of car parking spaces will affect the businesses along the street, the plans also does not currently differentiate between the allocation of loading and accessible bays along the allocated parking space.
- The plans propose the closure of the Carlow Shopping Centre Entrance on Kennedy Avenue. That would see all vehicular traffic exiting and entering via Tullow Street. In the last 6 months to 22nd May, over 251,221 cars used the car park at Carlow Shopping Centre. When entering 63% arrived via Kennedy Avenue and 54% of all cars exited via the same route.
- Analysis over the last 30 days saw over 36,345 cars enter the car park, that is on average 1,211 per day. With that volume of traffic exiting onto Tullow Street it would see congestion problems further along at Dublin Street or Shamrock Plaza. The figures from the Car Park show higher levels of entry and exit at specific times.
- The plans for Tullow Street do bring some positives, the proposed work at the Shamrock square junction are vital and need to happen. Currently at the junction the only safe way to cross Tullow street using pedestrian crossings requires the pedestrian to firstly cross Barrack Street, then Staplestown Road, then Green Lane. The only crossing located on Tullow Street is at the Library, the far end of the street.

Kennedy Avenue

The plans along Kennedy avenue, while acknowledging the potential future developments, do not allow for what may happen should those sites move for development in the very near future.

- The removal of entrance/exit to the Carlow Shopping Centre car park would have a major impact on the ability of the facility to draw people to utilise the space and the immediate surrounds. The entrance is the primary entrance and exit point from the car park, as highlighted previously.
- In addition, with the proposed removal of this entrance/exit we are putting a restriction in place for vehicular traffic coming from the west. This would either see cars go around to the Fairgreen or to stay away from the town completely.

Town Centre Link

The inclusion of the linkage from Fairgreen to Carlow Shopping centre is something that is well overdue and that the Chamber have asked for over numerous years.

The plans to further develop the link with the addition of retail space would raise several concerns:

- Carlow currently has a high level of vacancy, and the addition of units in this area would further weaken the future potential for Lower Tullow Street to attract new tenants to the existing vacant units.
- The addition of these units would also see the potential reduction in available car parking spaces in the Carlow Shopping Centre Car Park, that is in addition to the reduction of spaces on street.

Barrack Street

The proposals in the plan for Barrack Street bring a considerable level of change to the area that will impact on the businesses currently sited on the street. The impacts will be both positive and negative, with the new link route from Fairgreen to Carlow Chopping Centre hopefully helping to increase direct footfall to the area. Several areas of concern include:

- With a proposed reduction of 55% in the number of on street parking spaces, this will impact greatly on businesses like Carpenters Funeral Home, and the Off Licences.
- Bethany House located on the southern end of the street offers a range of vital HSE services to people locally and in the wider rural community. In many instances it is vital that people using these services can easily access and park in direct proximity.

Potato Market

The plans to redevelop the Potato Market into a space which will be more open and usable for events and festivals is welcome, however there are several concerns which must be addressed and reviewed.

- The proposals do not offer any suggestion as to how deliveries to the commercial premises in the area would be handled. The nearest noted spaces for same would be on Tullow Street and Kennedy Avenue, a distance that is not feasible for manually transferring high volumes of stock, and in both instances the allocated bays are located on the opposite sides of the road away from the Potato Market.
- The removal of the taxi rank and the railing alongside will help to open the space further; however, it is also a very important part of the life in the centre of town. It is important to retain it in proximity and to ensure that there is either adequate space, on occasion the existing rank is not able to cope with the number of taxis queuing and these in turn causes problems as they park briefly in other non-designated taxi areas.
- The closing of the Potato Market on a permanent basis to traffic is of major concern to the business operators in the area, especially as many of them depend on customers being able

to access via vehicle for several reasons. Restricting this would severely impact on their ability to trade. The area should be reviewed with a plan to allow for a shared usage where traffic may be closed off as required to facilitate for events and festivals, rather than on a full closure.

Conclusion

It is vital that we redevelop the town centre of Carlow, however it is also important that the design, feel and flow of this work is correct for Carlow, its people and its business.

The plan shows several very good and positive aspects, including the linkage of the Fairgreen to Carlow Shopping Centre, and the enhancement of the streetscape across the public realm. There is concern that the design would see a shift in both vehicular and pedestrian movements more eastwards away from the areas of Lower Tullow Street, removing people from the central areas of the town through the reduction in on street parking, access and egress to Carlow Shopping Centre car park and the changes to Potato Market.

Additionally, the vacancy level in Carlow currently stands above the national average at 13.7%. If we develop further stock of units, who will we get to fill the existing and new units?