



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Rathdowney Town Centre First Plan



 Future Analytics

October 2023

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Executive Summary



Executive Summary

Introduction

This town centre first plan sets out the vision, objectives and actions needed to enhance the vitality of Rathdowney's town centre and make it a strong engine for enhancing the quality of life of the town's residents. The plan was devised in companion with a parallel effort to create a new Town Team for Rathdowney. The new Team brings together representatives from the public, private and community sectors. The plan and Town Team complement each other. Without a good plan which faces up to the town's issues, there is a risk that the efforts of the Town Team become less strategic. Similarly, without an effective Town Team, there is a significantly reduced chance of the plan's recommendations being implemented.

The Plan and the creation of the Rathdowney Town Team are a reaction to the Government's Town Centre First Policy and the funding provided to support it. Laois County Council decided to use the available funding to activate the latent potential within Rathdowney. Going forward, Laois County Council will be key partners with the Town Team.

Process

The plan's methodology was formulated according to the requirements of Laois County Council and the Government's Town Centre First Policy. At the core of the process was a strong programme of public consultation. This was vital to ensure the plan was the right fit for the town. As part of the creation of this report key deliverables included:

- Socio-demographic analysis.
- Vacancy and dereliction analysis, including the identification of opportunity sites.
- Spatial and public realm analysis.
- Transport, active travel and parking analysis.
- The use of techniques such as a competitive advantage analysis and the cascade of choices to ascertain the suitability of actions.
- Appropriate Assessment Screening Report and SEA Screening.

Vision

A strong, bespoke vision, proportional to available resources and reflective of Rathdowney's situation was created. All the plan's objectives and actions support the fulfilment of the moderately ambitious vision below:

For Rathdowney to best use its advantages in location and built form to improve the quality of life of its residents and those who come to live in the town.

Objectives

In keeping with the vision, a set of objectives were devised to concentrate efforts, formulate actions and measure progress. The objectives below reflect the outcomes of stakeholder consultation and the lessons learnt in other comparable locations of good regeneration practice.

1. To use strong public realm design to facilitate and encourage residents to use the town centre more.
2. To support the creation of a vibrant business sector.
3. To make the town centre more walkable and accessible for all.
4. To increase usage of public transport.
5. To support community organisations in their future plans to make Rathdowney a better place in which to live.

Executive Summary

6. To improve the mental and physical health of residents by increasing opportunities to meet each other, play and exercise.
7. To nurture community spirit by celebrating the town's heritage and its evolving multi-cultural character.
8. To substantially reduce the prevalence of vacant and derelict sites in the town centre
9. To support and promote more environmentally sustainable lifestyles.
10. To concentrate housing and where appropriate – businesses and services – as close as possible to the town centre.

Key Actions

There are 27 actions in total. The actions are broadly split between five transformational actions and a series of smaller actions which support and build upon the larger scale recommendations. The larger actions are likely to be principally led by the County Council in consultation with the Town Team. The smaller scale actions are likely to be led by the Town Team in consultation with the County Council. The clear focus of the larger, more ambitious actions is to utilise two of the town's competitive advantages (i.e. streetscape, pond and Square and Rathdowney's flat, compact nature). The five transformative actions are:

1. Public realm works in the Square, including the construction of a pavilion.
2. Developing the Pond and the surrounding area for recreation.
3. Main Street public realm works and traffic calming.
4. Public realm improvements to Ossory St.
5. Improved link at Cascade St., including a walkway connecting Cascade St. with the GAA pitch and soccer ground.

Detailed design and implementation of all the actions will be completed in close cooperation with relevant stakeholders, especially any impacted landowners, residents, businesses and community groups.

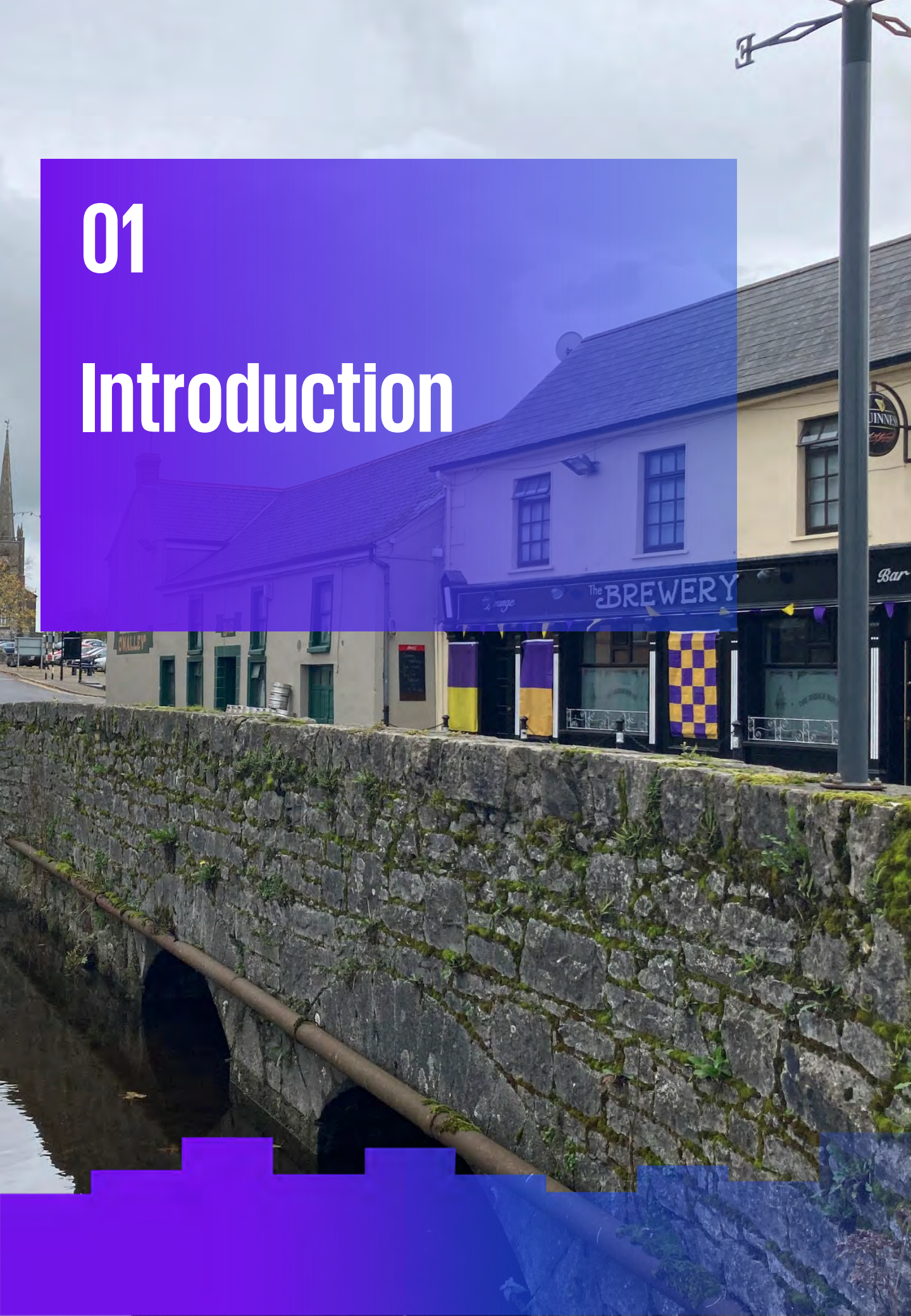
Implementation

Creating a good plan is only the start of a process. Without determined and adaptive implementation by the Town Team, Laois County Council and other key stakeholders the vision will not be realised. The proposed actions are mindful of the existing capabilities and management systems being put in place (i.e. the Town Team). Nonetheless, some modest changes to capabilities and management systems have been deemed necessary to permit full implementation of this plan. These include:

- Regular training and mentoring on regeneration strategy, governance, obtaining grants and local fundraising.
- The creation as required of themed sub-committees within the Town Team.
- The use of this report as the basis of more detailed work programmes for the Town Team and Laois County Council.

01

Introduction



The Project Brief



Stronger Together mural in the Square, Rathdowney

The purpose of the Town Centre First Plan for Rathdowney is to provide a vision for the ongoing development of the town, building buy-in from existing property owners and local communities. The Town Centre First Plan is intended to offer a comprehensive path forward for the revitalisation of the town as a desirable place to live and work within the context of the Town Centre First Policy.

The Town Centre First Plan will:

- Ensure the renewed engagement with the local community captures ideas and ambitions for the future development.
- Identify appropriate development opportunities and projects to support regeneration of the town centre.
- Provide a basis for the town to seek support from multiple funding streams (e.g. Rural Regeneration Funding (RRDF) and Town and Village Renewal Scheme).
- Help to maximise State investment.
- Offer an opportunity to deliver a coordinated programme of investment for the area, rather than funding being sought and spent on individual projects on an ad-hoc basis.

The Town Analysis and Appraisal includes a review of the physical character of the town (i.e. the pattern of buildings, streets, spaces) and its setting within the landscape (i.e. topography, views, rivers/streams, nature and planting), as well as all community and public realm projects.

As part of the process of assessing the character of the town, practical issues are addressed, such as enhancing the public realm to create more attractive streets and spaces, and review of traffic management and parking management, so as to reduce the impact of private vehicles on the public realm and living environment.

The outcome of this process is a plan for the town's future development and a vision for going forward. A number of key possible projects are identified to achieve this vision which are capable of being developed and refined at a later stage through available funding measures.

Rathdowney Context

Rathdowney is a small town of attractive, traditional character located about 30 km south-west of Portlaoise, in the south-west corner of Co. Laois between the M7 and M8 motorways. The town is centred upon the junction of the Abbeyleix to Templemore road (R433) and the Borris-in-Ossory to Johnstown road (R435).

Rathdowney is defined as one of three ‘Small Towns and Villages’ in the Laois County Development Plan 2021–2027, which is the fourth tier of the County’s settlement hierarchy. The population of the town in 2016 was 1,208, a decline from 1,271 in 2011, though is projected to increase to 1,425 persons by 2031 (NPF). The town provides a range of services and facilities for the population of the surrounding hinterland. It is a focus for social and economic interaction in the south-west of the county and provides linkages to smaller settlement nodes in the district, such as Errill and Donaghmore and further afield.

Despite its strategic location, Rathdowney is situated in a part of Laois which is under far less influence from the Dublin Metropolitan area than the eastern part of the County, and larger towns such as Portlaoise. As a result, it has experienced less growth and development pressures. Agriculture is the key industry in the surrounding region, and forms an important part of the town’s economy and character. The largest employer within Rathdowney is the Dawn Meats facility in the centre of the town.

Like many smaller rural towns, Rathdowney experienced significant challenges following the economic crash of 2008. The town centre contains a large number of vacant commercial properties, as well as a number of derelict sites, which have significant impact on the vibrancy and general environment of the town.

This Town Centre First Plan provides the opportunity for Rathdowney to capitalise on its main strengths and advantages to drive regeneration of the town centre as a great place in which live, work and visit.



The Methodology

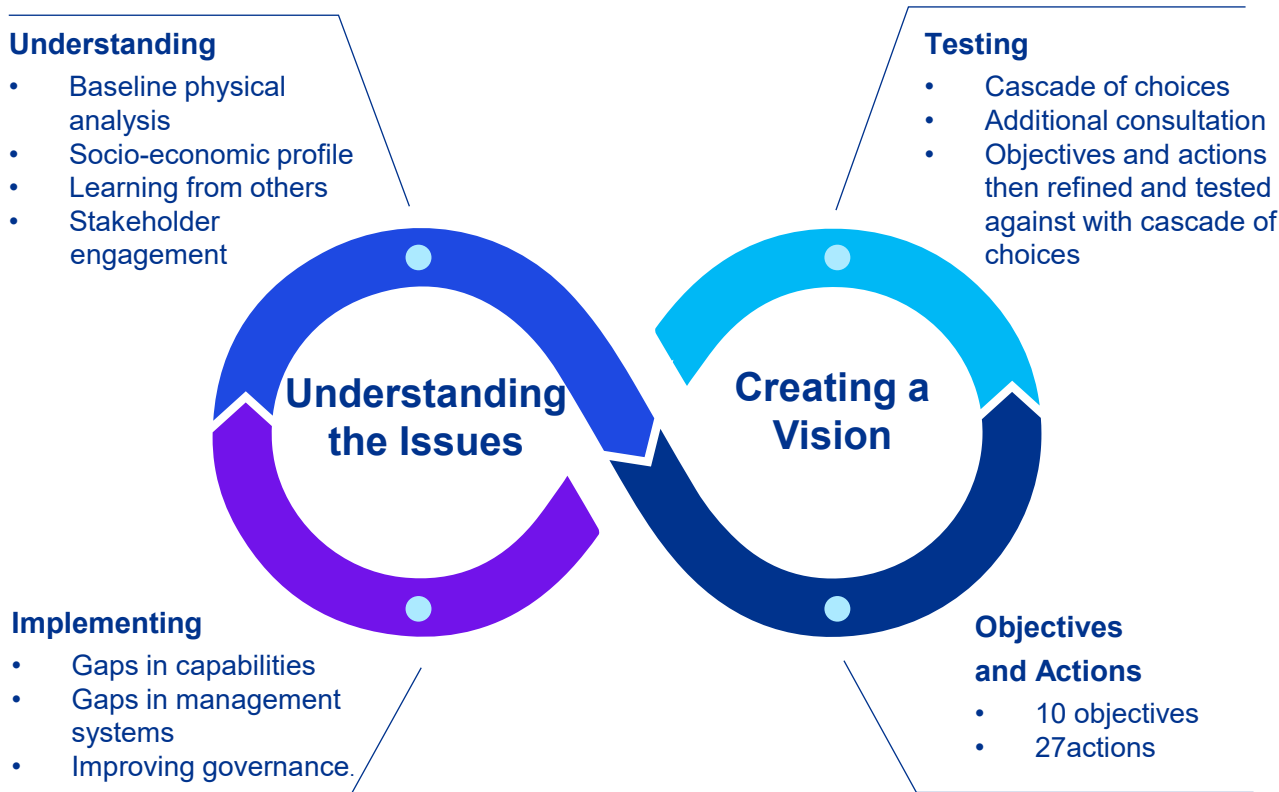


Figure 1.1: Overall approach

The methodology used was formulated according to the requirements of Laois County Council and the government’s “Town Centre First a Policy Approach for Irish Towns” (TCFAPA). It drew upon the consultant team’s breadth of experience and learnings from previous and current town centre regeneration plans. The result is a bespoke plan that drives sustainable economic and community development which when implemented will lead to a more prosperous and inclusive Rathdowney.

Our approach included the following key deliverables:

- Two phases of stakeholder and community consultation. This was vital to ensure the success of the plan and that it meets the needs of residents and other key stakeholders. There was an initial learning/understanding phase of consultation following by a testing phase, once a full draft plan was ready.

- Socio-demographic analysis.
- Vacancy and dereliction analysis, including the identification of opportunity sites.
- Spatial and public realm analysis.
- Transport, active travel and parking analysis.
- Creating an appropriate vision.
- The use of techniques such as a competitive advantage analysis and the cascade of choices to ascertain the suitability of actions.
- Appropriate Assessment Screening Report and SEA Screening.

The overall approach is illustrated in figure 1.1.

Overriding Status of the Plan

Implementing this Plan will involve Laois County Council helping to facilitate, promote, support and coordinate stakeholders in their activities in a way that is consistent with existing and emerging plans setting out public policy for sustainable development, including that relating to the economy, communities, infrastructure, land use tourism and environmental protection and environmental management.

This Plan is situated alongside this hierarchy of statutory documents that has been subject to environmental assessment/screening for environmental assessment, as appropriate, and forms the decision-making and consent-granting framework. The Plan does not provide consent or establish a framework for granting consent and will not be binding on any decisions relating to the granting of consent.

The Plan fully aligns with the provisions of the existing National Planning Framework, Ireland 2040, National Climate Action Plan 2023, Housing For All 2021, the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy 2019-2031 and the current County Development Plan, all of which have been subject to legislative requirements relating to public consultation and environmental assessment/screening for environmental assessment. As such, the Plan is wholly subject to the requirements of the provisions set out in these documents, including provisions relating to sustainable development, environmental protection and environmental management that have been integrated into these documents, including through SEA and AA processes, and does not introduce any alterations or additions to those provisions.

In order to be realised, projects included in this Plan (in a similar way to other projects from any other sectors) will have to comply, as relevant, with various legislation, policies, plans and programmes (including requirements for lower-tier Appropriate Assessment, Environmental Impact Assessment and other licencing requirements as appropriate) that form the statutory decision-making and consent-granting framework. It is a specific provision of this Plan to ensure that all of the provisions from the County Development Plan identified as mitigation in the accompanying Screening for SEA and AA reports shall be complied with throughout the implementation of this Plan.

02

Policy Review



National Policy Context

National Planning Framework: Ireland 2040

Project Ireland 2040 is the government's long-term overarching strategy to make Ireland a better country for all of its people. There are various strands to Project Ireland 2040, with perhaps the most significant component being the National Planning Framework (NPF). The NPF outlines the Government's high-level strategy for the future sustainable development of Ireland.

NPF has identified ten core principles termed as 'National Strategic Outcomes' (NSO), to frame all policies and objectives. NSO looks at strengthening rural economies and communities (No.3); to create a strong economy supported by enterprise, innovation and skills (No.5); and to enhance amenity and heritage (No.7).

National Development Plan 2021 – 2030

The National Development Plan (NDP) 2021-2030 is an update and revision of the original NDP 2018-2027, that sets out the Governments over-arching investment strategy and budget for 2021-2030. This underpins the implementation of the National Planning Framework and has a significant focus on improving the delivery of infrastructure projects to ensure speed of delivery and value for money. The NDP will support a total public investment of €165 billion over the period 2021 to 2030 and will aim to ensure continuous cross-sectoral regional development and public investment.

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) supports the National Strategic Outcome in relation to "Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities". The RRDF is a capital spending investment programme of €1 billion investment in supporting rural renewal to enable towns, villages, and outlying areas to grow sustainably. The RRDF can fund projects including (but not limited to):

- Measures that support the regeneration and development of towns and villages.
- Projects that support job creation, entrepreneurship, and innovation within rural areas, with a strong preference for digital hubs, enterprise hubs, creative hubs, or training facilities.
- Projects that encourage the co-location of facilities to create a focal point of activity in a town or village.
- Provision of infrastructure projects that improve and support housing and/or commercial development.
- The development of community or public facilities to support towns and village populations, including social infrastructure provision.

National Policy Context

Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021 – 2025

Our Rural Future is a framework for the development of rural Ireland over the period of 2021-2025. It seeks to address challenges that rural Ireland faces, and the opportunities that exist for rural economies and communities to benefit. It contains 152 actions which will be delivered by the Government, Local Authorities and State Agencies over the next five years. Within this there are 9 key deliverable areas, covering the 152 actions, which are outlined below.

Key Deliverable Areas:

- Optimising Digital Connectivity and Supporting Remote Working
- Supporting Employment and Careers in Rural Areas
- Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages
- Enhancing Participation, Leadership and Resilience in Rural Communities
- Enhancing Public Services in Rural Areas
- Transitioning to a Climate Neutral Society
- Supporting the Sustainability of Agriculture, the Marine & Forestry
- Supporting the Sustainability of our Islands and Coastal Communities
- Successful Implementation of the Policy.

Town Centre First: A Policy Approach for Irish Towns 2022

Town Centre First, built on the foundations of the National Planning Framework and Our Rural Future, represents a new approach to the development of our towns, where local communities and local businesses can be central to reimagining their own towns and planning their own futures. With towns and villages across Ireland facing significant challenges and opportunities that require a coordinated and comprehensive approach, Town Centre First (TCF) aims to facilitate that response by towns of all sizes across the country so that their centres can function as the sustainable and vibrant heart of the communities they serve, in ways that are adaptable and appropriate to 21st Century needs.

Rathdowney has been selected as one of 26 pathfinder towns, which will act as demonstrators of the Town Centre First approach and lead best practice to inform the approach for towns that are at an earlier stage in the TCF process. As a pathfinder town, Rathdowney has been provided funding to develop a Town Centre First Plan that will support the development of a unique vision for the town as well as outline specific interventions required to deliver on the vision.

The delivery of the Town Centre First policy approach is supported by different public funding schemes, including the Rural Regeneration and Development Funding (RRDF) and the Croí Conaithe (Towns) Fund Scheme, and Local Development Strategy Funding.

National Policy Context

Climate Action Plan 2023

The Climate Action Plan 2023 sets out a roadmap for taking decisive action to reduce Ireland's emissions by 51% by 2030 and reach net zero no later than 2050. It contains a suite of goals, objectives and actions spanning across all industries and sectors towards achieving these targets of halving national emissions by 2030 and net zero emissions by 2050. It establishes a legally binding framework with clear targets and commitments, to ensure the necessary structures and processes are in place to deliver our national, EU and international climate goals and obligations in the near and long term.

€5 billion of the total €9.5 billion in additional carbon tax receipts over the period of the newly adopted NDP have been allocated to increase capital investment levels in energy efficiency. In addition, our National Resilience and Recovery Plan commits €518 million to prioritising advancing the green transition to significantly reform and direct relevant funding towards decarbonising projects such as retrofitting, ecosystem resilience and regeneration, climate mitigation and adaptation, and green data systems. Rathdowney, as with all towns in Ireland has a role to play in helping Ireland deliver on the targets within this plan.

National Biodiversity Action Plan 2021-2027

The Third National Biodiversity Action Plan (NBAP 2021-2027) is the current statutory Biodiversity Action Plan of Ireland. However, cognizance will also be given to the upcoming Draft National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023 – 2027. The Fourth NBAP is currently at consultation stage and is currently being finalized to account for public consultations and further stakeholder feedback. The Third NBAP emphasizes Ireland's continuing commitment to meeting and acting on its obligations to protect the country's biodiversity for the benefit of future generations through a set of targeted objectives and actions. The targets in the plan are aligned with the strategic objectives of the previous biodiversity plans. The NBAP emphasizes the role of local authorities in Biodiversity conservation.

Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy 2021

Remote working is at the forefront of working lives as a result of COVID-19, while remote working was already seen in Ireland pre-COVID-19, it has since accelerated with remote work being a central part of the workplace today and in the future. This strategy seeks to ensure remote working is a permanent feature in the Irish workplace and build on the progress made in the adoption of remote working to date in a way that will maximise the economic, social, and environmental benefits. Developing and leveraging remote working infrastructure is one of three key pillars of this strategy, with objectives regarding the mapping of commuter, skills and childcare facilities data to inform future hub development and objectives involving investment in future hub development outlined in this pillar. The strategy has three key actions to support this objective, which are as follows:

1. Create a Conducive Environment
2. Develop and Leverage Remote Work Infrastructure
3. Build a Remote Work Policy and Guidance Framework

National Policy Context

Rathdowney is ideally positioned to support existing and new remote work hub developments, leveraging its wider services and employment functions for its peripheral rural hinterlands. The Rathdowney Brand Central Hub is supported by this policy.

Future Jobs Ireland 2019: Preparing Now for Tomorrow's Economy

The Future Jobs Ireland report was created to ensure Ireland's economy is well positioned to adapt and prosper in the future and aims to drive our development as a resilient, innovative, and globally connected economy, capable of coping with technological and other transformational changes ahead. Future Jobs Ireland is focused on five key pillars: Embracing Innovation and technological change, improving productivity, increasing labour force participation, enhancing skills and developing talent, and transitioning to a low carbon economy. By aligning with the five key pillars and their associated objectives, Rathdowney will be able to ensure it maintains a resilient and innovative economy ready to adapt and prosper in the future.

Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025

Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 was created to benefit all people living in Ireland, companies operating here or planning to establish here, those working here, and those hoping to work here. The strategy builds on the progress made under the previous strategy 'Towards Tomorrow's Skills' and outlines objectives and actions over the next 10 years. The Strategy aims to provide:

- A focus on providing skills development opportunities that are relevant to the needs of learners, society, and the economy.
- Employer participation in skills development and effective use of skills in their organisations, to become more productive and competitive.
- Constant improvement and evaluation of teaching and learning quality at all stages of education
- More people across Ireland engaging in lifelong learning
- A focus on active inclusion, to support participation in education and training and the labour market
- Support for an increase in the supply of skills to the labour market

Small towns such as Rathdowney have the opportunity to benefit from the objectives and actions outlined within Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 to improve the skills and quality of the towns workforce.

Regional Policy Context

Regional Policy Context

Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern & Midlands Regional Assembly 2019-2031

The Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly is a regional-level authority covering nine counties containing twelve local authorities and three sub-regions. County Laois is one of the counties within this regional assembly and is within the Midlands sub-region. In Rathdowney's case, the RSES has identified challenges facing rural places and as such contains a number of Regional Policy Objectives (RPO) relating to "Healthy Placemaking", which is a key principle of this RSES. Examples of these RPO's are below:

RPO 4.77: "In development plan policy local authorities shall prioritise the regeneration of rural towns and villages through identification of significant regeneration projects for rural villages and rural areas which could harness untapped assets with community and wider private and public sector support and investment including the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund."

RPO 9.27: "EMRA will support local authorities to work with local communities to promote historic towns in the Region in the practice of heritage led regeneration, to promote the sensitive and adaptive reuse of historic building stock and industrial structures where appropriate, and to strengthen their capability to draw down European and national funding".

Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024

The Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024 was published in 2022 and is the third Regional Enterprise Plan for the region since 2015, following up on the Action Plan for Jobs 2015-2017, the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan to 2020. Key aims of the plan include sustaining the momentum in employment growth achieved since 2015, reducing unemployment, increasing the numbers of people that live and work in the Midlands and improving labour force participation, particularly in relation to female participation rates.

The plan consists of three strategic objectives that build on successes in the region and are aligned with national priorities in areas such as resilience, climate transition and digitalisation, innovation and smart specialisation, and ecosystem strengthening and competitiveness.

The three strategic objectives are as follows:

Climate Action: Transition to a climate neutral economy. This will include actions related to supporting low-carbon projects, realising the economic opportunities from the low-carbon transition and the development of climate action plans.

Build on achievements to date in sectors in which the region has a competitive advantage through Smart Specialisation and wider adoption of digitalisation within business, leveraging the new Technological University of the Shannon. This includes actions related to realising the business, industry and skills opportunities arising from the establishment of the Technological University, positioning the region as an advanced manufacturing centre of excellence, and developing a smart connected technologies cluster.

Placemaking: Position the Midlands as a community of choice in which to live, create, study, work, visit, and invest. This includes actions related to further promoting the region, expanding the network of co-working facilities, implementing visitor experience plans and developing a food and drinks cluster.

Local Policy Context

Laois County Development Plan 2021 – 2027

The current Laois County Development Plan (LCDP) is for the period 2021-2027. Rathdowney is identified in the 'Towns and Villages' settlement hierarchy for Laois within the LCDP which is described as 'Towns and villages with local services and employment functions' (Figure 2.1). The population allocation within the NPF projects Rathdowney's population to reach 1,425 by 2031. While not identified as a Self Sustaining Town, the importance of the town and services in the South West of the County is recognised. Rathdowney is described as providing 'a range of services and facilities for the population of the immediately surrounding hinterland. It is a focus for social interaction in the west of the county, and provides linkages to the smaller settlement nodes [such as Errill and Donaghmore] in its district.'

While the LCDP written statement includes objectives directly relating to Rathdowney such as ED15 and TRANS 51, Volume 2 - Settlement Strategy of the LCDP includes a settlement strategy for Rathdowney that has 15 Written Objectives for Rathdowney, covering Built Form and Regeneration, Economic and Community Development and Infrastructure.

The mapped policies for Rathdowney are set out in Map 5.1 (A) (Figure 2.2). This establishes the extent of the Town Centre, proposed settlement boundary, and other zoning objectives for the town. One site on the western of the town zoned has been zoned for new residential development, while other undeveloped land within the town is zoned as established residential areas. An area of undeveloped land to the rear of Breslin's SuperValu has been zoned as 'Town Centre', allowing expansion of town centre uses, in addition to some other infill or industrial sites. The site of the Brand CENTRAL Hub, on the southern approach to the town, is zoned for Mixed Use development, while two undeveloped sites to the east and west of the town have been zoned for 'community-educational-recreational' use.

Local Policy Context

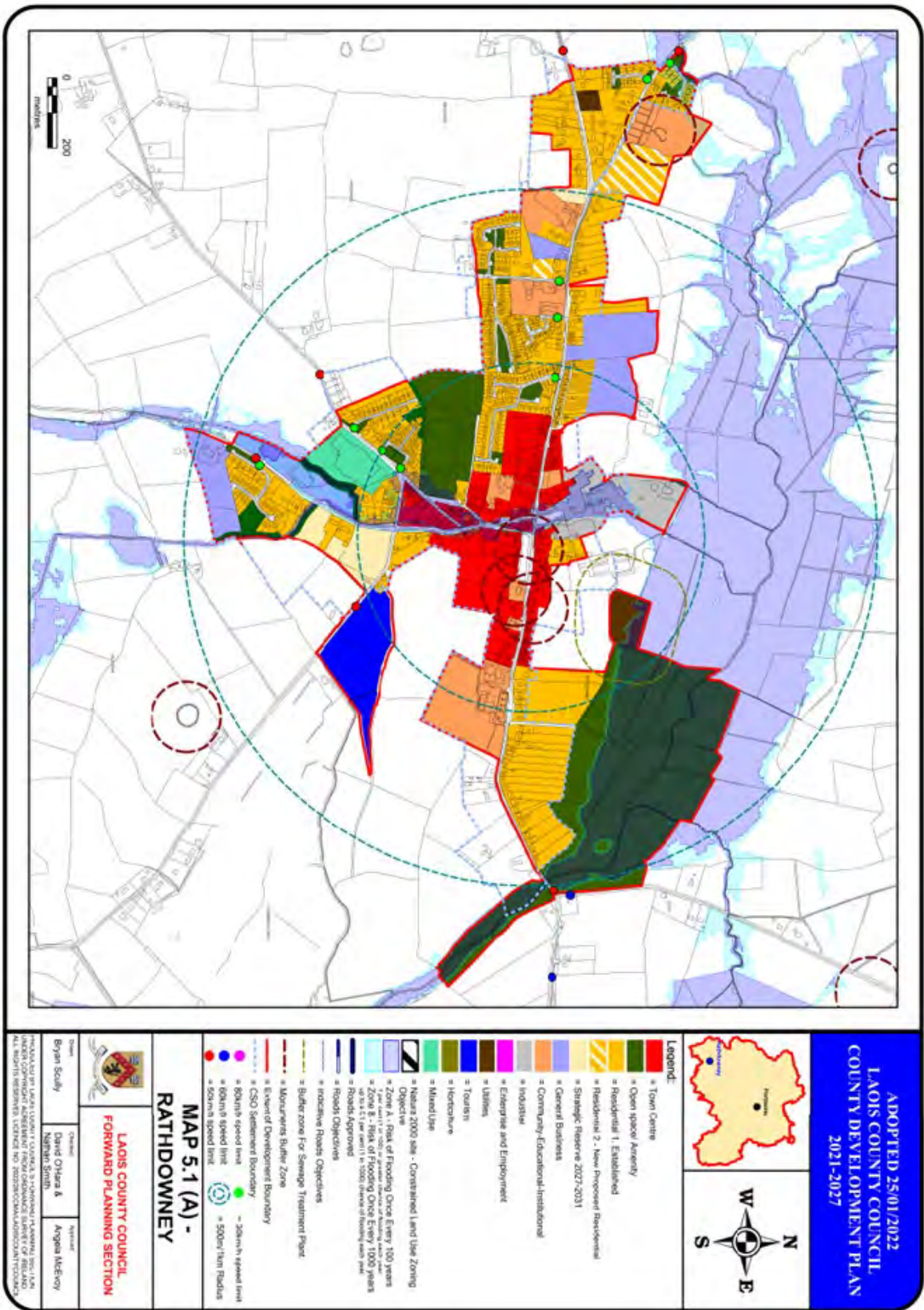


Figure 2.1: Mapped objectives for Rathdowney. Image Laois County Council

Local Policy Context

Laois County Local Economic and Community Plan 2023 – 2028

The Laois LECP 2016-2021 has expired but Laois County council has commenced the preparation of the Local Economic Community Plan 2023-2028. The purpose of the LECP, as provided for in the Local Government Reform Act 2014, is to set out, for a six-year period, the objectives and actions needed to promote and support the economic development and the local and community development of County Laois, both by Laois County Council directly and in partnership with other economic and community development stakeholders. The draft LECP 2023-2028 contains 10 proposed high level goals which are currently on display for public consultation (May 2023). It is important that the objectives and actions of the LECP are aligned with the TCF plan for Rathdowney.

Laois Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy 2021 – 2026

The Laois Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy 2021-2026 is a statutory plan which sets out a structure to protect and conserve the county's heritage with a collaborative effort from the key stakeholders and organizations. The strategy consists of eight key objectives ensuring the conservation and celebration of Laois Heritage and Biodiversity. Of particular relevance to this Town Centre First Plan is:

Objective 6: Place-making and Connecting Landscapes

With regards to this Town Centre First Plan, this strategy aims towards strengthening the townscapes and conserving the intrinsic qualities of all key towns including Rathdowney by establishing a stronger connection between heritage places across the County Laois.

Laois Digital Strategy 2020 – 2024

The Laois Digital Strategy 2020-2024 is a statutory plan aimed at enabling the population of County Laois to benefit from the infrastructure and technology across the county. The strategy includes three set of objectives. Them being: Short term, Medium term, and Long term actions. Of particular relevance to this Town Centre First Plan is

Strategic Aim 4: 'Promote the digital economy to stimulate economic opportunity and grow the Tourism and Heritage product of County Laois.'

Under this strategic aim, short term objective 8a specifically mentions Rathdowney in context of supporting the development of remote working in various locations throughout the county.

This target of this objective is to facilitate and support E-working experience of County Laois.

Relevant Funding Opportunities

Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF)

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) is a funding programme that is investing €1 billion in rural Ireland up to 2027. This fund is aimed:

- Supporting job creation in rural areas
- Addressing de-population of rural communities
- Supporting improvements in towns and villages.

RRDF funding is available for towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000, therefore Rathdowney would qualify for this fund. The funding is awarded through a competitive bid process, proposals are invited from Local Authorities and other locally/regionally based organisations such as Local Development Companies. Laois County Council we're recently successful in

their bid for the fourth call for Category 1 Applications in the RRDF. A total of €1,456,983.00 was awarded for the Durrow Community Enterprise Hub project. This experience in submitting winning bids to the RRDF application process can be used for a project suitable for Rathdowney.

Croí Cónaithe

The Croí Conaithe (Towns) is a grant introduced by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. This grant is a key initiative that underpins the policy objectives set out in Pathway Four 'Addressing Vacancy and the Efficient Use of our Existing Stock' of 'Housing for All'. The grant is aimed at addressing the blight of vacant and derelict properties across cities, towns and villages by bringing them back into use, adding vibrancy and providing new accommodation on these areas.

Croí Conaithe has two streams with different supports. Stream 1, which is the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant, provides people with a grant of up to a maximum of €50,000 to support the refurbishment of vacant properties, and up to €70,000 for derelict properties. Stream 2, which is the Ready to Build Scheme, provides local authorities with the ability to make serviced sites available, at a discount on the market value (up to a maximum of €30,000) within towns and villages to potential individual purchasers (building must be occupied as the principal private residence of the purchaser).

Town and Village Renewal Scheme

The Town and Village Renewal Scheme is a funding scheme first introduced in 2016 as a measure to rejuvenate rural towns and villages throughout Ireland. This scheme is part of "Our Rural Future - Ireland's Rural Development Policy 2021 - 2025" as is funded under Project Ireland 2040. Since the launch of the scheme over €149 million has been allocated to more than 1,600 projects.

This scheme is supported by the Town Centre First Policy and the priorities under the scheme are reviewed each year with the scheme revised as appropriate. The 2022 scheme had a particular focus on supporting bringing vacant and derelict buildings and sites back into use as multi-purpose spaces and supports small to medium capital projects with grant funding for projects ranging from €20,000 to €500,000.

Relevant Funding Opportunities

The 2022 scheme was targeted at two categories:

Category 1: Towns and villages up to 5,000 people (which Rathdowney would fall under)

Category 2: Town with a population of 5,001 to 10,000 people.

Details of the main scheme for 2023 are due to be announced.

This scheme is similar to the RRDF, is a competitive process where local authorities submit application forms to the Department of Rural and Community Development. There are two types of applications Local Authorities can submit, Building Acquisition Measure or Main TVRS Measure.

LEADER Community Led Local Development (CLLD)

The Leader programme is funded by both the EU and Irish Government and provides grants, advice and training to support business start -up, expand or develop new products. It enables community projects to be planned and carried out and assists projects that help the rural environment.

The LEADER programme is administered at a local level by 29 local action groups. The Laois local action group is the Laois Community Development Committee (LCDC) which is responsible for selecting and awarding LEADER funding to projects within their geographical area; for the previous LEADER programme Laois Partnership Company acted as an “implementing partner” for the LCDC in delivering the LEADER funding.

Miscellaneous funding opportunities

Aside from the funding opportunities described above, there are other grant schemes which would support the regeneration of Rathdowney. The following is a non-exhaustive list:

- Creative Ireland Grant Scheme
- Heritage Council Community Heritage Fund
- Dept. of Housing, Local Government and Heritage Community Monuments Fund
- SEAI Community and Business Grants
- Local Authority Community Grants
- Fáilte Ireland Small Grants Scheme
- Laois Local Enterprise Office Financial Supports
- NTA Active Travel Grants Programme

Please note that details of funding programmes, and amounts of funding available, set out this section are correct as of May 2023. These programmes are renewed and revised on a regular basis, with new funding streams also introduced.

03

Socio-Economic Assessment



Socio-Economic Assessment

A Snapshot of the Population and Economy

This section provides of an overview of socio-economic assessment undertaken for Rathdowney. Full details of this assessment can be found in Appendix 3.



8.3%

The population of Rathdowney has increased by 8.3% across the most recent census period (2016-2022) or about 100 people in real terms. This follows a fall in population in previous census periods.



8%

The population of Rathdowney is diverse. 8% of the population were non-Irish nationals at the time of 2016 census . However, evidence locally suggests that this has increased significantly since then.



17%

There is a sizable older population within Rathdowney, with a third of residents over the age of 50, and 17% of residential aged over 65 (compared to 13% nationally). Just over a quarter of the population is under the age of 19 with the remaining two fifths aged between 20 and 49.



77%

There is a high level of home ownership in Rathdowney 77% of homes in Rathdowney are owner occupied (compared to 67.6% Nationally). 9% of homes are privately rented, with 9.5% social rented or subsidised.



€ 6.8%

Housing in Rathdowney is more affordable than other town in the local region. The average price of a second-hand house in Rathdowney in 2022 (Q1-Q3) was €165,595 compared to €269,865 in Abbeyleigh. House prices are rising, but at a slower rate than other towns. Rathdowney has seen 6.8% increase in average sale price.



55%

One and two person households make up 55% of households in Rathdowney, while homes have an average of 2.6 bedrooms.

Socio-Economic Assessment

A Snapshot of the Population and Economy



As per Pobal’s Deprivation Index, the town of Rathdowney is generally considered “disadvantaged”, with parts considered very disadvantaged.



23%

As a smaller town in a rural heartland, farming and skilled and unskilled manual labour are prominent local skillsets, while managerial and professional skills make up 23% of the available workforce. 23% of workers in Rathdowney are in skilled trade occupations.



313

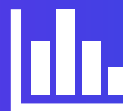
Rathdowney is an important Economic Hub for the local region, with up to 313 people working in the town. Dawn Meats is a major employer in the centre of the town. Of other business, the vast majority are involved in hospitality and the retail trade. There are a number of services and professional skills businesses in the town, including health and wellbeing.



52%

In 2016, Rathdowney’s level of employment was 51%, with an unemployment rate of 9.1%. This is generally consistent with figures for County Laois, and the significant increase in employment nationally since 2016 is likely reflected locally.

4.2% of the population were recorded as having a disability, the retired community formed 16.6% of the population, while students made up 9.8%

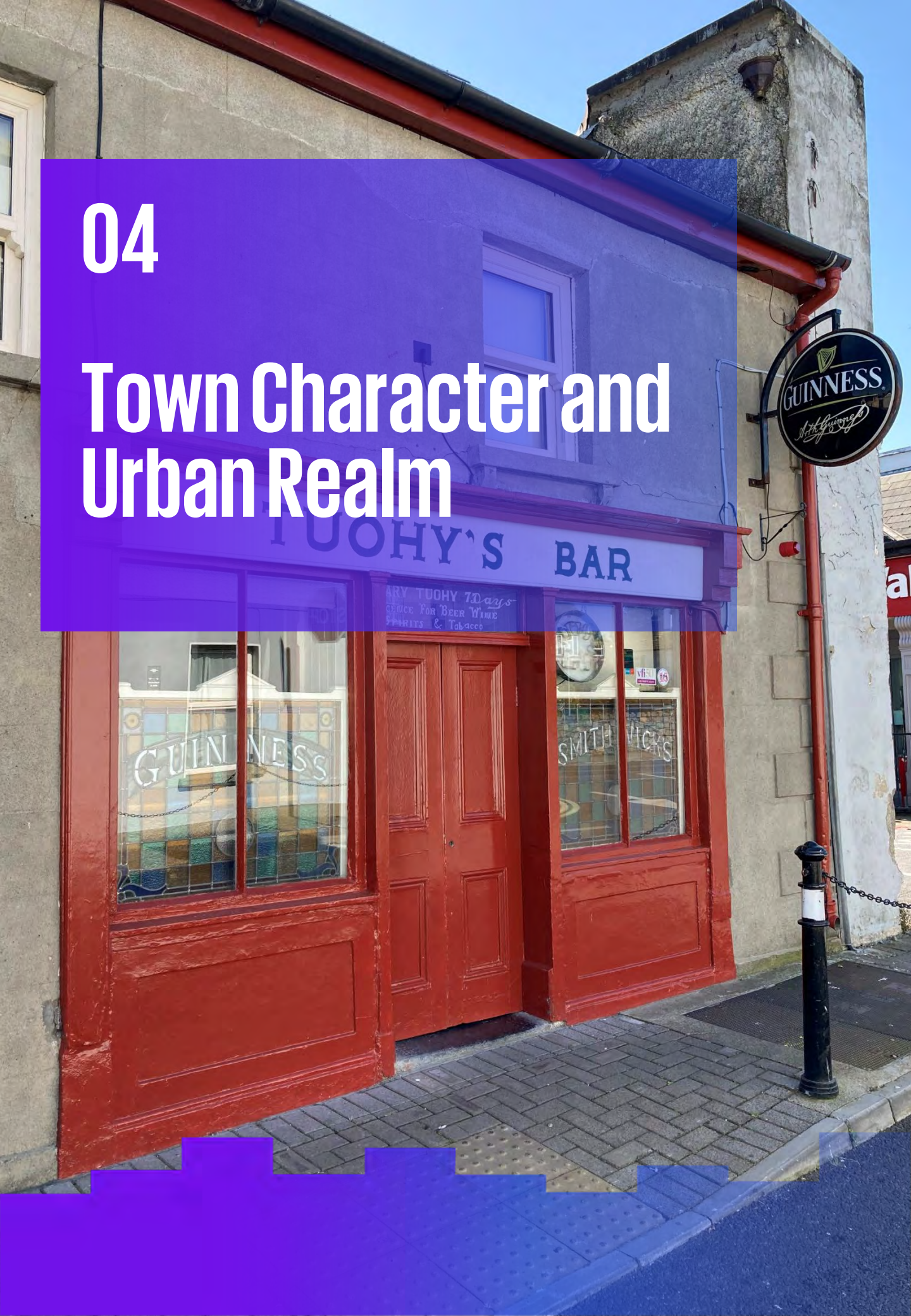


77%

Commerce and Trade (22%), Professional Services (19%) and Agriculture and Forestry (15%) account the highest employment categories within the Town

04

Town Character and Urban Realm



Landscape Setting

The landscape surrounding Rathdowney is strongly influenced by the River Erkina and its associated areas at Risk of Flooding. A major tributary of the river passes through the centre of the town from south to north.

The setting comprises productive lowland agricultural areas, primarily pastoral and tillage, characterised as a generally flat open landscape with long distance views towards the distant upland areas.

The surrounding field patterns tend to be large scale, bounded by deciduous hedgerows containing mature trees, creating an attractive landscape setting for the numerous estate houses and the settlement of Rathdowney.

Within this landscape are a number historic enclosures and ringforts, including Cody's Castle, a ruined tower house in Castletown to the north, and the ruined Castle of Rathpiper to the south of the settlement.

Large areas of the river lowlands to the north-east of the town are defined as Open Space Amenity in the County Development Plan.

Rathdowney Golf Club is located less than 1km south-east of the town centre at Coolnaboulwest, set within a rural parkland extending to around 42ha.



River Erkina to the west of Rathdowney



Rathdowney Golf Club

Historic Background

Rathdowney is named after a nearby ringfort, Ráth Domhnaigh, ‘Ringfort of the Church’, which is mentioned three times in the Annals of the Four Masters, in the years 874, 909 and 1069. The ráth was levelled in 1830.

The settlement of Rathdowney has existed since at least the 9th century, and historically forms part of the Kingdom of Osraige. Today the town remains part of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Ossory.

The town is focused on the crossing point of a tributary of the Erkina River, which has been an important feature of its historical development.

The ruined castle of Rathpiper lies less than 1km southeast of Rathdowney. It remained standing up to 1836.

The Croppy's Grave located in the town's central square is the still visible cobbled grave of a croppy revolutionary hanged and buried there in 1798.

Samuel Lewis describes the town of Rathdowney in 1831 as containing “...211 houses, which are in general indifferently built and of neglected appearance; the streets are ill paved, and the place has few indications of prosperity. There are an extensive brewery and a bolting-mill”.

Queen Victoria passed through Rathdowney during her first visit to Ireland in 1849, and described Rathdowney as ‘a quaint village, surrounded by hills’ and ‘an idyllic small town’.

Saint Andrew’s Church, the Church of Ireland parish church in Rathdowney, overlooks the town’s square and was built in 1818 on the site of an earlier medieval church.

A Roman Catholic church was constructed on the main street in the 1830s, but was demolished in the 1950s and replaced with a shrine and carpark.

The replacement larger Catholic Church of the Holy Trinity was built on the west side of the town.

The town prospered with the development of a brewery, dating back to the Perry family in 1800, brewers of great distinction. Queen Victoria granted Royal Warrant to supply ale to her household. By 1831 the Brewery boom had increased the population of the parish to 6,664, with 1,224 living in the town itself. Perrys were purchased by Irish Ale Breweries who eventually closed them down in 1967.

Prior to the Brewery, the only industries were two large corn mills at Donaghmore and the Convent Mill, plus a tanyard and some small clothing industries.

The Perry's Brewery site was purchased by Lyons Meats in 1968 and converted to a meat processing facility, which went into production in 1971. The Meadow Meats processing plant, part of the Dawn Meats Group, became the largest employer in the town.

References cited for historical information:

- *Lewis' Topographical Dictionary 1837*
- *Historic Environment Viewer, National Monuments Service*
- askaboutireland.ie (*Perrys Brewery*)

Key Spaces



Key town centre public spaces

Key Town Centre Public Spaces:

- Bridge crossing
- Mill Pond
- Main Street Public Park
- Mill Race/Mill Street
- The Square

Key Spaces



Wide junction of Main Street and Mill Street



Site of former RC Church on Main Street (new public park)

Key Spaces



The Mill Pond and view to former Brewery complex (right of image)



The Mill Race/Mill Street

Key Spaces



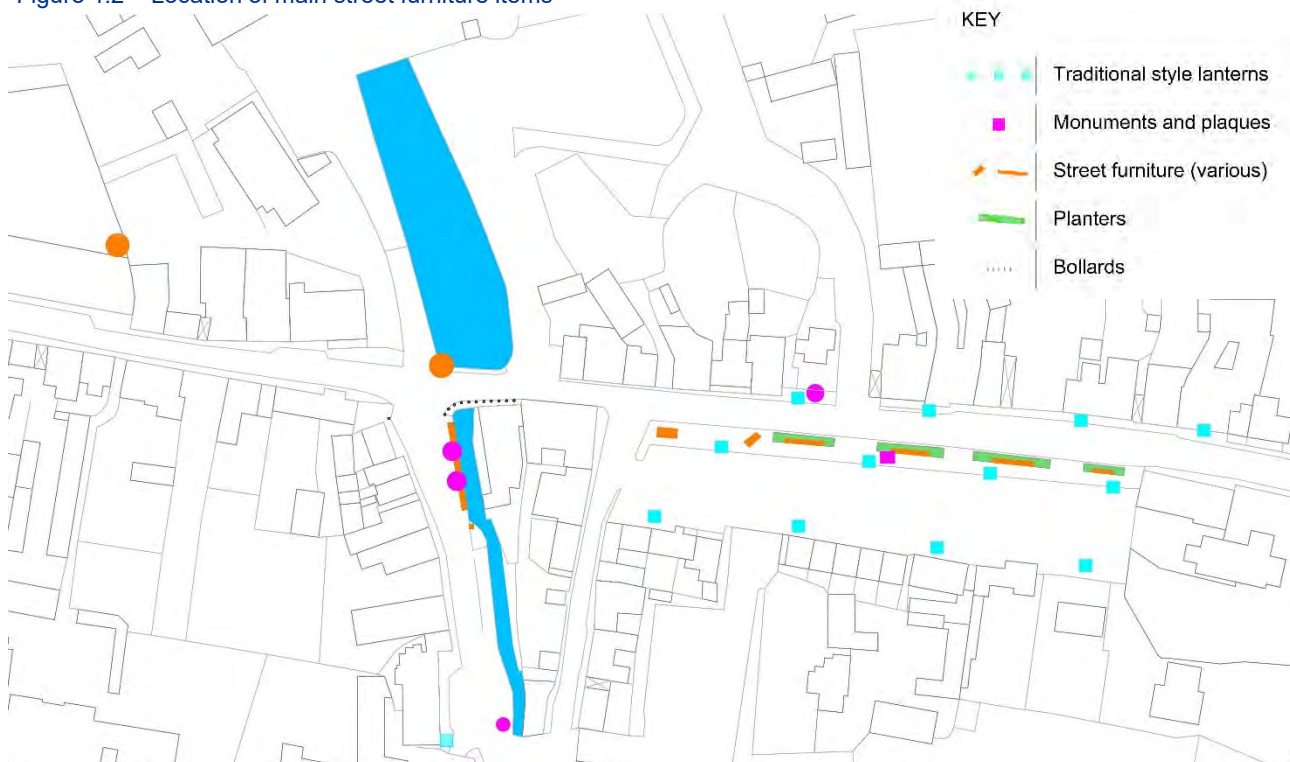
The Square facing east



The Square at night facing west

Townscape Artefacts

Figure 4.2 – Location of main street furniture items



The majority of the street furniture occurs within the heart of the town centre, between Mill Street and The Square, and comprises a mixture of different items and styles, such as:

- Low level concrete planters
- Sculptural (bog-wood) seat
- Various seats, including timber slatted along north edge of The Square (in poor condition)
- Memorial plaques and tourist information signage
- Single utilitarian cycle stand
- Traditional and utilitarian streetlights
- Litter bins and bollards

The town centre, in particular, would benefit from a de-cluttering of street furniture, with removal of poor quality or damaged items and replacement by higher quality more coherent types that do not hinder pedestrian movement or detract from the townscape.

Signage throughout the town, both regulatory and informational, should be rationalized to help reduce clutter and enhance legibility.



Freestanding limestone memorial fountain, c. 1920

Townscape Artefacts

Other street furniture items:



Temporary flower display on hand cart



The Croppy's Grave memorial



Mill Street seats and plaques



Lantern



Sculptural seat on The Square

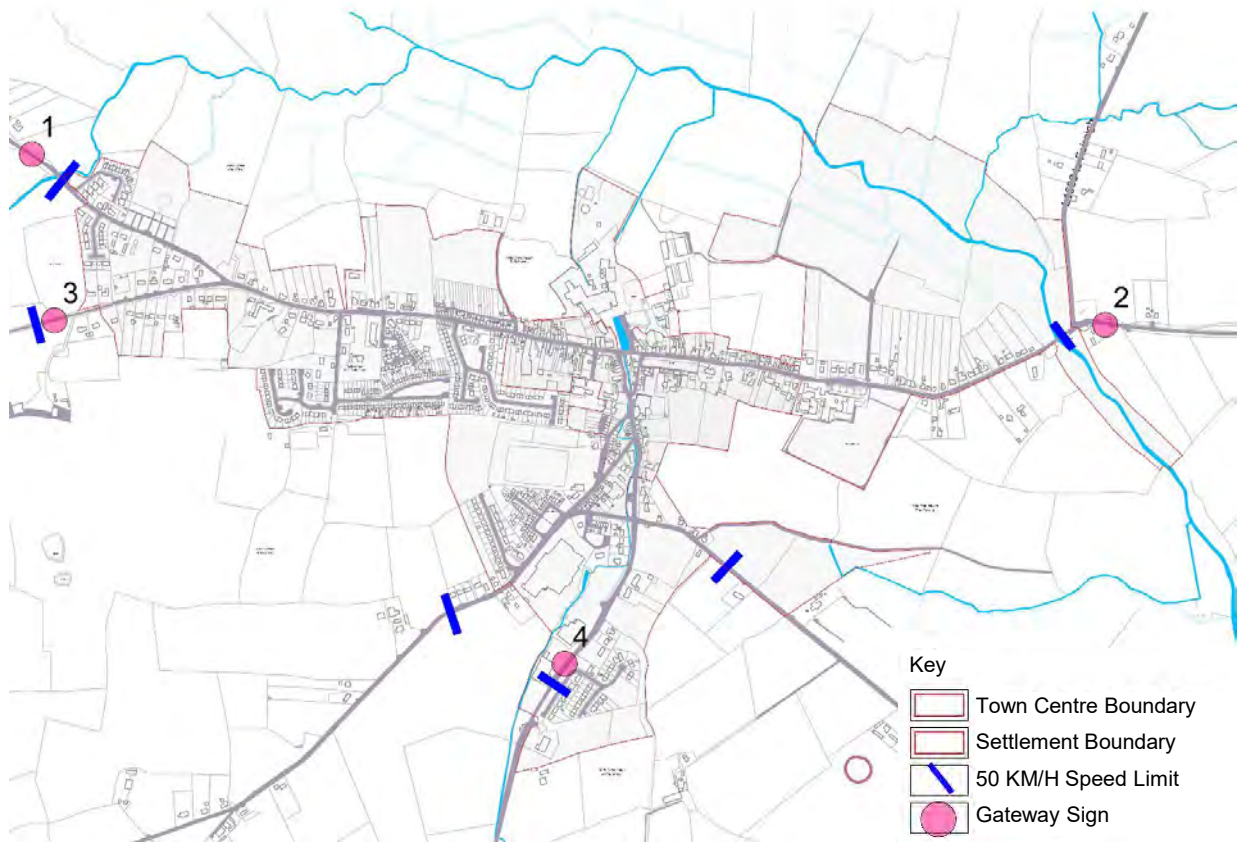


Poor quality street furniture



Bespoke seat and other miscellaneous items on The Square

Town Approaches



Town Gateways

Town Gateways:

1. R435 to Borris-in-Ossory
2. R433 to Ballacolla (M8) and Abbeyleix
3. R433 to Templemore
4. R435 to Johnstown

50km/h speed signs close to each Gateway and at:

L1557 to Templetuohy

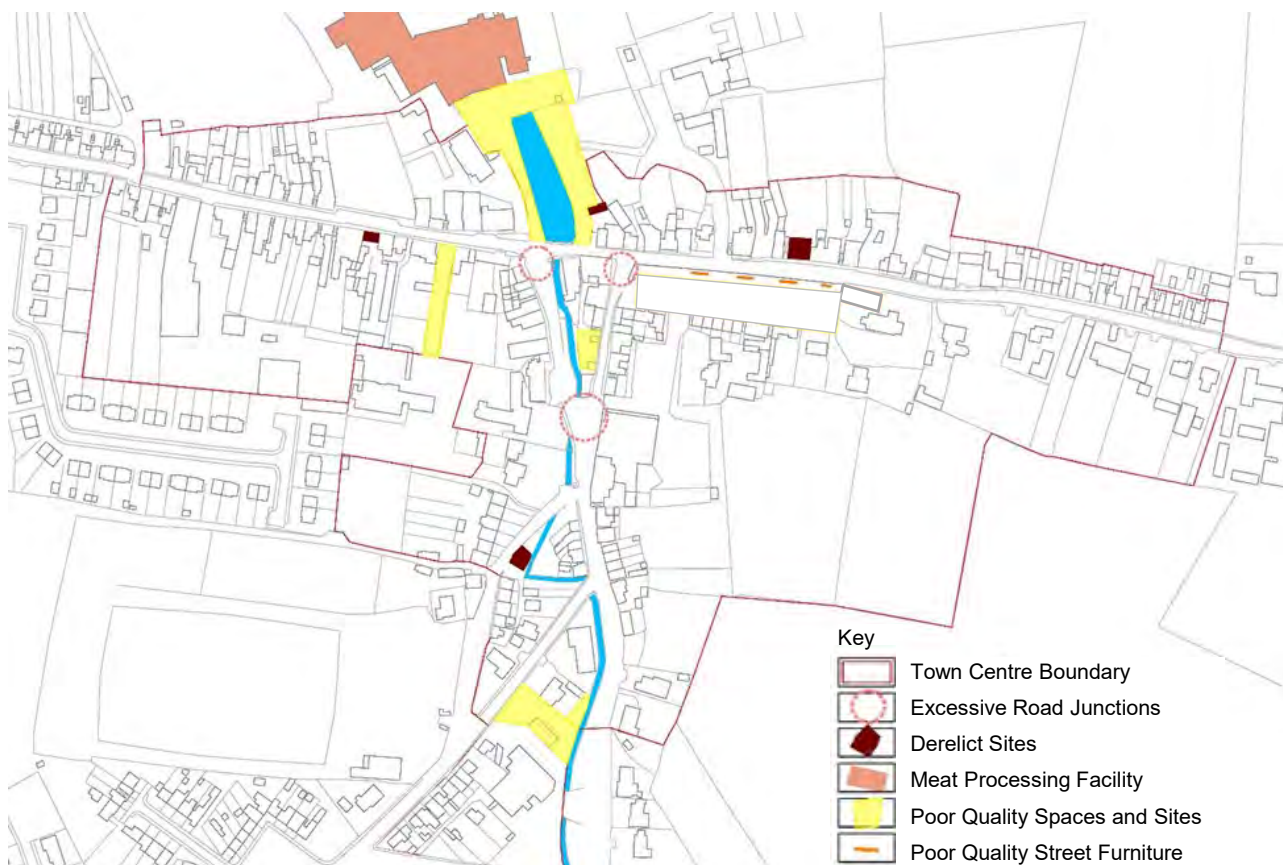
L1568 to Cullohill

Each gateway would benefit from increased definition, on the regional road approaches in particular, by traffic calming measures and improved signage that welcomes visitors and encourages a change in driver behavior through the built-up area.



Eastern entrance to Rathdowney on R433

Townscape Detractors



Location of main townscape detractors

The elements that tend to currently detract from the character of the town centre include:

- Derelict sites
- Unsightly buildings
- Excessive road junctions
- Excessive car parking on The Square
- Dominant and unsafe on-street car parking
- Inadequate width footpaths
- Poor surface finishes and street furniture
- Poor lighting
- Overhead cables and utilities infrastructure



Derelict heritage building

Townscape Detractors

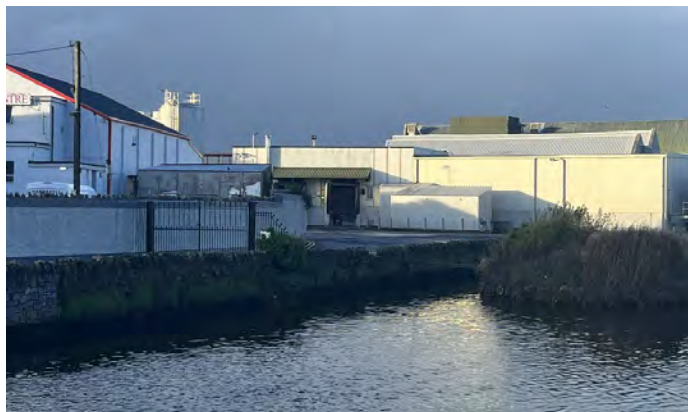
Other detracting elements



Overhead cables, Main Street



Pedestrian deterrent features



The Dawn Meat processing plant



Poor quality illumination



Poor quality surface finishes



Derelict site at junction of Mill Street and Shambles Street

Townscape Opportunities

There are a number of features of the townscape that would benefit from enhancement and provide opportunities for potential projects:

- Derelict sites and buildings (incentives for redevelopment)
- Improved setting of The Meadow Meats plant and upgrading of the Mill Pond area
- Reduction in road junction widths
- Up-grading of The Square as a civic space
- Rationalised on-street car parking to achieve suitable width footpaths
- Higher quality surface finishes and street furniture
- Improved streetlighting
- Undergrounding of overhead cables
- Town gateway improvements on main approach roads



Town Square southern range of buildings



Town Square northern range of buildings

Town Centre Trees



Green infrastructure within the Town Centre

Existing trees contribute significantly to the network of green infrastructure and open space within the town, particularly:

- Along Mill Street as far as the Mill Race.
- Defining the northern edge of The Square.
- Within St. Andrew’s churchyard.
- Within the Eastholme grounds, as a backdrop to Mill Pond.
- Within the new town park at Main Street
- Along the roadside boundary of the GAA Club.
- On the main town approach roads.



New and retained trees within the new town park on the old church grounds

Town Centre Trees



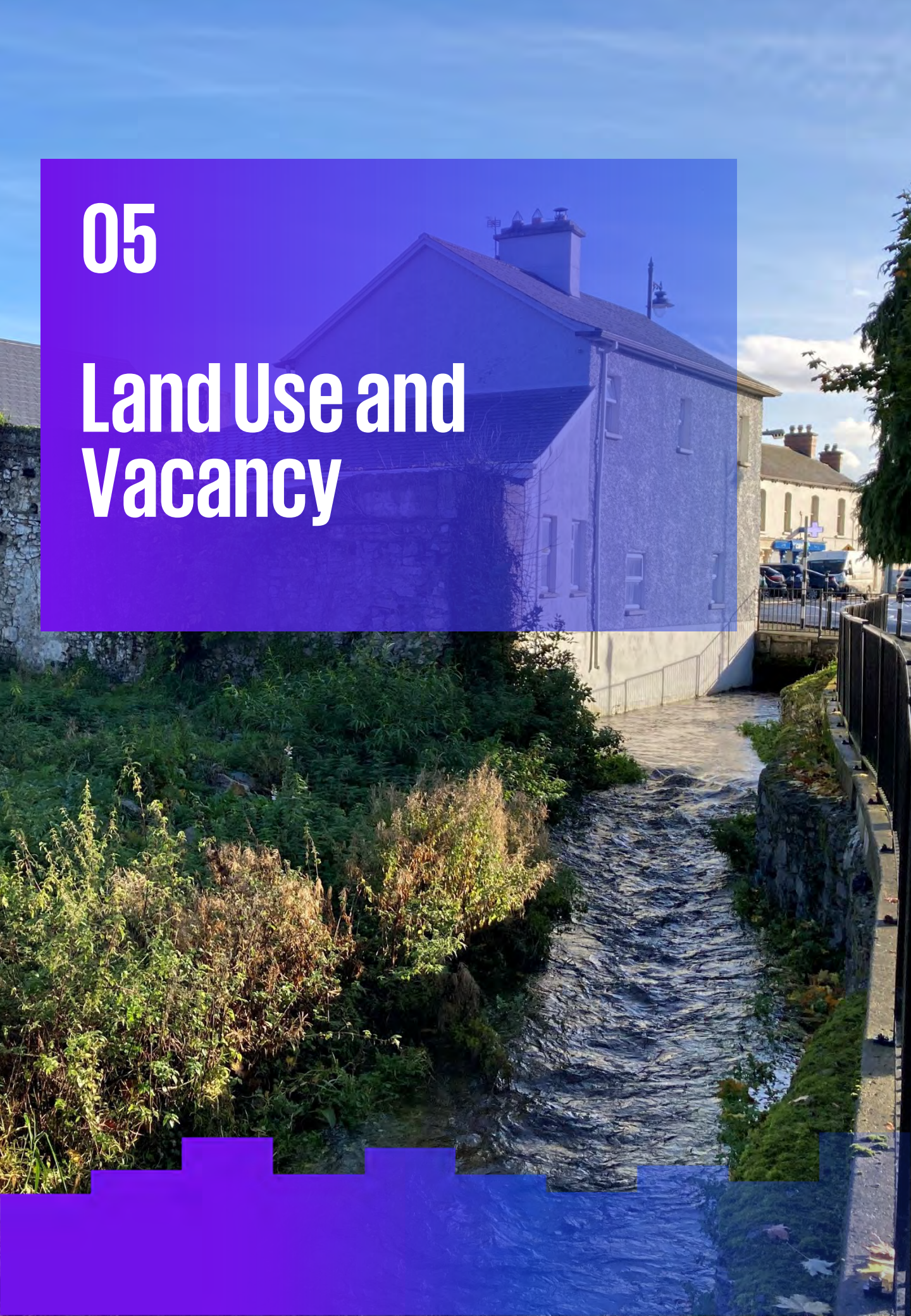
Mill Street



The Square

05

Land Use and Vacancy



Land Use Context

The footprint of commercial buildings in the town centre and the wider settlement are shown in Figures 5.1-5.2.

Service activities make up a significant proportion of the commercial mix in the town at 50%, though a lower proportion of the town centre mix at 38%. With the national average for service activities at 49%, this indicates that while the town has a comparable service offering, the town centre does not. When considered along with initial feedback from stakeholder engagement in the town, this does indicate a gap in the service offering in the areas of food services and recreation uses in particular.

Retail and wholesale provision make up 21% of the overall town mix and 18% of the town centre mix, compared with 22% nationally. This reflects the role and importance of two main supermarkets in the town in particular.

The town centre contains a prominent mix of other uses across financial and insurance activities, public administration, and health and social work activities.

There are a number of important social and community uses located across the town. The two local schools, and Health Centre are located to the outer edges of the town, though the town centre does include the library, community centre and a number of social and religious uses.

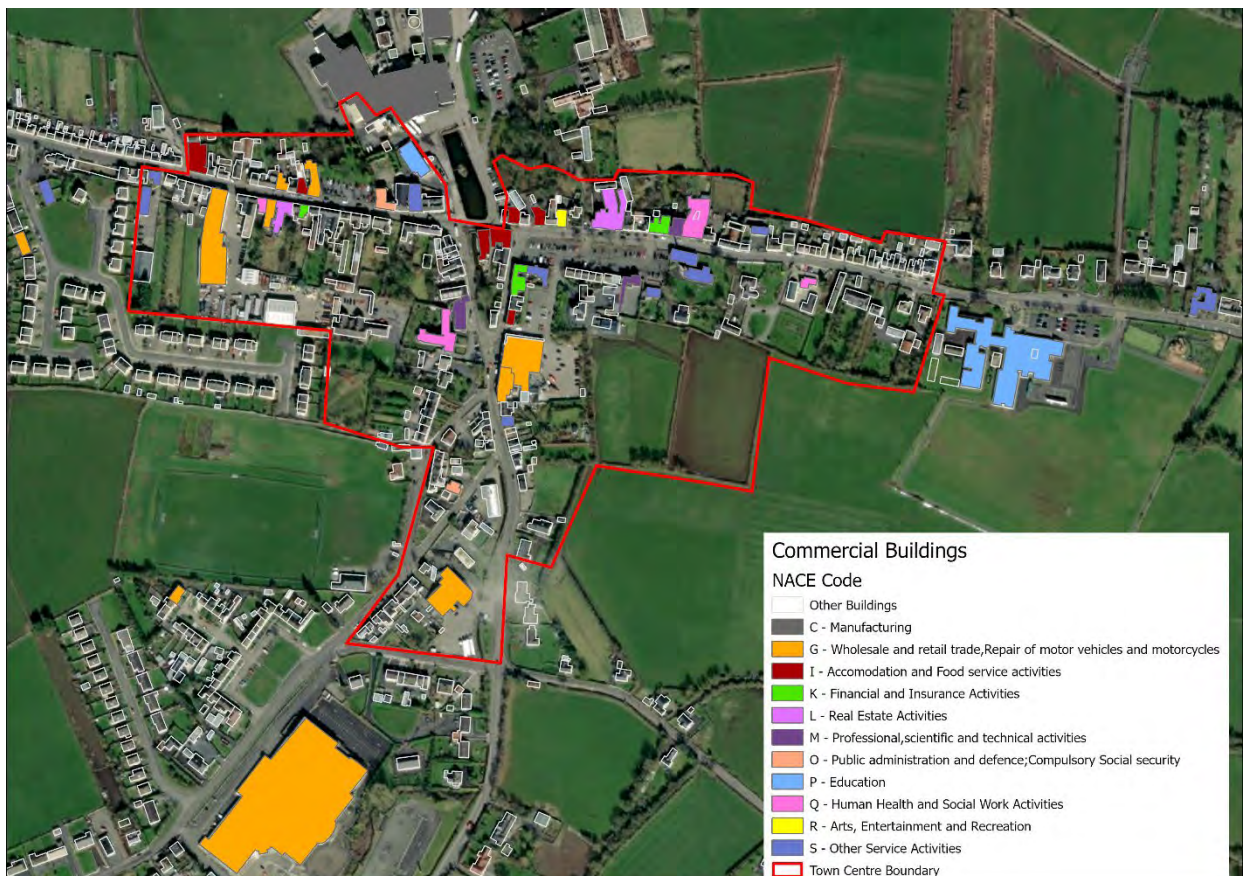


Figure 5.1 – Town centre land use

Land Use Context

It is important to note the Remote Brand Central Hub building to the south of the town. While recorded as in category G (wholesale and retail trade) in the NACE dataset, reflecting its prior purpose as a retail outlet centre, and major portion of the building is now in use as a remote working hub space. This space, and other retail uses on the same site, represent a significant proportion of the towns commercial floorspace located outside the town centre.

The Dawn Meats site is a major manufacturing use within the town. While outside the defined town centre boundary, this is a prominent site with its site entrance at the core town junction and has a strong relationship with the town centre.

Residential properties make up a significant proportion of the building stock within the town centre, with few areas that would be considered exclusively commercial which may be found in some larger market towns. This is partly a traditional characteristic of the town centre, but has also become more a trend in recent decades as former commercial properties have been converted to residential use. **This mix of residential and commercial uses will be important to consider when developing the vision for the Town Centre First Plan.**



Figure 5.2 – Rathdowney settlement land use

Land Use Context

Figures 5.3-5.4 detail the type of commercial businesses that are present in the town centre and the wider settlement.

Rathdowney Town Centre

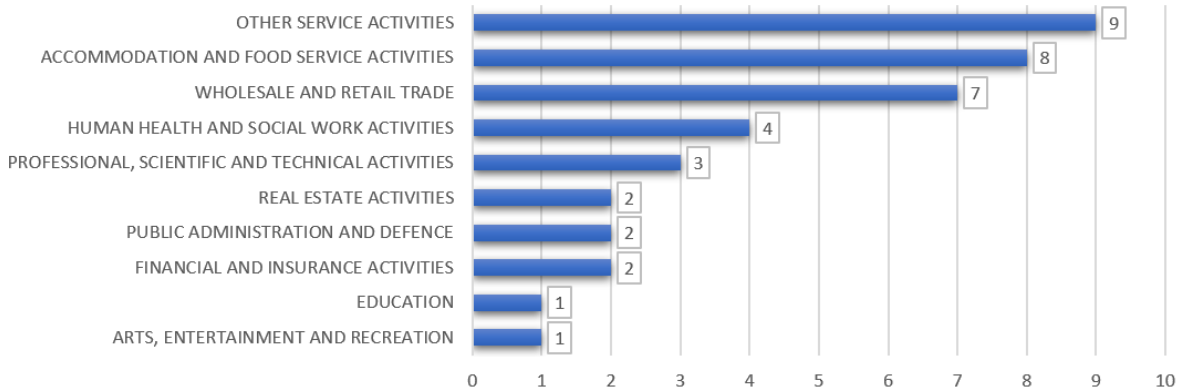


Figure 5.3 – Commercial mix within town centre

Rathdowney Settlement

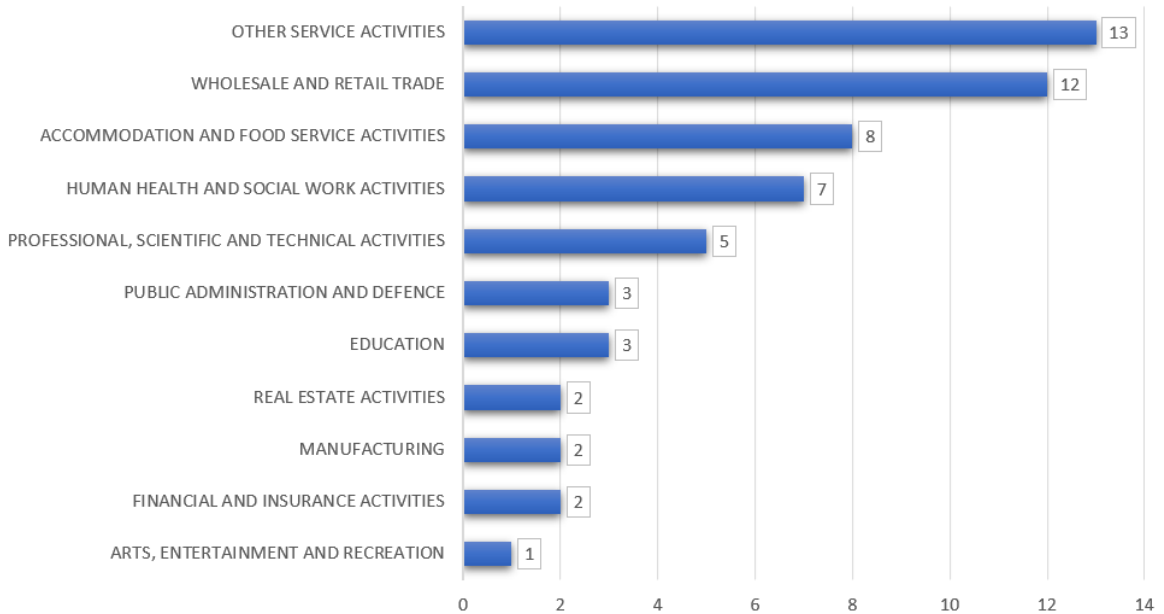


Figure 5.4 – Commercial mix within Rathdowney settlement

Vacancy and Dereliction

A vacancy and dereliction survey has been completed using GeoDirectory data and an on-site street survey to enable collation of a digital ARC-GIS database. Each property has been geo-located and a record made of its vacancy/dereliction status. The results of the town centre survey are mapped in Figure 5.5 and summarised below. A similar survey was undertaken for the wider settlement, the results of which are shown in Figure 5.6.

The **town centre has an overall vacancy rate of 9%** (i.e., 25 vacant buildings out of 261), which is driven predominantly by a **commercial vacancy rate of 33%** (14 vacant units out of 40). This compares with an average commercial vacancy rate of 15%, across County Laois and 14% nationally. While vacancy can be more pronounced in town centres, these findings demonstrate the major significance of vacancy within Rathdowney.



Figure 5.5 – Vacant and Derelict Sites: Town Centre

Vacancy and Dereliction

Main Street

Main Street faces the most significant issues in relation to vacancy and dereliction, with **50% of the commercial units are vacant or derelict**.

A cluster of vacant and derelict properties to the south of the street, west of the central junction, stands out with seven vacant/derelict properties in row, having a major negative impact on the vitality of the area. Traditionally an important street for commerce in the town, **there are currently more vacant commercial properties along the street than occupied**.

Some previous commercial properties also appear to have been converted to the residential use. While a positive that such buildings are in use, this does impact on the traditional commercial character and role of the street. There is evidence of some above the shop spaces being occupied for residential use, with the ground floor commercial premise vacant.

Town Square and Church Road

The Town Square and Church Road area, east of the central junction in the town, is perhaps the key node of the Town Centre. It is fronted onto by a mix of commercial and residential properties with the Church of Ireland as a significant landmark to the East, with the square itself prominently use for Car Parking.

There is low level of vacancy in this portion of the town centre, though the derelict site adjacent to AIB Bank is particularly prominent and detracts from the quality of the space.

When assessed against historic Google Street View mapping, and from discussions locally, some properties in this area have recently been brought back into use from a vacant and dilapidated state, notably the Richard Williams & Sons Building.

Johnstown Road, Cascade Street, Ossory Street and Mill Street

This network of streets form the southern approach the town centre, and includes the primary commercial anchor of town centre in Breslin's SuperValu, as well as Rathdowney Library, Clochar Community Centre and some smaller commercial units.

Whilst there is generally low level of vacancy along Johnston Road and Mill Street, **there is a significant cluster of vacant and derelict properties along Ossory Street**, including a prominent derelict site which visible from Mill Street.

There is also a cluster of vacant residential buildings on the southern approach from Johnstown Road, and a particularly prominent vacant building on the site of the former Motor Factors.

Vacancy and Dereliction



Vacant buildings / refurbishments at Main Street



Derelict site, Town Square



Derelict site fronting Mill Street



Vacancy, Ossary Street



Vacant and derelict buildings along Main Street

Summary

The survey demonstrates that vacancy is a particular issue in Rathdowney Town Centre, **with commercial vacancy levels significantly higher than the national averages.**

Vacancy is a particular issue along Main Street, with 50% of commercial units vacant and some previous commercial units now converted to residential use. However, a number of these units are currently undergoing renovation and conversion to residential use. **While this is positive, it will impact on the traditional commercial character and function of the street**, with the cluster of active commercial uses focused to the West of the street and somewhat disconnected from the greater concentration of commercial uses to the east.

In developing strategies to address vacancy in this area **it will also be important to agree a long term vision and role for the street.** The progress and impacts of renovation work currently underway on vacant properties will also be important to monitor. New homes and residents within the heart of the town centre has the potential to impact positively.

While vacancy does exist in other parts of the town centre (see Figure 5.6 for the dereliction survey in the overall town), it is at a much lower level and more reflective of national averages. However **this does include some prominent sites** which will need to be addressed to improve vitality and vibrancy.



Figure 5.6 – Vacant and Derelict Sites: Overall Town

06

Built Heritage & Heritage Protections



Built Form



Current urban form of Rathdowney town centre

The town centre retains much of its pre-19th century character, particularly with heritage buildings fronting The Square and the prominence of St. Andrews Church.

The approach from the west along Main Street is for the most part defined by traditional 2-storey terraced buildings, and to a lesser extent from the east along Church Street.

Whereas the mill pond and river continue to contribute importantly to the character of the town centre, the loss of the brewery complex detracts from the coherence of the urban form in this location.

The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage has been referenced to inform details of built heritage assets set out this section.

Buildings of Special Townscape Interest

In addition to the numerous heritage buildings included in the NIAH (as illustrated on the previous page), Rathdowney contains four entries in the Record of Monuments & Places:

- The Historic town (LA028-112----), scheduled for inclusion in the next revision of the RMP (see Historical Background).
- The pre-Reformation church (LA028-055001-), dedicated to the Most Holy Trinity, which was demolished in 1818. No visible surface remains. Its site is now occupied by the 19th century Church of Ireland church.
- The Graveyard (LA028-055004-), scheduled for inclusion in the next revision of the RMP. All visible headstones are post 1700 AD. The Church of Ireland church in centre of the graveyard may have been built on the site of an earlier medieval church (LA028-055001-). The medieval graveyard may have extended northwards across the public road and into the properties to the north-east of the church. Possible ringwork (LA028-055003-) may also have been situated within the grounds of this medieval graveyard.
- On the western edge of the town and adjacent to the Local Cemetery is a fine early medieval ringfort (LA028-041----). The graveyard dates from the early 20th century.

There are several fine buildings in the town centre:

- On the opposite side of the street from the Church of Ireland church is the premises of PP Ryan, one of the many distinctive buildings overlooking The Square. This terraced, four-bay, former bank was built c.1875, and has an integral carriageway, a dormer attic and a carved heraldic plaque.



Ringfort beside Local Cemetery

- Saint Andrew's Church of Ireland church was built in the early 19th century in a commanding position overlooking the town's square, on the site of a pre-Reformation church. The Georgian Gothic church is distinguished by its tower and needle spire, forming a distinctive focal feature on the approach to the town centre from the west and south. The church was renovated, c.1865, with projecting porch and chancel added, and extended c.1990 with the addition of a plant room to the chancel.
- Further west on Church Street is Eastholme, a Tudor Gothic gate lodge dating from c.1865. The Eastholme estate was once the residence of a long-serving managing director of Robert Perry and Son, brewers and maltsters. The Perry Memorial, an ornate limestone fountain, is located on the wall of the lodge.

Buildings of Special Townscape Interest

- The Perry name is also evident on the former premises of HG Perry & Sons, a two-storey house, built c.1835, with an integral carriageway. According to its entry in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, it was renovated c.1940, with a pub front inserted to the ground floor.
- Also overlooking The Square and in the same terrace, is the former premises of Richard Williams & Sons, built c.1835. It was renovated c.1890, when the shopfronts were inserted on the ground floor, including the projecting shopfront to the left.
- The public house of JA O'Malley overlooks the southern side of The Square, in a prominent location at the junction of Church Street and Shambles Street. This end-of-terrace two-storey building was built c.1900.
- To the western side of the bridge on Main Street is a fine pair of earlier (c.1830) terraced 6-bay two-storey houses, renovated c.1900 and with a shopfront inserted to ground floor. Now in use as offices with residential accommodation above.



O'Malley's Pub



Former premises of Richard Williams & Sons

Heritage legal protections

Planning and Development Act 2000

There are 24 structures in the study area listed in the County Laois Record of Protected Structures (RPS). As a result, these properties are protected under the Planning and Development Act 2000. Should the building owner wish to make alterations that would change the character of one of these buildings, planning permission must be applied for from Laois County Council.

There are 20 structures listed in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (NIAH). Ascription in this inventory does not provide legal protection. However, the inventory is used to inform future judgment on whether a building should be listed as a protected structure. There are no Architectural Conservation Areas in the study area.

National Monuments Acts 1930-2004

There are four archaeological sites listed within the Record of Monuments and Places (RMP) that are located within or are immediately adjacent to the town. Being listed provides these places with protection under the *National Monuments Acts 1930-2004*. When the owner or occupier of a property, or any other person, proposes to carry out any work at, or in relation to, a recorded monument, they are required to give notice in writing to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage two months before commencing any work.

Natural Heritage

Protection to a number of species and designated landscapes are provided under the European Birds (1979) and Habitats (1992) directives, Birds and Natural Habitats Regulations 2011, the *Wildlife Acts 1976* and the *Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000-2010*. Where development is proposed that impacts upon a protect species or protected place, a derogation license must be sought from the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

The study area of Rathdowney is not listed as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). The nearest SACs are the River Barrow and River Nore SAC (002162) and Galmoy Fen SAC (001858). The River Barrow and River Nore SAC is located c.4.4km to the east. The Galmoy Fen SAC is located c.4.4km to the south. The study area is not designated a Special Protection Area, Natural Heritage Area, nor as a proposed Natural Heritage Area (pNHA). There are four pNHAs to the east (The Curragh and Goul River Marsh, Coolacurragh Wood, Grantstown Wood and Lough, Cuffsborough) and one to the south of the town (Galmoy Fen).

Heritage legal protections



Town centre Protected Structures and NIAH buildings

07

Traffic and Transportation



Road Infrastructure

A review of road infrastructure in Rathdowney has been undertaken with particular regard to roads in the town centre. This review was informed by both a desktop assessment and a detailed on-site assessment carried out on 12 November 2022. Key findings are provided below and illustrated in Figure 7.1.

- The town centre is accessed via regional road. The R433 runs through the town in an east-west alignment, forming the main thoroughfare through the town and provides access to the town from the M8 Motorway at Ballacolla at its eastern end and the town of Templemore, Co. Tipperary at its western end.
- The town centre can be accessed from the south via the R435 which connects Johnstown, Co. Kilkenny at its southern end to Rathdowney Town Centre.
- The abovementioned regional roads converge in the centre of Rathdowney forming the 3-arm R433 (Chapel Street) / R435 (Mill Street) junction.

- To the immediate east of the 3-arm junction, there is a “give and take” regime in place due to the narrow width of the R433 at this location as a result of existing building lines. In this area, drivers approaching the junction from the west have priority over drivers approaching from the east with existing signage present giving drivers notice of the arrangement.
- Vehicular carriageway widths of the regional roads within the town centre are generally ca. 5.5 meters to ca. 6.5 meters, save for the area on the R433 at which the “give and take” arrangement is in place which measures ca. 3.5 meters wide.
- Another notable local street within the town centre is Ossory Street, a one-way local street running from the R433 (The Square) at its northern end to the R435 (Pound Street) at its southern end. The one-way arrangement on this street allows for vehicular movements from north to south only. On-street parking takes place along much of this street.



Figure 7.1 – Local Road Network

Road Infrastructure

Local roads in the vicinity of the town centre include Cascade Street and the abovementioned Ossory Street. These streets are typically narrower than the regional roads that make up the main thoroughfares through Rathdowney.

Cascade Street is a local street to the south of the town centre is primarily residential in nature and runs from the R435 at its northeastern end to Crab Road at its southwestern end. Despite being lightly trafficked as it is primarily used for local access, the street lacks continuous footpaths along its length.

Traffic Levels

To gain an understanding of the level of traffic present on the local road network, traffic counts were undertaken during the Saturday peak hour (12:00hrs – 12:59hrs) on 11 November 2022 at the 3-arm R433 (Chapel Street) / R435 (Mill Street) junction. The results are shown in Table 7.1 and Figure 7.2.

As outlined previously, Ossory Street is a narrow one-way local Street which links The Square (R443) to Mill Street (R435). This street is primarily residential in nature but also features a number of public houses and a bank branch. It is noted that the existing pedestrian footpaths on Ossory Street are very narrow and used for parking by private vehicles. For this reason, Ossory Street appears to act as a shared surface with motorised and non-motorised traffic mixing in the vehicular carriageway.

The survey recorded light traffic on the local road network during the Saturday peak hour. The greatest number of vehicles were observed moving from Chapel Street (West) to Chapel Street (East) (i.e. through the “give and take” section of road at the town centre). This level was still considered low with 130 vehicles moving during the 1-hour survey period (i.e. about two vehicles per minute).

From Chapel Street (East)		From Mill Street (South)		From Chapel Street (West)	
To Mill Street	To Chapel Street (West)	To Chapel Street (East)	To Chapel Street (West)	To Chapel Street (East)	To Mill Street
14 vehicles	90 vehicles	78 vehicles	109 vehicles	130 vehicles	100 vehicles

Table 7.1 – Local Road Network – Peak Hour Period Survey Results (12:00-12:59hrs)

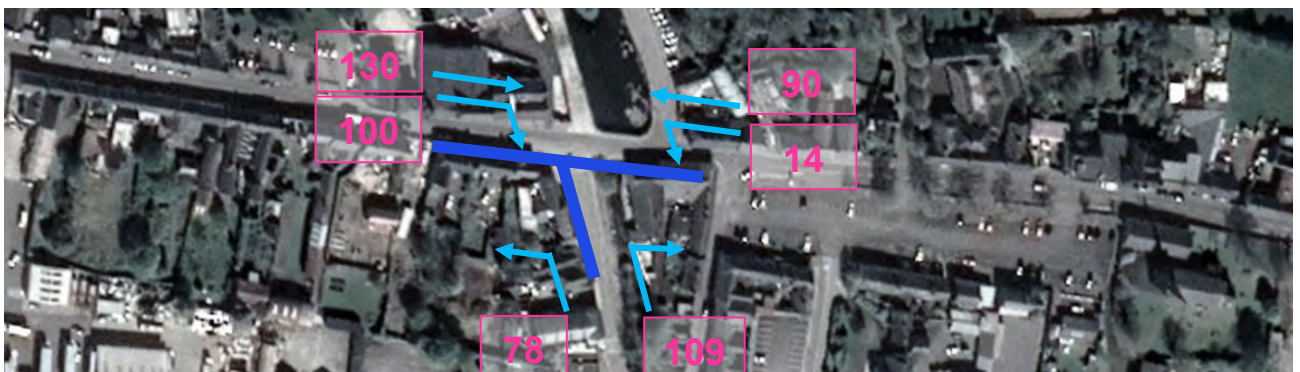


Figure 7.2 – Local Road Network – Peak Hour Period Survey Results

Road Infrastructure – Servicing

No dedicated servicing/loading bays were noted in the vicinity of the town centre. While servicing activities were not observed during the on-site investigation, it appears from the storage of materials related that commercial activities in on pedestrian footways and servicing of local businesses takes place directly to and from the vehicular carriageway.

Public Transportation

As per Transport Infrastructure Ireland’s (TFI’s) website, there is one bus stop located within Rathdowney Town Centre. The location of this bus stop as per TFI’s website is illustrated in Figure 7.3. However, no signage, bus bay or other indication of the presence of a bus stop was found during the on-site assessment.

As per TFI’s website, the bus stop in question is served by bus no. 831 which is operated by ‘Slieve Bloom Coach Tours’ runs between Portlaoise Shopping Centre and Borris-in-Ossory in a looped fashion, as illustrated below (Figure 7.3).

This implies that servicing, not having specific facilities to accommodate it, blocks footpaths and may force pedestrians onto the vehicular carriageway. This may in turn act as a barrier to walking, particularly for the mobility impaired and those with children in buggies who may not have an appropriate place to dismount and remount the pedestrian footpath.

As of May 2022, there are three Local Link routes that incorporate Rathdowney. Two run on two days a week. The third runs on one day. None enter Ballybrophy Train Station. At least one of the Local Link services only skirts the town and does not enter the core.



Figure 7.3 – Rathdowney Bus Stop Location (left) and Bus no. 831 Route (right)

Active Travel – Overview

Rathdowney is a small, compact town with all facilities within 5-10 minute walking distance.

While footpaths are generally in good conditions, connections throughout the town centre are restricted in places by narrow or non-existent footpaths, as well as street clutter such as railings, bollards and signage obstructing the pedestrian flow.

Between the bridge and Shambles Street there is a noticeable pinch-point, requiring ‘give way’ traffic movements and sub-standard footpaths. Footpaths are also inadequate along Shambles Street, between O’Malley’s and SuperValu. There are only two pedestrian crossings within the town centre, one at Mill Street by the Brewery and the other by SuperValu.

Unauthorised parking on footpaths, especially outside convenience stores, is a common occurrence, which causes significant disruption for safe pedestrian and cycle movement.



Narrow footpaths and unauthorized parking restrict pedestrian movements

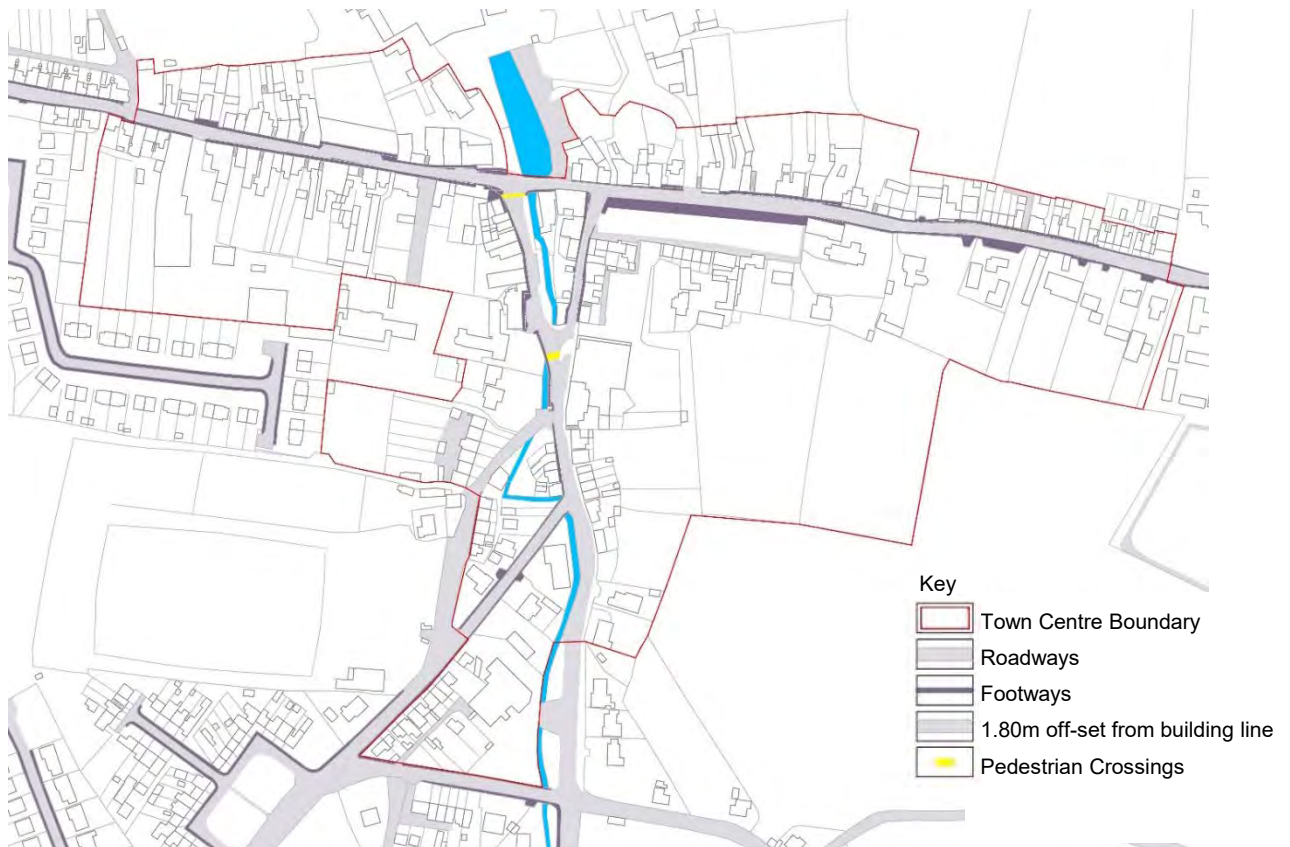


Figure 7.4 – Footpaths within the town centre

Active Travel Infrastructure – Walking

A review of active travel in Rathdowney has revealed the following characteristics:

- Roads within the town typically feature adjoining footpaths on both sides. However, **the majority of footpaths within the town are narrower (i.e. less than the 1.8 metres) than is required to allow two wheelchair users to pass each other.** Moreover, street furniture such as signposts, utility poles, illegally parked cars, guardrails, bollards and walls further narrow the effective width of existing footpaths.
- The images shown in Figure 7.5 illustrate the narrowness of footpaths and the barriers to pedestrian movement in Rathdowney. Note how both the vehicular carriageway and the pedestrian footpaths prioritise

motorised vehicles and utilities over pedestrians, with traffic signs frequently placed in the centre of footpaths. This also acts as a particular barrier to the elderly, mobility impaired, and mobility aid users, and people with children in buggies who may require more footpath width to move around.

- One area in which footpaths are notably absent is the vicinity of the area in which the “give and take” regime is in effect for road traffic. In this area, road markings appear to denote pedestrian refuge areas in lieu of pedestrian infrastructure. This would appear to be a vital link through the town, lying on a major pedestrian desire line, yet pedestrian infrastructure is substandard or absent altogether.



Figure 7.5 – Rathdowney Town – Barriers to Pedestrians

Active Travel – Walking Accessibility

An accessibility assessment of Rathdowney has been undertaken by means of an isochrone analysis. For this purpose, walking time isochrones have been generated for the identified town centre, located at the Chapel Street / The Square / Ossory Street junction using a network comprising the existing roads and pedestrian links. A walking speed of 5 km/h has been assumed. While not exact, such approach has been deemed to deliver a reliable overview of the opportunities for navigating the town on foot.

This exercise revealed that **the majority of Rathdowney is located within a 5 to 10-minute walk of the town centre** and that the entirety of the wider environs around Rathdowney, including Clandonagh and Rathdowney Golf Club are within a 20-minute walk. The obtained isochrone map is presented in Figure 7.6.

This assessment demonstrates that **the town is conducive to walking**, subject to non-distance-related hindrances to walking outlined previously such as narrow or missing footpaths or street furniture acting as a barrier, etc. being minimised.

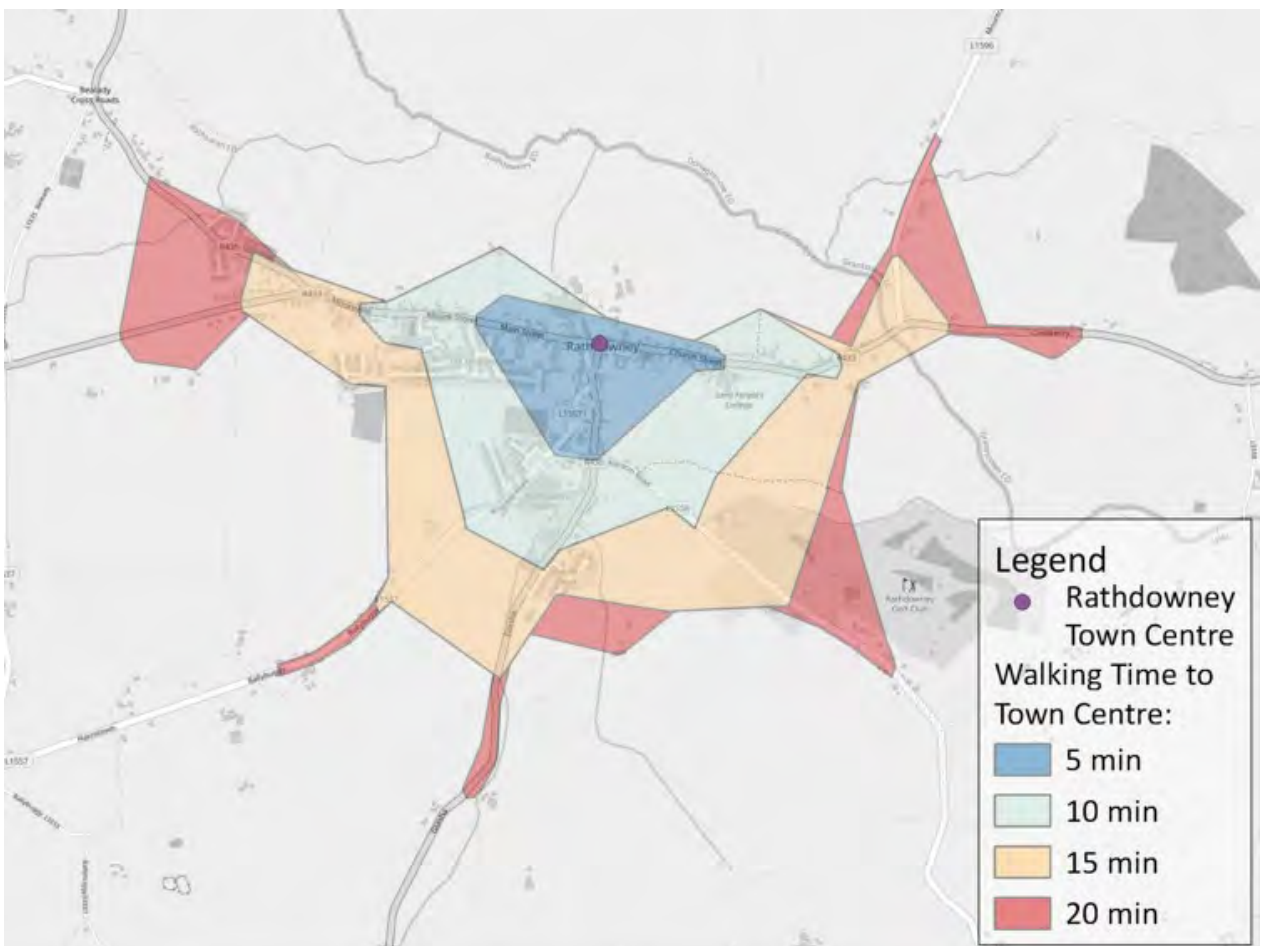


Figure 7.6 – Rathdowney Town Centre 20 minutes Walking Catchment

Active Travel – Cycling Accessibility

No dedicated cycling infrastructure was noted in the vicinity of Rathdowney. However a small number of cyclists were noted in the town during the on-site assessment. Cycle parking was also noted to be present at The Square public car park in the form of a “toaster rack” and further cycle parking in the form of Sheffield stands were noted adjacent to SuperValu.

A cycling accessibility assessment of Rathdowney has been undertaken by means of an isochrone analysis. Cycling time isochrones have been generated for the identified town centre point at the Chapel Street/ The Square/ Ossory Street junction using a network

comprising the existing roads links.

The isochrone map shown in Figure 7.7 reveals that **Rathdowney and its hinterland is accessible within a 5-minute on road cycle**. However, no dedicated cycle infrastructure is present in the vicinity of the town, which acts as a barrier to less confident cyclists, children, the elderly and the less mobile. Notwithstanding the existing lack of cycle infrastructure, cycling appears to be a viable travel mode for some in the existing situation, particularly for short journeys.

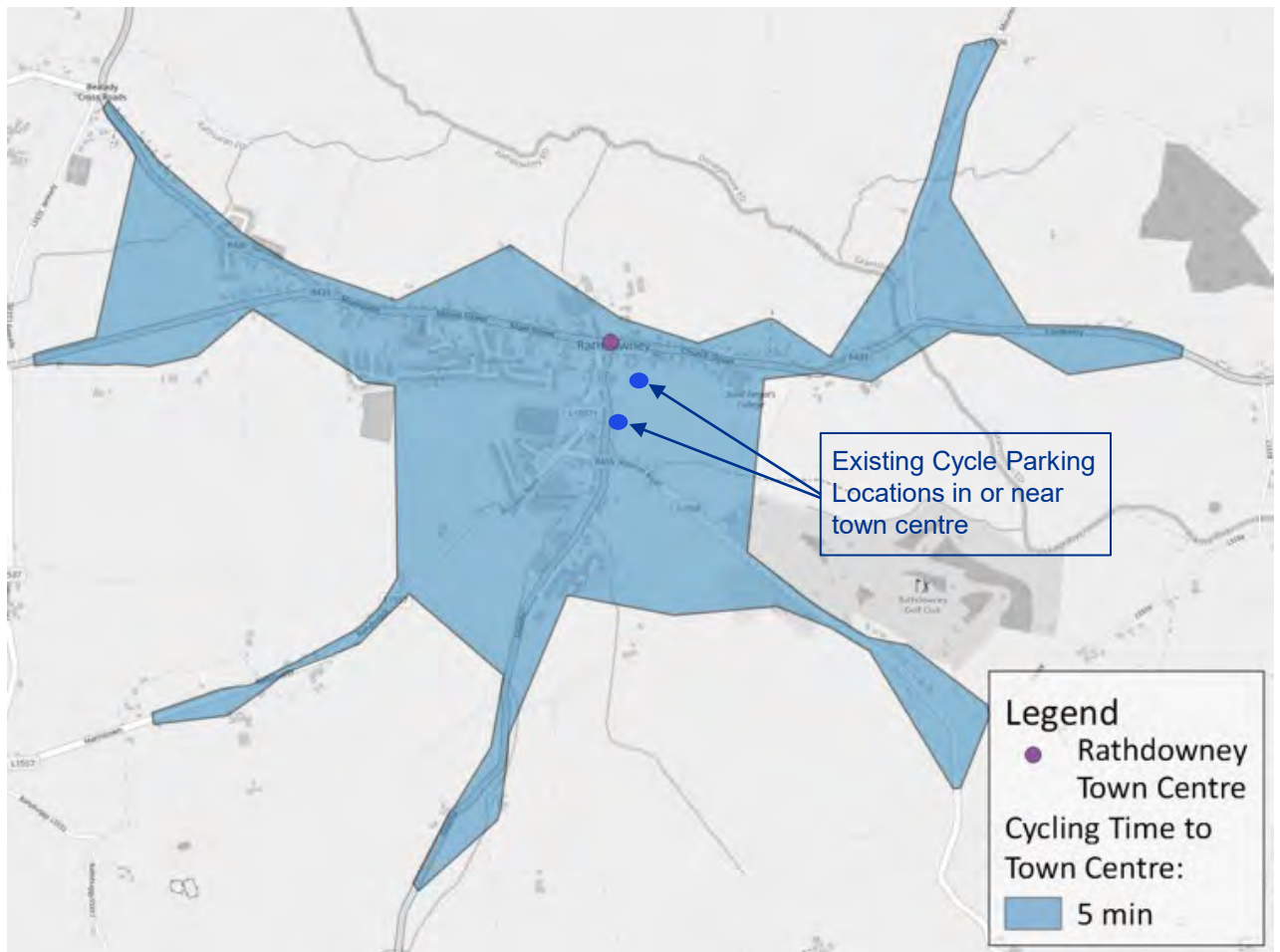


Figure 7.7 – Rathdowney Town Centre 5-minute Cycling Catchment

Parking Capacity

A review of on and off-street public and private parking within Rathdowney was undertaken as was an assessment of the prevalence of illegal car parking. The location and capacity of private and public car parks in the vicinity of Rathdowney Town Centre are illustrated in Figure 7.8, which also includes the on-street car parking areas.

The car parking assessment identified the following features:

- The town contains a number of medium to large car parks including The Square car park (public), adjacent to St. Andrew’s Church, the public car park located off

Chapel Street, the SuperValu car park (private), the car park located to the north of Main Street (public) and the car park adjacent to Midland Hardware Builder’s Providers (private). All car parks are within a 5-minute walk of Rathdowney Town Centre.

- On-street parking is permitted along the full length of the R433 except for the area between Ossory Street and Mill Street and along the full length of the R435 to the south of Cascade Street.
- On-street car parking is also permitted in areas along Ossory Street and Mill Street.

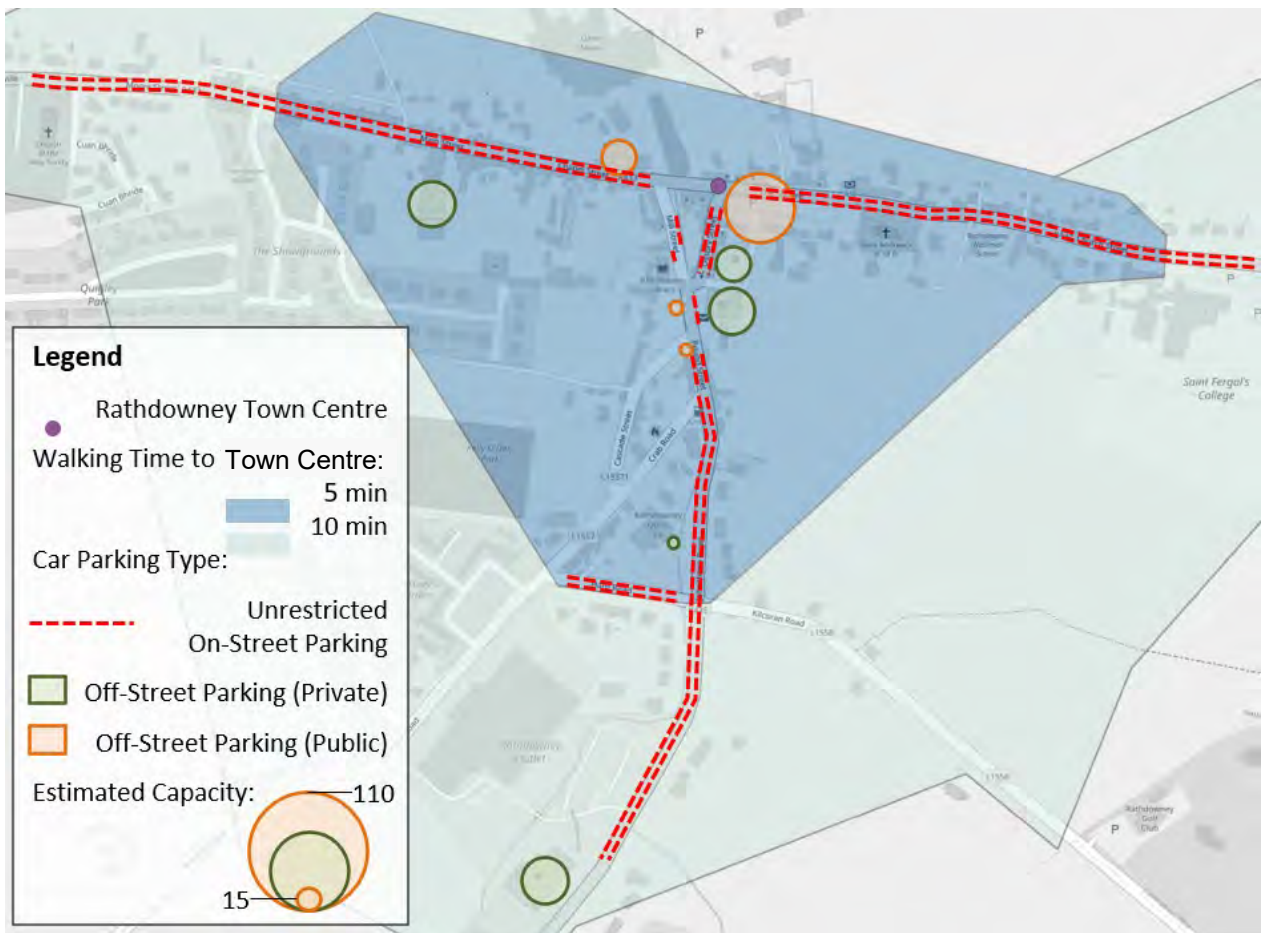


Figure 7.8 – Capacity of On and Off-Street Public and Private Car Parking at Rathdowney

Parking Occupancy

A review of off-street public parking occupancy was undertaken within Rathdowney. The location and maximum occupancy levels observed during the on-site assessment within public car parks in the vicinity of Rathdowney Town Centre illustrated in Figure 7.9.

This assessment revealed the following features:

- The town’s largest public car park, namely The Square car park adjacent to St. Andrew’s Church, was just under one third full, containing 36 vehicles parked and a total capacity of about 110.

- The two smaller public car parks on Mill Street were observed to contain a total of 6 vehicles out of a total capacity of about 40.
- The public car park on the northern side of Chapel Street was observed to contain 10 vehicles out of a capacity of about 25.

The car parking occupancy levels set out above, in combination with the existing private car park capacity within the town, suggest that **there is an opportunity to reallocate some public space from the storage of parked vehicles to usable spaces for the town’s residents and businesses.** This is particularly true of the public car park located adjacent to St. Andrew’s Church.

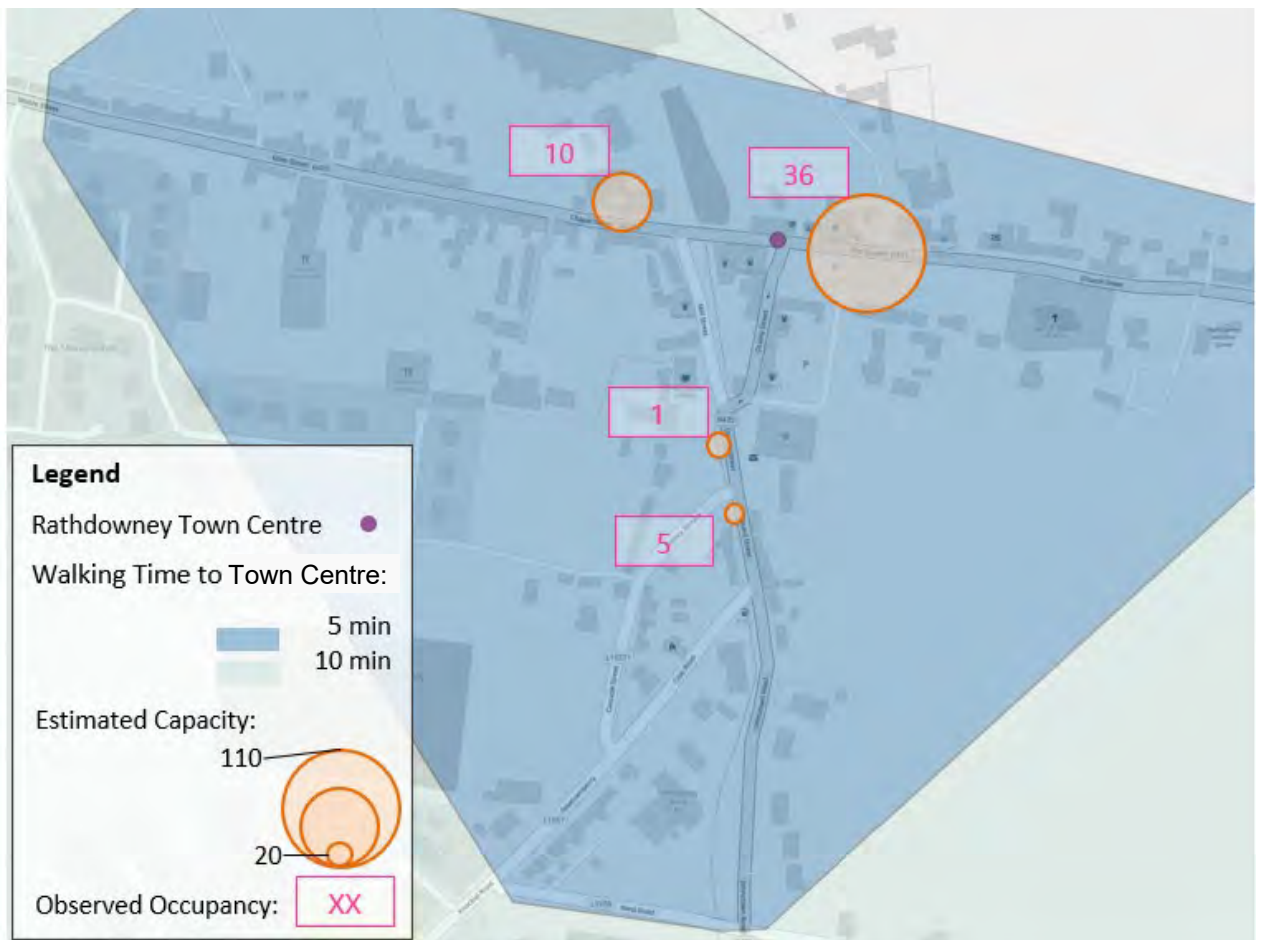


Figure 7.9 – Occupancy of Public Car Parking

08

Vibrancy and Amenities



Overview

Rathdowney's picturesque surroundings and quality of life provide the potential for it to be a highly attractive location in which to live, work and visit. There are a number of opportunities to enhance the leisure and recreation offer within the town to support the level of amenities available for those living and working there presently, and to attract new visitors.

There are four key reasons why people will visit Rathdowney town centre.

- Living in the town centre
- Working the town centre or attending school
- Visiting the town centre to access retail and social services
- **Visiting the town centre to enjoy social, recreational or leisure amenities.**

Of these the later provides an essential role in the vibrancy and attractiveness of the town, and the overall quality of life for residents.

Tourism in Rathdowney

Tourism is not currently a significant industry in the town, primarily due to the absence of both essential visitor attractions and accommodation options. There are some tourism destinations in the surrounding area, notably Donaghmore Workhouse, while nearby village of Durrow successfully attracts a large number of visitors. Enhancement and utilisation of Rathdowney's built and natural assets could improve tourism potential, particularly projects which support active leisure and recreation uses.



Donaghmore Famine Workhouse Museum

Tourism is not likely to become key driver of the town's economy in the short to medium term. However, an increase in the number of visitors could support the overall vitality of the town, and viability of many smaller hospitality businesses in particular.



Tuohy's Bar, Ossary Street

Rathdowney and its surroundings

The provision of recreational and leisure amenities/ activities within Rathdowney should be viewed within the context what is available in settlements across wider region. The offer available in these towns and villages will both compliment and compete with those on offer to residents and visitors of Rathdowney.

Durrow is large village located 14.5 kilometres east of Rathdowney in the southernmost part of County Laois. Castle Durrow is major visitor attraction and catalyst for other amenities. There a also number of recreational facilities available in Durrow including looped walking paths (through woodlands of Dunmore Woods) and kayaking on the Nore. The village has a very strong hospitality offer, with restaurants, cafes, fast food places, and coffee shops in the village, and a number of options for visitor accommodation. However, Durrow is a smaller settlement, and lacks the major retail anchors which Rathdowney contains.

Abbeyleix is located 18 kilometres east of Rathdowney. It is a slightly larger town, and includes similar core retail and civic anchors. However Abbeyleix contains a much stronger hospitality offer, including hotels, and a number of restaurants and cafes which helps draw additional visitors to the town. There is also a weekly farmers market in the town, and it has an attractive and spacious public realm.

There are number of smaller villages in the surrounding area, including Errill, Borris in Ossary and Ballancolla. These villages include some public houses, small scale convenience stores and some takeaways, but largely rely on Rathdowney and other larger villages and towns for core services and amenities.

In the wider region beyond County boundaries, Templemore and Roscrea in Co. Tipperary are larger towns which provide a range of services and amenities.

In comparison to Durrow and Abbeyleix in particular, **it is clear that the hospitality offer within Rathdowney is significantly lacking.**

The town lacks the a major attraction in the form of Castle Durrow, while the absence of successful hotel means there is no core hospitality anchor within the town.

The results from the community survey insights indicates that there is a lack of social places to meet in the town centre, such as a restaurant or a café, as well as the scarcity of accommodation facilities for both locals and visitors. The Golf Club is a strong recreational asset for Rathdowney, and is a popular destination for hospitality. However, given its location outside the town, this does not directly benefit the town centre.

The popularity of Durrow and Abbeyleix demonstrates potential visitor numbers in the wider area. **To capitalise on this, Rathdowney needs stronger amenities to draw people into the town.**

Social and Community Infrastructure

The availability and capacity of social and community infrastructure is a key component to a healthy town, while their location and accessibility in an important aspect of the Town's sustainability.

Rathdowney has a strong structure of community facilities, many of which are centrally located within the Town Centre.

The Community Centre

The Community Centre, located off Main Street at the main junction in the town, provides an essential space for a range of community activities.

While fit for purpose the Community Centre building is dated and in generally poor condition. Considering the important role of Centre in the town, it would benefit from significant refurbishment or potentially redevelopment to better serve the Town into the future.

While the current site is somewhat constrained, it's location at the core of the Town Centre would be a key asset.

The Clochar Centre

Utilising the grounds and buildings of the old convent school, the Clochar Centre includes spaces for a number of important community uses and services, including a creche, youth café and spaces for community groups.

While well located, there is potential to open up the older entrance to Main Street to improve connections to the site.

Rathdowney Library

The Library is an important community facility, and hosts afterschool events for local students, book clubs and different cultural and community initiatives.

The Library is centrally located at Mill Street, though the building is dated and potentially in need of some refurbishment and maintenance.

Schools

Rathdowney contains two schools, Scoil Bhríde primary school, and St. Fergal's College post primary school. While the former Church of Ireland national school closed in 2020, having both a primary and secondary school within the town supports educational attainment and community cohesions, and the role of Rathdowney as a hub for its surrounding hinterland. Both schools will also be crucial in supporting the effective integration of new arrivals of the town.

With both schools located outside the town centre towards the outskirts of the Town, linkages to the town centre are compromised by poor quality walking and cycle connections.

Town Centre Footfall Survey

The level of footfall within a town centre is the best guide to its overall health and vitality. Footfall surveys were undertaken in Rathdowney on a Wednesday and Saturday in late 2022, the results of which are shown in Figure 8.1.

Key observations from the surveys are set out below:

Town Square (outside AIB)

- Midweek, footfall at the town square is low both in the morning and afternoon hours but tends to increase in the evening.
- Stops offs following schools pick ups result in a sudden rise in the footfall (around 3:00 PM) on weekdays.
- There are occasions when footfall outside the AIB is very low, noticeably at weekends.

Ossary Street (outside SuperValu)

- Maximum footfall is recorded near SuperValu during weekdays and weekend evening.

- Footfall is driven predominantly by the supermarket itself, and so is dependent on store opening hours.
- The majority of the footfall is from those parking directly outside the store or within the car park, with some pedestrian movement to elsewhere in the town.

Main Street (centre of street)

- People mostly visited Main Street during the day to visit one of more of the businesses, particularly the Pharmacy and Butchers.
- There was a significant increase in footfall in the evening, driven largely by the opening of takeaways on the street.
- Footfall on Main Street was driven by set down parking, and short trips to specific stores. Very few visitors were observed walking from elsewhere in the town.
- There were a high number of visitors to the hardware store, though as parking and access is provide to the rear this resulted in no recorded footfall on Main Street.

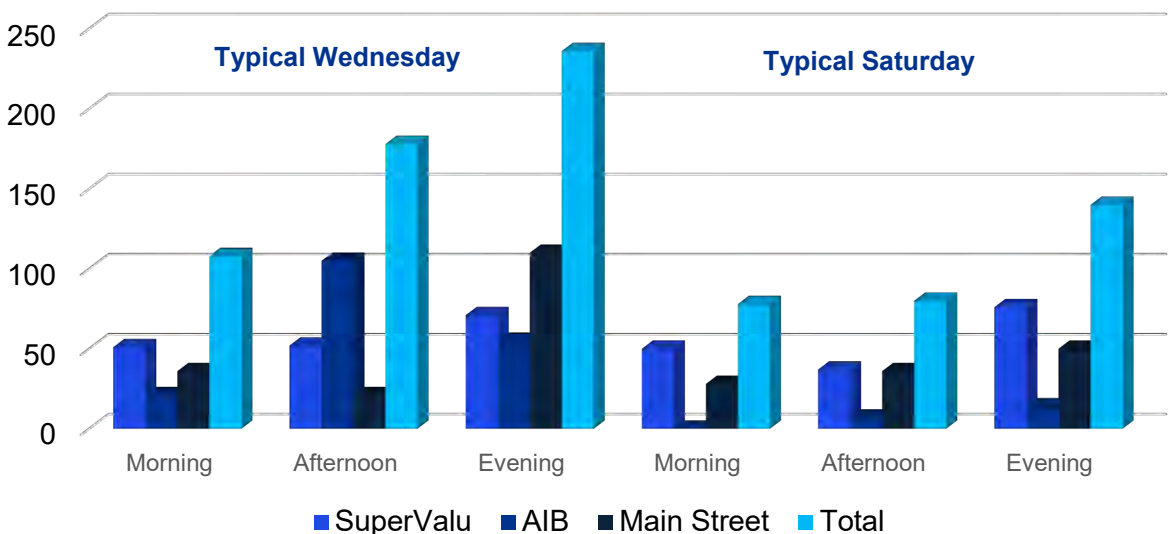
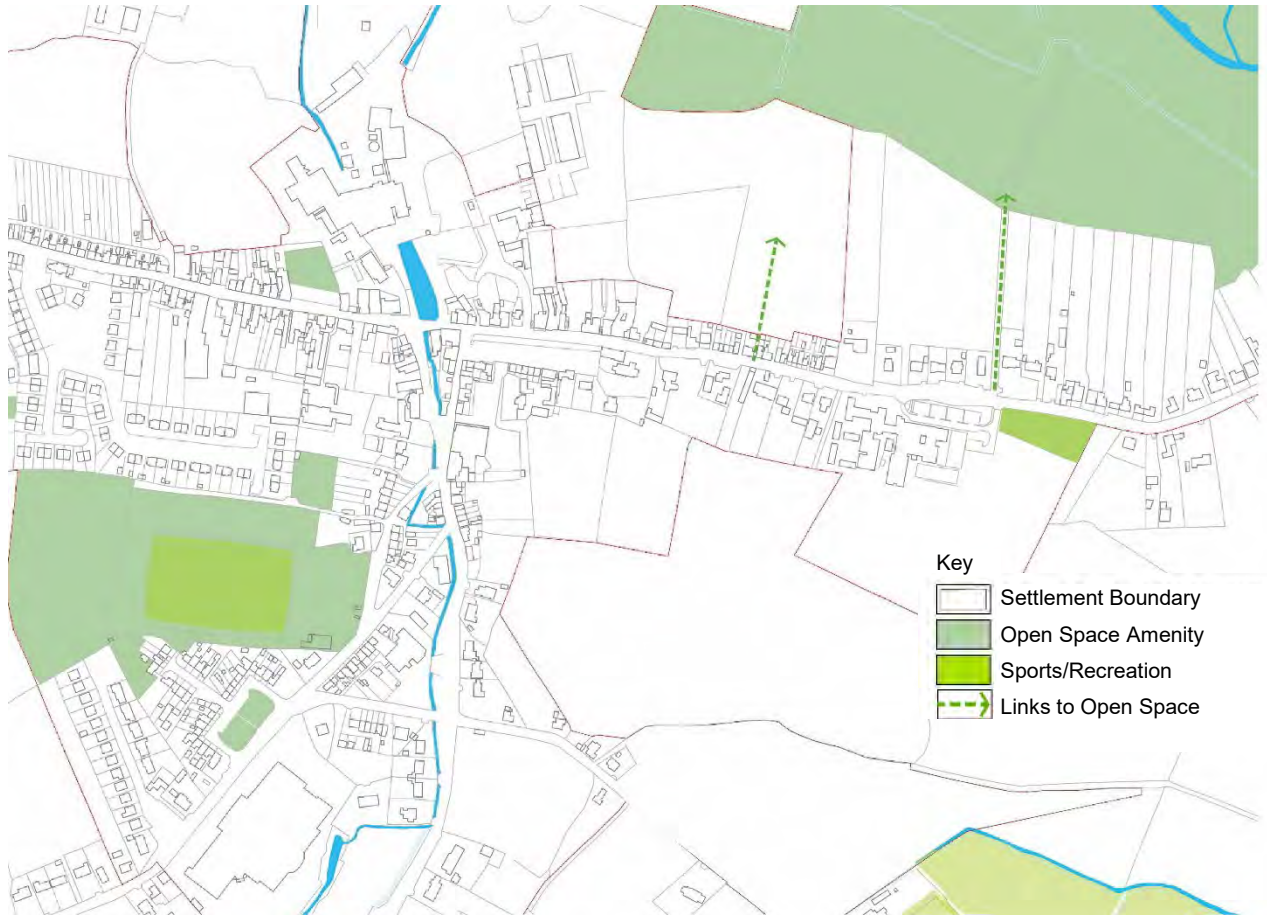


Figure 8.1 - Results of Footfall Survey for Rathdowney Town Centre

Open Spaces and Recreation



Open Space / Amenity / Recreation Zoning (Laois County Development Plan)

The town has a variety of amenity attractions and recreation facilities that include:

- Extensive natural open space areas associated with the River Erkina, zoned as open space, with historic pedestrian links to Church Street.
- Playground and Multi Use Games Area, at Conoboro Road.
- New town park, currently being developed at Main Street.
- Rathdowney GAA Club on Cascade Street.
- Rathdowney Golf Club to the south-east of the town centre.

Many of these amenities are located outside the town centre, but have the potential to complement and support uses within the town centre with the correct strategies.



Rathdowney playground

09

Consultation and Engagement



RDW

Overview of Approach

This chapter summarises the consultation undertaken to inform this study. This process includes the outcome of online surveys that were prepared to capture the views of the resident and business community in Rathdowney. To seek the input of community and businesses operating in Rathdowney, two **surveys** were issued in November 2022 for a period of four weeks. A total of 127 responses were received for the community survey and 14 responses for the business survey, each demonstrating the depth of interest and engagement with the perceived issues, solutions to address issues, and possible interventions required.

Targeted **strategic conversations** were also held with a range of key stakeholders and a **youth workshop** was organised in partnership with St. Fergal’s College to elicit the views of transition year students on the future of Rathdowney.

To facilitate a deeper understanding of the concerns of locals, two **drop-in community clinics** were also hosted on 26 November 2022 in the Rathdowney Community Centre. Members of the community were invited to stop in at any time during the workshops to give their views on Rathdowney and learn about the Town Centre First Plan project.

Notice of the public consultation was placed on the County Council’s website as well as through social media and newspaper advertisements.

A draft Town Centre First Plan was published online for public consultation from 23 May to 6 June 2023, receiving 12 responses. In addition to this, the project team held two public workshops on the draft TCF Plan in the morning and afternoon of 30 May in Rathdowney Library.

Together, this wide range of engagements have provided valuable insights in developing and validating the Town Centre First Plan for the Rathdowney.

Community Survey: Facts & Figures

A total of 24 questions were included as part of the community survey. These questions ranged from profiling-style questions to SWOT-style and open-end response-style questions. The information presented in this section is a summary of the 127 answers received. The full survey results are provided in Appendix 1.

Respondents Profile



Individuals responded to the community survey.



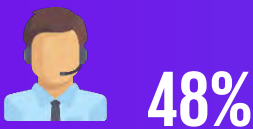
Of the people surveyed were either employed or self-employed, full time or part time.



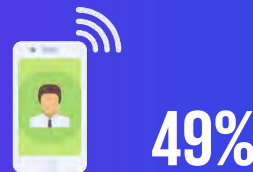
Of the people surveyed lived and/or worked in Rathdowney. The majority (61%) had lived in Rathdowney for more than 20 years.



Of employed respondents either worked in Rathdowney or elsewhere in Co Laois.



Of the employed respondents benefit from some form of working from home arrangements. 28% were working from home at least one day a week and 10% were working from home full time.



Of the employed respondents would like to work from home more often.



Of respondents indicated that they would spend more time in the town if there were more small shops, cafes, and restaurants available.



Of respondents believed that transforming the town square and pond into a dynamic, social space would be a positive initiative.

Community Survey: Facts & Figures

Perceptions of Rathdowney Town



Of respondents believed that a sense of community was Rathdowney’s greatest asset, followed by quality of life (43%) and availability of services (29%), such as healthcare and education.



Of respondents believed town centre vacancy and dereliction were Rathdowney’s biggest challenges, followed by the development of the hospitality sector (43%) and retail and shopping opportunities (31%).



Of respondents pointed to the lack of social places to meet in the town centre as well as the scarcity of accommodation facilities for both locals and visitors.

Closely following were the need to improve public transport and road safety and facilities for pedestrians and cyclists (17%) and the need for more local shops (12%).



Of respondents singled out dereliction and vacancy and improving the appearance of buildings as top priorities for the town centre.



Addressing dereliction and vacancy and improving the appearance of buildings were picked up as the clear top priorities for the town centre by 77% and 62% of respondents respectively.



Of respondents believed that Rathdowney provides good quality of life for people of all age groups, backgrounds and areas.



Of respondents picked up community and mental health services as the top area that should be prioritised for investment.



Of respondents agree with the statement that Rathdowney is supportive and inclusive for minority communities.

Community Survey: Facts & Figures

Feedback for Town Centre First Plan



Roads & Transport

Respondents believed that roads and transport-related issues requires attention in the Town Centre First Plan. The common issues mentioned includes: parking on footpaths, adequate street parking, cycling and walking facilities, and improved public transport links.



Leisure & Amenity

Several respondents drew attention to increasing and improving public amenities in the town. They raised the need to facilitate participatory arts, sport and physical activity, as well as children activities. Other concerns included setting up a health centre with therapy room facilities.



Community Development

Respondents emphasised the need to bring the community closer to ensure that locals are closely involved in the development of the town.



Investment Incentives

Respondents also called for investments – from sources such as the IDA or the Local Authority – in new businesses.



Business & Employment

Respondents picked up the need to bring more businesses to town, revitalise retail and night life, and help create more jobs in the area was also highlighted. Respondents suggested ways to create more opportunities for small businesses,



Vacancy & Dereliction

Respondents highlight that vacancy and dereliction are a major problem for Rathdowney. There were several mentions about the insufficient housing supply, need to increase the GARDA presence on town centre streets.



Town Regeneration

The most common vision for Rathdowney respondents put forward centres around the regeneration of the town. People would like to see a new “buzz” in the town so that it becomes a place that attracts visitors and where young people want to stay and/or move to.



Community Facilities

Respondents pointed out towards improving community facilities being the key element for ensuring a better quality of life. There were also calls for further education opportunities, needs of people with disabilities, and age friendly initiatives.

Business Survey: Facts & Figures

A total of 25 questions were included as part of the business survey. These questions ranged from profiling-style questions to SWOT-style and open-end response-style questions.

The information presented in this section is a summary of the 14 answers received. The full survey results are provided in Appendix 2.

Respondents Profile



14

Business representatives answered the survey.



9

Business have 5 or less employees.



12

Businesses are located in Rathdowney.



4

Businesses operate in retail.



5

Businesses have operated at their current location for over 10 years.



4

Businesses primarily use a retail unit and 3 businesses operate on a work-from-home basis.



9

Businesses agree that “Rathdowney business environment can be improved significantly for enterprise growth to be realised”.

Business Survey: Facts & Figures

Perceptions of Rathdowney



Accessibility to motorway network and *growth potential* were singled out as the town's main strengths as a place for doing business.



Four out of the five businesses who were *seeking space in Rathdowney* in the past three years were not able to source it.



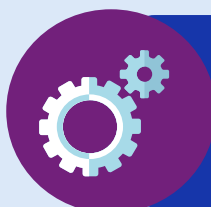
Accessibility to public transport options was highlighted as one of the town's main constraints for doing business.



Top three priorities to help drive economic development in Rathdowney identified by respondents: *infrastructure, pro-business culture, and enterprise support services.*



One third of businesses intend to *scale up* from their current location in Rathdowney over the medium term (1-3 years).



Only one business has considered availing of available grants to upgrade vacant or derelict buildings in the town centre.



When asked what they think of Rathdowney town centre, nearly all businesses had negative first thoughts.



Four out of the five businesses who were *seeking space in Rathdowney* in the past three years had not been able to source it.



Almost half of interviewed businesses expect trading to worsen over the next two years.

More than three quarters (79%) of the people surveyed were either employed or self-employed, full time or part time.

Business Survey: Facts & Figures

Feedback for Town Centre First Plan



Support for Small Businesses

Respondents emphasised the need to create better conditions for small businesses to operate in Rathdowney. Some major points highlighted by the respondents were: Landlord engagements, Prioritising the development of Brand Central Building, supporting infrastructure for businesses, and addition of some low- ley leisure points in Rathdowney.



Transport & Parking

Respondents pointed towards tackling the transport issues in Rathdowney. According to the respondents, for the businesses to flourish and additional housing there is a need for more workers. To attract workers in the town, transport measures like providing shuttle services to the Railway station is must.



Town Regeneration

Respondents singled out the need to tackle vacancy and dereliction, improve public amenities, and add services and attractions that would transform the town into a tourist destination should be the top priorities of the Rathdowney Town Centre Regeneration.



Vacancy & Dereliction

Respondents view vacancy and dereliction as a massive issue in Rathdowney. The buildings need development and improvement. Prioritization of the seven council houses on the main street should be an immediate priority of the Town Centre Plan as per the respondents.

Additional Engagement



Drop-in Events

Positives of Rathdowney

- Strong Community Spirit
- Sense of safety
- Close proximity to train station
- Historic character
- Presence of key services

Main Issues

- Vacancy & Dereliction
- Poor street conditions
- Lack of good cafes/eateries in town centre
- Poor public transport
- Lack of community initiatives

Actions needed

- Capitalising on Town Centre & green spaces
- Raising awareness towards grants & funding
- Improve public transport and pedestrian facilities
- Develop incentives for small businesses



Youth Workshop

- Friendly, quiet, safe town.
- School close to the town.
- Sport facilities and playground

- No places to meetup.
- No Cafes
- No gadget shops around.
- Too many cars on footpath.
- Smell from the slaughterhouse.
- Litter around.
- Derelict buildings

- Tackle dereliction.
- Need for a café.
- More activities to do in the evening.
- Better bus connections with neighbouring towns.
- Easy access to AstroTurf pitch and floodlighting.
- Gym at the secondary school.



Strategic Conversations

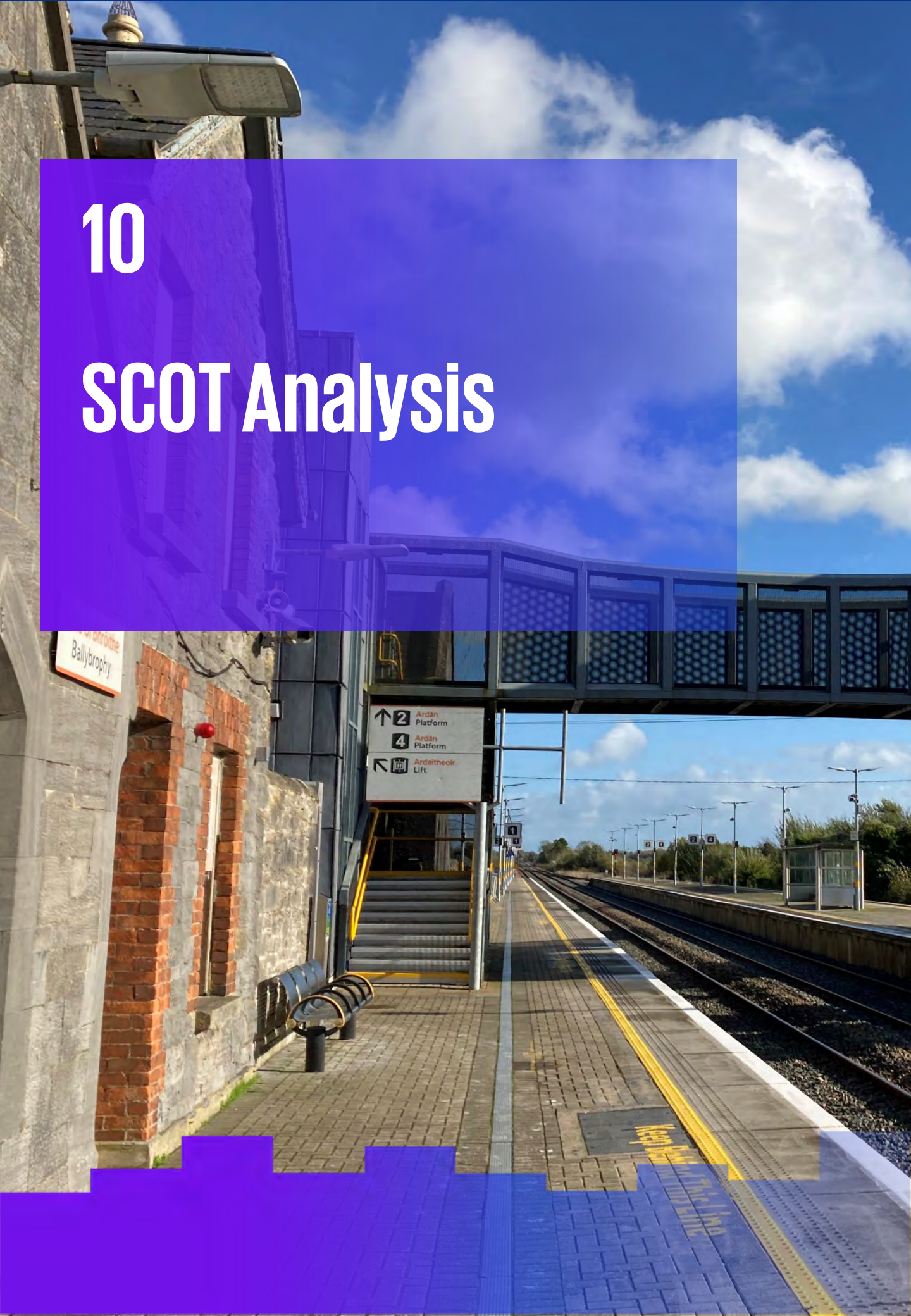
- Strong local business community.
- Low property prices in town centre.
- Library acting as a hub for children's activities.
- Brand Central Hub
- Hub for a wide hinterland

- Lack of hospitality offerings.
- Lack of events/amenities.
- Difficult to make people invest.
- Poor public realm & parking arrangements.
- Difficulties around the concentration of lower income workers.

- Incentivise the development of small business.
- Further potential for development on Brand Central Hub site.
- Integrating the community.

10

SCOT Analysis



SCOT Analysis

Using the findings from the analysis completed to date a high level study into Rathdowney's Strengths, Constraints, Opportunities, and Threats (SCOT) has been conducted. The SCOT can be defined as follows:

- **Strengths** – can be understood as the advantages of Rathdowney in the present day.
- **Constraints** – can be understood as the challenges facing the town at present.
- **Opportunities** – can be understood as the future strengths for Rathdowney. They represent the potential advantages available to Rathdowney and its communities.
- **Threats** – can be understood as the potential future constraints and challenges facing Rathdowney and its community.

Key points from this initial SCOT analysis are outlined below.

Strengths

- Small but strong local business community who has been active in attempted improvements in the town despite often lacking wider community support.
- Strategic location relative to Cork, Dublin and Limerick and good accessibility via road due to proximity to motorway (10km to M7 & 7 km to M8).
- Close to Ballybrophy train station (7 km) and its services to Dublin, Cork and Limerick.
- Beautiful landscape and abundance of natural amenities.
- Strong sense of community, small town feel and widely acknowledged friendliness of community.
- Good sports clubs and facilities within the town.
- Attractive town square and central pond (Mill Pond)
- Historical buildings and townscape.
- Primary and secondary schools, good community anchors

Constraints

- The lack of a hospitality offering (town hotel and good local cafés), lack/poor quality of local amenities and low footfall.
- Lack of public transport options (e.g. service to Ballybrophy train station) increase car dependency.
- Safety concerns for cyclists and pedestrians (e.g., parking on footpaths, poor street lightning, poor walking / cycling infrastructure).
- Parking management and behaviours across the town, and restricted capacity of street to allow for formal street parking.
- Difficult to get people interested in investing in the town centre for living or business purposes given the scale of vacancy/dereliction and poor public realm/parking arrangements.
- Lack of buy in from local community on local projects.
- Potential difficulties with the concentration of lower income workers in the town centre.
- High business rates, comparable to larger Towns within the County, challenging viability of businesses.
- Indication that deprivation levels have increased in recent years.
- Scale of vacancy and dereliction in specific locations hampering interest in individual interventions, particularly on mains street.
- Access to broadband is an issue in some areas.

SCOT Analysis

Opportunities

- Beautiful landscape and quality of life can potentially attract people to live, visit, and work.
- Attracting further investment to encourage entrepreneurialism and innovation, particularly around Brand Central Hub, and increase in remote/hybrid working.
- Availing of national schemes, such as the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant, to repurpose vacant and derelict sites, for community and commercial purposes.
- Improve energy efficiency and sustainability across the county including through increased use and generation of renewable energy where possible.
- The potential of Town Square and Mill Pond as unique place making opportunities in the town centre
- Potential for active recreation and leisure uses, including greenway projects that could be funded through national schemes such as the 'Grant Allocations to Local Authorities for National Roads'.

Threats

- External economic factors, inflationary pressures and risk of recession on businesses and the community.
- Decreases in younger cohorts could affect workforce availability and impact competitiveness in relation to securing investment.
- Lack of engagement from key land owners could negate attempts to tackle vacant and derelict sites.
- Increasing population due to increasing immigration rates may strain key services, which in turn could affect the town's ability to maintain growth (e.g. provision of healthcare, housing, childcare).
- Rural decline evident in the large number of young people leaving the town and county.
- Conflict of competing aims of town centre regeneration and growth of edge of town retail development.
- Climate change impacts and associated weather events may present risks for urban and rural areas.



11

PESTEL Analysis

PESTEL Analysis

Political

- Post-COVID fiscal pressures and potential for contracted budgets for a number of years could see the shrinking of local finances
- Geopolitical tensions, such as the Ukraine crisis, may result in significant intake of refugees and/or migrants in the region, which can put more pressure on community resources and risk of negative social reactions.
- Changes to legislation, policies or funding supporting rural regeneration resulting from change in government or responses to political pressures.

Economic

- Urban and Regional Development Fund (URDF) makes €2 billion in funding available up to 2027.
- Inflationary pressures and supply chain issues exasperated by the effects of the pandemic, the Russian aggression and China's zero covid regulations add to economic uncertainty.
- A lack of average disposable income within the Midlands makes it difficult to compete with other economic regions.
- Reduced market opportunities caused by Brexit and supply chain issues.
- Housing shortage identified as a critical barrier to growth in Irish economy.

Technological

- Next-generation technology for process automation
- Cost of implementing new technologies
- 5G broadband rollout

Legal & Regulatory

- R&D tax credits and other incentives for the agricultural sector and farmers
- Post-Brexit challenges in relation to the import and export of produce to and from the UK
- Remote working and hybrid work legislation may add to Rathdowney's attractiveness to live and work in.

Environmental

- Implementing the Climate Change Action Plan 2019-2024
- Climate change impacts and associated weather events presenting risks for urban and rural areas.
- Flooding and drainage problems

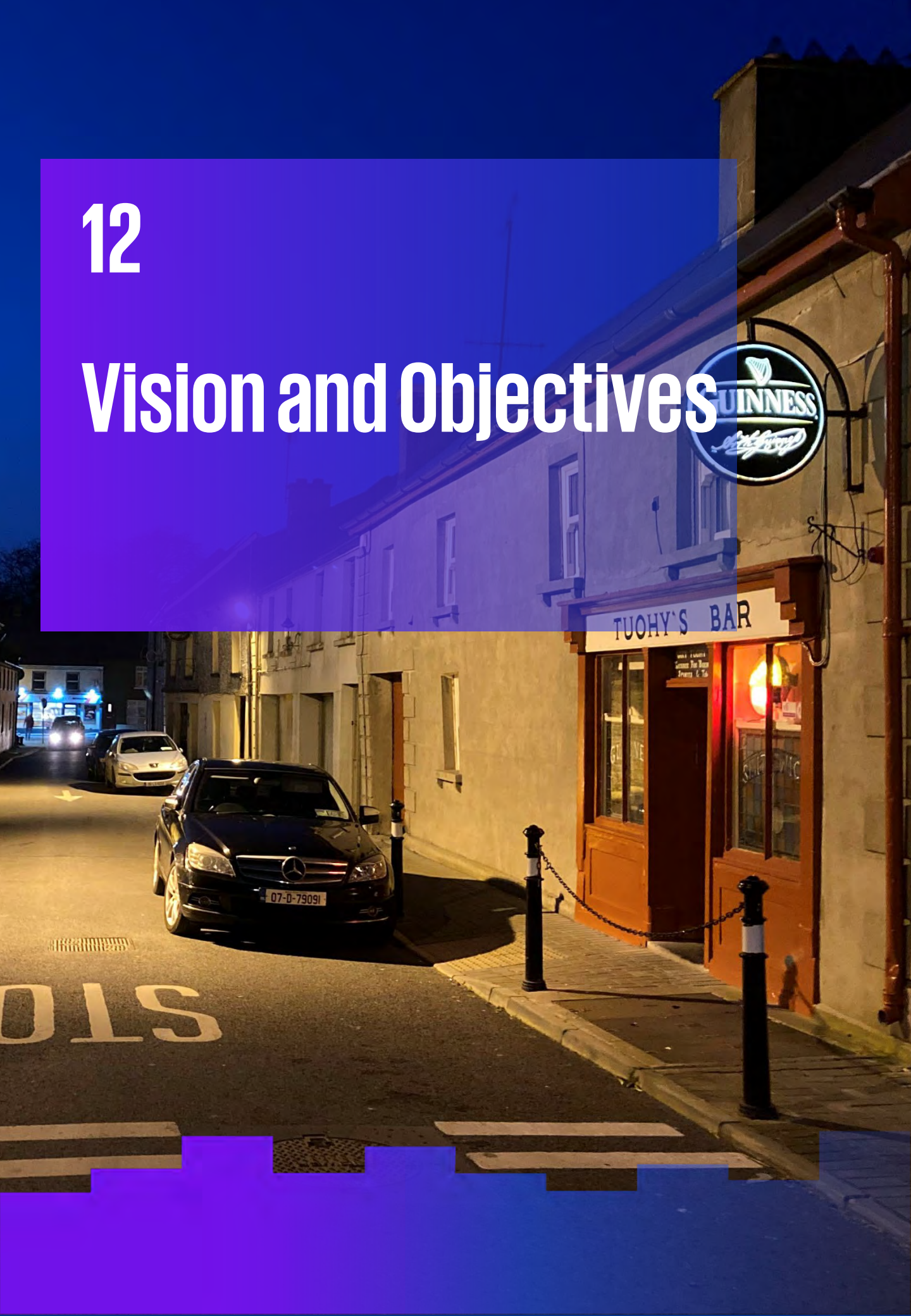
Social

- Young talent not interested in pursuing employment outside urban centres.
- Good social and community structures and infrastructure.
- Aging demographics particularly in agriculture.

Sources: KPMG research.

12

Vision and Objectives



Vision for Rathdowney

The sustained regeneration of Rathdowney demands a strong vision which provides clear direction towards a future of possibilities. When devising a vision, it is useful to establish what winning looks like.

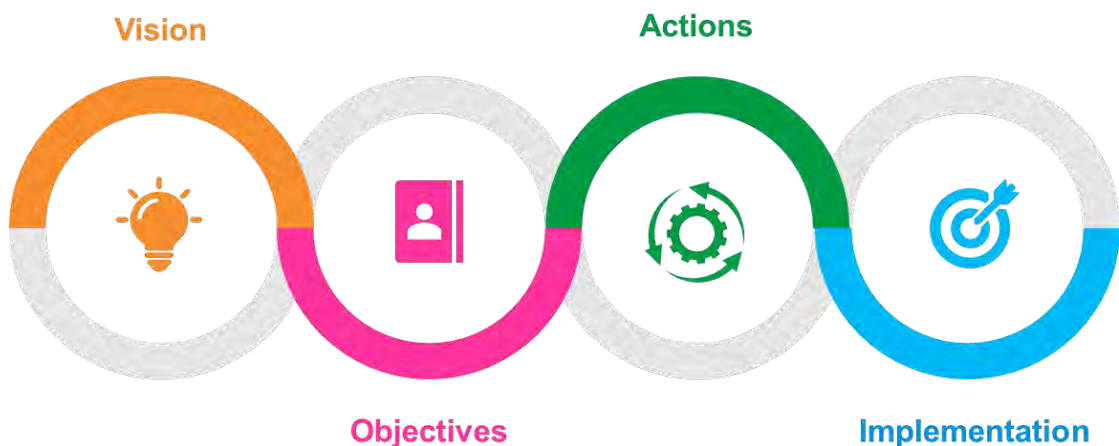
For the locals, this is likely to mean living in a dynamic town with a strong sense of community where there are ample opportunities to exercise, shop and socialise in an attractive setting.

For Laois County Council, success is likely to mean having a community partner which can take advantage of the available funding opportunities and become as vibrant as the nearby settlements of Durrow and Abbeyleix.

An appropriate Vision is one which accomplishes these various definitions of winning. It is also one which is reasonably ambitious without falling into the trap of being wildly ambitious. Having a wildly ambitious vision is likely to lead to disappointment as it becomes apparent that the unrealistic aspiration will not be realised. Accordingly, below is the suggested vision:

For Rathdowney to best use its advantages in location and built form to improve the quality of life of its residents and those who come to live in the town.

The emerging vision above was tested with the Town Team and found to be suitable. All the objectives and actions that follow in this document are in keeping with this vision. None is an outlier. They have been designed to build upon and support the other.



How the Vision is built upon within the Town Centre First Plan

Objectives

From the vision come the objectives necessary to concentrate efforts, formulate actions and measure progress. Based on consultation and comparing Rathdowney against other comparable case studies, the following objectives are proposed:

Objective 01

To use strong public realm design to facilitate and encourage residents to use the town centre more.

Objective 02

To support the creation of a vibrant business sector.

Objective 03

To make the town centre more walkable and accessible for all.

Objective 04

To increase usage of public transport.

Objective 05

To support community organisations in their future plans to make Rathdowney a better place in which to live.

Objective 06

To improve the mental and physical health of residents by increasing opportunities to meet each other, play and exercise.

Objective 07

To nurture community spirit by celebrating the town's heritage and its evolving multi-cultural character.

Objective 08

To substantially reduce the prevalence of vacant and derelict sites in the town centre

Objective 09

To support and promote more environmentally sustainable lifestyles.

Objective 10

To concentrate housing and where appropriate – businesses and services – as close as possible to the town centre.

13

Transformative Projects



13.1 Charting the Future – A Strategic Action Plan for Rathdowney

The aim of this project is to develop an economic development strategy to drive the sustainable growth of Rathdowney with ideas and actions that could also be replicated in other small towns across County Laois. In doing so, a number of possible ways to progress this Town Centre First Plan have been examined to develop a focused list of deliverable actions. This includes actions focused towards:

- Improvements to the public realm and physical environment
- More sustainable movement and greater connectivity, including management of parking and traffic;
- Initiatives aimed at stimulating commercial activity and economic health of the town;
- Supporting community identity and vibrancy and broader social cohesion of the town.

The key to driving economic development in Rathdowney and other small towns across County Laois lies in the identification of their strengths, leveraging these strengths and associated opportunities for growth, and empowering the local community to drive the development for its own benefit. In the case of Rathdowney, the key strengths and opportunities have been identified around its connectivity and accessibility, the friendliness of the community, business presence, the

availability of sport clubs and facilities, good schools, and social services, as well as the existence of distinctive town features, such as an attractive and spacious town square and central pond. Together, these features offer the town the most feasible means to drive economic development. While these elements can act as the initial focal point for growth, the overall economic development of the town should be supported by other actions that enhance infrastructure and service provision, build a coordinated approach to the town's development, and empower the local community to access funding to provide capital for projects into the future.

These ideas are expanded on in the remainder of this section, building on the overall strategic vision and objectives for the town set out in Section 12. Opportunity Areas have been identified through spatial analysis of the town, with architectural concepts, ideas and sketches for development outlined where applicable. These ideas are then incorporated into the wider action plan using key themes to highlight actions that can contribute to the economic growth and development of the town.

13.2 Analysis of Key Issues and Priorities

The balance of residential and non-residential uses

Rathdowney town centre does not have an exclusive commercial core, and housing forms an important part of the town centre's character when compared to larger towns where the main streets are often fully non-residential at ground level. This is a traditional aspect of the town but it is clear that recent decades have seen commercial properties declining and either becoming vacant or converted to housing. In some respects, this makes Rathdowney more robust in its ability to respond to a decline in traditional commercial uses. However, an appropriate quantum of commercial, social and cultural uses is crucial to making the town centre a vibrant and attractive place for people to visit. It is also noteworthy that there is now a disconnect between the remaining active businesses at Main Street and rest of the Town Centre.

Actions will need to consider the balance between the growing residential character of the town centre and the role it can play in addressing vacancy, whilst supporting existing businesses and supporting the potential for new businesses and other non-residential uses within the town centre.

Vacancy and Dereliction

Significant levels of vacancy and dereliction have been recorded in Rathdowney town centre. The issue is most prominent at Main Street, which has a commercial vacancy rate of 50% at the time of analysis. There are also a number of prominent derelict sites in town including adjacent to the AIB at Church Street. Feedback from public consultation makes clear that residents and businesses consider that vacancy, dereliction, and the poor condition of many occupied buildings has a major detrimental impact on the town.

At the time of preparing this plan, refurbishment works are underway at a

number of vacant properties, including within the worst cluster of vacant properties at Main Street. The refurbishment of the former J. McGrath Butchers on Main Street, as one example, demonstrates how traditional buildings can be repurposed into a high quality homes suitable for families whilst retaining the architectural character of the original buildings. On Church Street, the renovation of the prominent Williamson and Sons property has resulted in a significant improvement to the character of the street. These projects and others currently underway demonstrate that, despite long term issues with vacant properties, there is the interest and skills to address the issue, and that national initiatives such as the Croí Conaithe scheme is having an impact. Actions should seek to build upon the momentum created by these recent projects, to highlight the potential of vacant building stock and the resources available to support their refurbishment.

Derelict sites are often more complex and timely to bring back into use than vacant properties. As well as the need to address the longterm redevelopment of these sites, actions should consider how temporary interventions could improve the condition of derelict sites and mitigate negative impact on the town's character.

Fostering Smaller Scale Services and Hospitality Offer

Rathdowney is a small town, but one which contains some key services which are usually found in larger towns. This includes two large foodstores, financial institutions, schools and other social and community services. What is clear however is that the town lacks smaller services and businesses, particularly in hospitality, which are key to creating a vibrant place for residents and visitors alike. Successful small businesses such as artisan cafes, restaurants or those focused on arts and cultural offerings, are people driven.

13.2 Analysis of Key Issues and Priorities

Actions should focus on fostering an environment where those with innovative ideas for new businesses which would add value to the town are encouraged and supported.

The Potential of the Pond and Square

A core theme of the analysis and consultation is the value and potential of both the Town Square and Mill Pond. These are unique features to Rathdowney, and are physical assets which should be celebrated as core parts of the identity of the town. Both assets are significantly underutilised. The Town Square is a generous space with a prominent setting, yet currently only functions as a car park. The Mill Pond is in poor condition, and is compromised by the location of a large industrial meat processing facility fronting onto space, and associated access and ownerships constraints.

Actions are needed for realistic, yet ambitious, proposals for both these spaces from a public realm perspective, whilst also considering events and initiatives which will appropriately activate the spaces and ensure they are celebrated as the heart of the town.

Connectivity and Movement within the Town

Rathdowney is a small town, which has not experienced major sprawl, and where the vast majority of homes are within 15 minutes walking time of centre of the town. The potential development of modular homes for emergency accommodation at Kilcoran Road, while somewhat removed from the town, is still within 15 minute walking distance of the town centre. The compact scale of the town means that it should be well suited to walking and cycling, but the lack of appropriate infrastructure undermines this. Footpaths are often in poor condition, are incomplete or non-existent in some locations on routes entering

the town centre, while casual parking on footpaths is prominent across the town centre representing a major obstruction to pedestrians. There is a complete lack of cycling infrastructure in the town.

Actions should consider how active modes of travel would be most effectively supported within the town, particularly between the town centre and key residential areas towards the edge of the town, and key destinations outside the town centre such as schools which are most likely to be used by younger people. It will be particularly important to ensure high quality walking and cycling links between the town centre and the Brand Central Hub, which has the potential to play a major role in the growth of the town. The site is between 6 to 8 minutes walking time from the centre of the town, and it is important that town centre is accessible by foot to those working at or visiting the site.

Parking

Parking has been cited as a significant issue in the town. While our assessments demonstrate that there isn't any shortage of parking in the town, arrangements for informal on street parking result in haphazard and often dangerous parking which impacts on safe movement of both pedestrians and cyclists, and negatively impact the overall amenity of the town centre.

Despite the nearby availability of formal parking spaces in most parts of the town centre, businesses have expressed strong resistance to the removal of parking directly outside their premises. This can largely be attributed to established behaviours, where there is an expectation of being able to park directly adjacent to specific premises. On street parking arrangements on Main Street are particularly chaotic, with informal parking blocking both footpaths and carriageways and leading to significant obstructions to passing traffic at peak times.

13.2 Analysis of Key Issues and Priorities

Actions will need to address the current informal parking arrangements within the town centre, whilst also catering for the traditional short stay set down on street parking which is important to many businesses. Whilst the width of Main Street would not allow for parking bays to be provided while retaining two lanes of carriageway, actions could consider how current arrangements could “formalised” by providing parking bays at key locations outside existing businesses with one lane for passing traffic, and removing parking on footpaths. Approaches to changed behaviours and attitudes to parking will also be important in creating a safer and more attractive environment.

Wider Transport Connections

Rathdowney’s location is widely acknowledged as a key strength of the Town. Despite being strategically located between the M7 and M8, the Town itself does not suffer from excessive traffic or congestion, while it’s close proximity to Ballybrophy train station is a significant asset. A clear weakness however is the lack of a high quality public transport links from the town itself. Despite its proximity to Ballybrophy train station, and that current bus services actually pass by the station, there is no bus service to the station.

There is a clear opportunity and rationale to provide an improved bus link from the town centre to major nearby towns, synchronised with the train services at Ballybrophy. This would also the make the town more accessible to visitors, improvising opportunities for business and tourism.

Integration of New Arrivals

At the time of writing, detailed dissemination of the 2022 census data is not yet available. However, it is clear that the demographics of the Town have been undergoing significant

change from 2016 when the previous census data was published. It is noted that there has been an increase in the number of foreign nationals living and working in the town (primarily in Dawn Meats), whilst direct provision accommodation is being provided for in the former Commercial Inn since 2019. Plans have also now been published for 42 modular homes on lands at Kilcoran Road to provide temporary accommodation for refugees fleeing the war in the Ukraine.

Sudden changes to the demographics of a small rural town can present significant challenges without proper planning and consultation with the local community. Actions will need to focus on the successful integration of the town’s new residents, avoiding the potential for segregation of particular communities or “ghettoisation” of any parts of the town, and capitalising on the opportunities presented by an increased population with a diverse background and range of skills.

13.2 Analysis of Key Issues and Priorities

Cascade of Choices

The actions set out in this Town Centre First Plan have been identified after an extensive programme of consultation. In developing the actions, the “cascade of choices” approach has been applied to evaluate their appropriateness.



Cascade of choices model

The winning aspiration for Rathdowney was defined in Section 12 through the vision and objectives. The answers to “where will we play” and “how will we win” are established through the opportunity sites and actions set out in Section 13. The necessary capabilities and management systems needed to deliver the actions are described in Section 14. The actions within this also take into account the enhanced capabilities and management systems that can be reasonably obtained.

Utilising the cascade of choices approach has resulted in a significant improvement in how the proposed actions have been aligned with the needs of the residents and other key stakeholders.

13.2 Analysis of Key Issues and Priorities

Rathdowney's Competitive Advantages

In order to ascertain which projects will have the greatest impact, we have identified Rathdowney's primary competitive advantages. These competitive advantages represents the greatest opportunities which can be harnessed to attract people to live, work and visit the town.

The three core competitive advantages we have identified are set out below:

Competitive Advantage 1: Connectivity

Rathdowney is strategically located relative to Cork, Dublin and Limerick and is easily accessible due to its proximity to M7 (10 km) and M8 (7 km) motorways as well as to Ballybrophy train station (7 km).

This connectivity is a significant benefit to residents who benefit from work-from-home arrangements but who need to attend major urban centres on a regular basis. It also makes Rathdowney more attractive as a prospective location in which to do business..

The strategic location of the town is however undermined by poor public transport connections. There is a particular opportunity/need to develop an improved bus link with Ballybrophy train station which is synchronised with rail services.

Competitive Advantage 2: Main Square & Mill Pond

The pond and the square are two of Rathdowney's main physical assets. They are unique features located centrally within the town centre that could be exploited more efficiently to make Rathdowney a more attractive and vibrant town. The majority of respondents to the community survey agreed

that transforming the town square and pond into dynamic, social spaces is a significant opportunity.

At the Mill Pond, there is the opportunity to improve the environmental quality of the pond to support a variety of water based recreational activities. There is also the opportunity for public realm improvements adjacent to the pond, and to build a direct link with the Community Centre site. The Town Square should be the social heart of Rathdowney, with the capacity to host a range of informal and formal gatherings and events, including farmers/artisan food markets. Such developments would stimulate economic activity, drive visitor footfall and lead to a more vibrant and liveable place.

Competitive Advantage 3: Compact Town

Rathdowney is a very compact town, with most facilities within 5 to 10 minute walking distance and all car parks located within a 5 minute walk of the town centre. The far reaches of the town are within 5 minutes travel by bicycle. Compared to many larger towns, the town has not witnessed significant sprawl.

While some important sites such as schools, Brand Central Hub and Golf Club are located outside of the town centre, the compactness of the town means that this does not need to undermine to vibrancy of the town centre. However, the compactness of the town is undermined by a poor quality walking environment and lack of cycling infrastructure.

13.3 Opportunity Areas

The spatial analysis of earlier sections has identified a number of Opportunity Areas where improvements are considered essential for raising the profile and liveability of the town centre. These transformative projects are underlined by the following key principles:

- Creating a vibrant town centre through the delivery of an enhanced public realm with improved accessibility for sustainable transport modes, mindful of the needs of those with physical mobility issues.
- Creating streets and public spaces that are well defined, welcoming, safe and inclusive with a distinct identity.
- Designing spaces to be robust and adaptable with landscape, green

infrastructure and sustainable drainage well integrated.

- Developing a public realm that is connected to existing places and promotes opportunities for social interaction and a range of activities for all people.
- Using – where feasible – high-quality natural materials and enhancing local biodiversity/habitats by the planting of appropriate native plant species.
- Implementing a public realm strategy to raise the profile of Rathdowney, to encourage increased pedestrian flow (enhancing vitality and vibrancy), to attract visitors and new businesses, and to engender a renewed pride and confidence in the town.



Opportunity areas and projects

13.3.1 Site A – Town Square

Public Realm Improvements

The Town Square is the principal public space of Rathdowney, of generous size and defined by heritage buildings on three sides and the prominent Church of St. Andrews at its eastern end. This important space has considerable potential to become multi-functional, providing opportunities for markets, festivals and events, and as a distinctive place in which to gather and socialize. Upgrading the Square would strengthen the identity of the town for both the local community and visitors, and enhance its inherent sense of place, while retaining provision for essential parking.



Town Square Public Realm Concept

Key Features:

1. New public space comprising a large pedestrian area, with opportunities for outdoor dining/refreshments, seating, and a central covered structure (Market House) as a focus for all-weather activities.
2. Relocated vehicle access point to avoid pinch-point by O'Malley's Bar.
3. Defined parking bays (closed for major events).
4. Pedestrian congregating space outside church, e.g. for weddings, funerals, first communions, etc.
5. Rationalised traffic lane giving a widened north-side footpath at pinch-point.
6. Existing on-street parking retained.
7. Shared surface treatment along Ossory Street.

Renewed street furniture and high-quality surfaces throughout. Opportunities taken for increasing biodiversity using design and planting of native flora.

13.3.1 Site A – Town Square

Car Parking

A parking beat survey undertaken during November 2022 indicates that The Square may have an excess of car parking capacity, even at peak times. It is also noted that The Square is single use at present (car parking), significantly underachieving on its potential civic function. As such, it is proposed to remove a section of the car parking at the western end of The Square and introduce a new public realm area. Any additional car parking requirements can be accommodated on R433, with formal on-street car parking deemed beneficial given its excessive road width at this location.



Roscommon Town Square. Note the lack of kerbs and presence of bike parking infrastructure.



Castle Square, Caernarfon, Wales is a shared space. The removal of parking has allowed several bars and restaurants to have a larger areas for outdoor dining. There is still considerable parking for people with disabilities.



Kildare Town Square. During Covid a corner of the square was given over to outdoor dining and socialisation rather than car parking. The measure has been a considerable success, supporting several businesses.

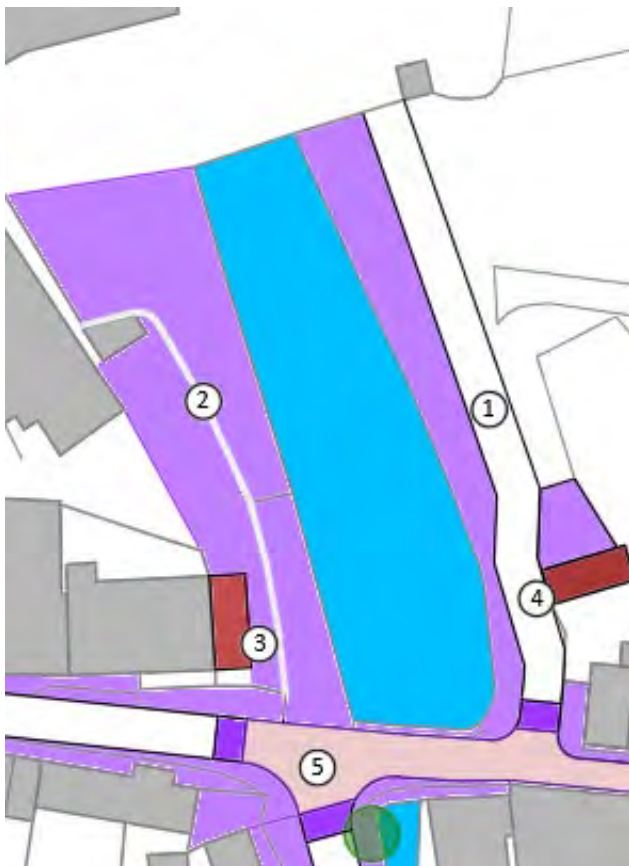


Waterford City Centre. Great effort has been made to only use high quality natural materials and to have as few kerbs as possible. Pic. Fáilte Ireland

13.3.2 Site B – Mill Pond

Public Realm Improvements

The heritage Mill Pond is a unique semi-natural feature of the town centre which, together with the Town Square, has the potential to become a public attraction for both formal and informal recreation and as a focal point for small-scale water-based activities (e.g. swimming, kayaking, fishing, paddle boarding and model boating). Consideration could be given to restricting vehicle access to one side of the pond, thereby creating a public space with enhanced amenity and water access opportunities. Connecting the Community Centre to the Mill Pond could also be explored by removing the existing dividing wall, or creating a series of openings through it, as well as introducing a new structure such as Community Pavilion for indoor events and refreshments.



Existing outbuilding



Community Centre with large boundary wall

Public Realm Concept

Key Features:

1. Vehicle circulation restricted to one side of pond only.
2. Possible opening-up of Community Centre to waterside public space.
3. New lightweight pavilion structure, e.g. for community café.
4. Re-purposing of existing outbuilding for recreation purposes. Another option is enhancing the facilities at the Community Centre.
5. Traffic calming of Main Street junction.

Good water quality is essential.

13.3.2 Site B – Mill Pond



*The Island Weir Pool, Thomastown, is a popular swimming area created by the local community by reusing an historic mill pond.
Pic: Fáilte Ireland*



There are two designated swimming spots on the River Nore in Kilkenny City. The Weir swimming area has bike parking, places to sit and steps to allow ease of access to the water.

Traffic Calming

A raised table shall be introduced in the vicinity of the Mill Pond which will connect the Mill Pond with Main Street, Mill Street and The Square. This raised table shall act to calm traffic whilst also providing improved connectivity and permeability in the centre of the town.

Pedestrian Space/Footpaths/Cycleways

New pedestrian-only spaces shall be created at The Mill, Main Square, and in the vicinity of the pedestrian entrance to SuperValu. This will seek to support the transformation of the town from a car-centred to a pedestrian-focused environment. Rathdowney GAA Club is located close to the town centre, however it is proposed to improve pedestrian/cyclist links between the Club and the town, particularly along Cascade Street and on R435 in the vicinity of the entrance to SuperValu. Cascade Street shall be turned into a shared surface with one-way general traffic movements, making it more suitable for pedestrians and cyclists along this critical link.

13.3.3 Site C – Main Street

Public Realm Improvements

As the key thoroughfare of the town, Main Street has to cater for a wide range of different needs, including through traffic on the Regional Road, local vehicle access and servicing, on-street parking, pedestrian movements and cyclists. For Rathdowney to fulfil its potential as an attractive place in which to live, work and spend time in, the current vehicle dominance needs to be addressed in favour of the pedestrian. The town centre is very walkable, with all facilities and destinations within convenient strolling distance, so the provision of an improved public realm with wider footpaths where possible and more frequent crossing points, are essential prerequisites for achieving more sustainable local travel patterns.

A high-quality public realm can reinforce the pedestrian experience, while signifying to motorists the presence of more vulnerable road users. It can also help support local businesses through the encouragement of increased footfall and opportunities for spill-out activities. Rationalisation of on-street parking through the creation of defined parking bays would help with traffic calming through a reduction in the effective width of the roadway, discouraging parking on both sides of the road and on footpaths. This would also improve the pedestrian environment whilst supporting local businesses reliant on passing trade.



Main Street Strategy Proposal Plan

Key Features:

1. Road narrowing with 'give-way' vehicle flow for traffic calming and to allow for widened footpaths.
2. Defined parking/loading bays each side of the street.
3. Additional pedestrian crossings.
4. Pedestrian link re-opened to the Clochar Centre and on through to the proposed walkway from Cascade Street to Clover Valley FC.

13.3.3 Site C – Main Street

Key Features (cont.):

5. Mill Street junction improvements.

High quality street furniture, improved surfaces and undergrounding of cables throughout. Opportunities taken for increasing biodiversity using design and planting of native flora.

Car Parking

At present, undesirable on-street parking (often partially or completely on footpaths) occurs on Main Street. This either reduces available footpath width, causing inconvenience to pedestrians, or blocks the footpath completely, forcing pedestrians to walk on the carriageway in places. It is proposed to upgrade this section of road by providing formal car parking facilities on one side of the road (alternating between the northern and southern sides of the street). The provision of formal car parking shall discourage informal car parking from taking place, whilst also retaining available footpath provision for use by pedestrians. There will also be some opportunity to increase footpath widths. Formalising parking provision will seek to balance improvements to the pedestrian environment whilst also seeking to allay concerns of local business owners who do not have the benefit of off-street parking facilities and would be concerned with complete removal of car parking.

Traffic Calming

The proposed public realm concept features a series of physical build-outs along Main Street. These provide both an opportunity to calm traffic through a reduction in the effective width of the carriageway, whilst also discouraging parking on both sides of the road and also discouraging parking on footpaths. The traffic calmed areas shall both reduce vehicle speeds whilst also seeking to better engage drivers in the town centre through changes to the street's horizontal alignment.



Proposed public realm improvements and traffic calming, Main Street Abbeyfeale

13.3.3 Site C – Main Street



The public realm works to the town centre in Clonakilty, Co. Cork have been transformative. There is low commercial vacancy and a significantly improved domain for people to walk and meet. Pic. Cork County Council



Thanks to recent works, Francis Street in Dublin's Liberties now has better traffic flow, more space for pedestrians and more space for businesses to spill out onto the street

13.3.4 Site D – Ossory Street & Mill Street

Public Realm Improvements

Ossory Street is a narrow one-way southbound local route, often with cars parked partially on the footpath along the eastern side. There is an unsightly vacant site between the street and the Mill Race. It is a potentially attractive route linking the Town Square to SuperValu, the library and the GAA grounds, but unfriendly to pedestrians at present. The opportunity exists to provide a shared surface treatment which allows vehicles to still use the street but in a calmed manner that emphasises the presence of pedestrians. Mill Street is a busier two-way vehicle route along the western side of the Mill Race. Although space is limited, there are opportunities for road narrowing and for more clearly defining on-street parking bays in order to gain increased footway width and enhanced public realm between the Ossory Street and Main Street junctions.



Key Features:

1. Shared surface treatment between the Town Square and SuperValu.
2. Up-grading of derelict site, e.g. as temporary green space with seating overlooking the Mill Race. The area should be designed to enhance local biodiversity.
3. Potential plaza to the front of SuperValu, with parking retained on higher quality surface.
4. Junction improvements at Main Street.
5. Widened footways along Mill Street where possible.
6. Rationalised parking bay and extended pedestrian space outside library.

High quality street furniture, improved surfaces and undergrounding of cables throughout.

Opportunities taken for increasing biodiversity using design and planting of native flora.

Ossory Street and Mill Street Proposals Plan

13.3.4 Site D – Ossory Street & Mill Street

Car Parking

Ossory Street currently operates as a one-way street and typically features cars parked along (and typically partially on) a footpath along the eastern side of the road. It is proposed to reinvent this road as a shared surface, with a 1.2 metre wide pedestrian refuge also provided. This shall allow cars to still use the road, however the changes will accommodate an improved pedestrian environment, whilst still retaining a dedicated area for pedestrians who may not be comfortable using a shared (pedestrian-vehicle) space.

Traffic Calming

The proposed shared surface along Ossory Street shall act to calm traffic in the centre of the town and reinforce a slow speed environment, making it more comfortable for pedestrians in particular. This will form a key link between the proposals on Main Square and the SuperValu plaza in the centre of the town.



Shared surface street with large art piece, Waterford City. Pic. Fáilte Ireland

13.3.5 Site E – Cascade Street Link

Public Realm Improvements

This short two-way local street, fronted by a terrace of houses with attractive front gardens along its northern side, provides important access between the town centre and the GAA Club. There is a narrow ill-defined footpath along the north side of the street, and a small off-street car park to the south. The street becomes wider and with better footpaths on approaching the GAA. The opportunity exists for the route to become a Quietway, possibly one-way, facilitating local access only and prioritising movement of people walking and cycling, supported by public realm improvements. An existing footpath link from the northern edge of the street could be opened-up and extended to the football pitches at Clover United FC, thereby providing sustainable access links from the town centre via the proposed SuperValu plaza and traffic-calmed section of Ossory Street. There is the opportunity along this route to have an outdoor gym facility. Eventually, the walkway could be extended to the east of SuperValu, connecting with St. Fergal's College.



Cascade Street Strategy Proposal Plan

Key Features:

1. Quietway treatment between Ossory Street and Newtownperry
2. Improved access to GAA Club.
3. Footpath link extended to Clover United FC.
4. Formalised access to existing housing estates

Improved surfaces and undergrounding of cables throughout. Opportunities should be taken with grassland management and planting to enhance local biodiversity.

13.3.5 Site E – Cascade Street Link

Public Realm Improvements



The Waterford Greenway passes by the back of many houses along its route. As appropriate, fencing/walling has been installed to ensure privacy and security.



Outdoor gym equipment located beside a walkway in Kilkenny City

13.4 Action Plan

This section outlines the social and economic plan to guide Rathdowney's development over the next 10 years and incorporates the concepts and ideas outlined for the opportunity sites above. It also looks to build on identified strengths and address recognised gaps and needs that have come out of the completed analysis with an aim to drive the overall economic development of the town for the benefit of the community. The actions are divided into themes and provide a short description that adds more detail and rationale for each headline action.

Table 13.1 provides an overview of the headline actions, potential funding sources, performance indicators (KPIs), and associated timeframes for completion – short (0-2 years), medium (2-5 years) and long term (5-10 years) – with the detailed themes and actions following. Each action is aligned with its appropriate objective(s) as outline in section 12 and the UN's Sustainable Development Goal(s) (SDGs).

Concerning prioritisation, the actions with the highest potential to fulfil this plan's vision are noted as being of Priority 1 importance. There is heavy dominance of public realm actions at being Priority 1. During the second round of public consultation, it became obvious that there should be an order of preference for the five Opportunity Site projects based on desirability and likely impact. Accordingly, the following preference for the rollout of Opportunity Site projects was decided:

1. Opportunity Site C (Main Street) combined with the walkway connecting Cascade Street with the GAA and Soccer pitches in Opportunity Site E
2. Opportunity Site A (The Square) combined with Opportunity Site D (Ossory Street)
3. Remaining Cascade Street element of Opportunity Site E (Cascade Street)
4. Opportunity Site B (The Pond) due to its complexity

13.4 Action Plan

Table 13.1 Action and roadmap

Theme	Funding	Timeline	KPI
Theme 1 – Empowering the Community for Growth			
<p>Action 1.1: Establish the Rathdowney Town Team and build the capacity of the group both internally and externally with other community groups (Obj 5; SDGs 11, 16) Priority 1</p>	N/A	ST	Town Team established. Strong governance followed. Plan implemented.
<p>Action 1.2: Establish a working group with surrounding areas to coordinate regeneration efforts and learnings (Obj 5; SDGs 11, 16)</p>	N/A	ST	Working group established
<p>Action 1.3: Work with education and skills providers to develop a more competitive workforce (Obj 2; SDG 8)</p>	N/A	ST-MT	New courses offered at the local Library or Community Centre
<p>Action 1.4: Support community efforts to reduce carbon emissions, enhance biodiversity and reduce waste through the rollout of renewable energy, adopting biodiversity friendly habitat management and embracing circular economy practices. (Obj 5, 9; SDGs 7, 11, 13, 15)</p>	SEAI / Heritage Council / Local Authority Grants / Leader	ST-LT	Less waste, lower carbon emissions, greater biodiversity

13.4 Action Plan

Table 13.1 – Actions and roadmap (continued)

Theme	Funding	Timeline	KPI
Theme 2 – Leveraging Strengths for Growth: Sustainable Hospitality Development			
<p>Action 2.1: Pilot an artisan market/festival in the Town Square. (Obj 2; SDGs 11, 12)</p> <p>Action 2.2: Explore options to provide a space for the arts and creative sector in the town and establishment of an Arts Festival. The preference should be for the reuse of an existing structure. (Obj 6, 7; SDG 3)</p> <p>Action 2.3: Explore opportunities and advertise incentives to encourage the opening of a café or restaurant in the town centre. To ensure long term success, this action will likely need either Opportunity Site A or B to be complete. (Obj 2, 6, 10; SDG 11)</p> <p>Action 2.4: Examine the heritage and history of the town to explore options for heritage-based activities and events (e.g. heritage trail, community festival). (Obj 5, 7; SDG 16)</p> <p>Action 2.5: Examine the potential of cost-effective tourism-based opportunities. Build on the presence of Donaghmore Famine Workhouse Museum and other historical sites. (Obj 2, 6; SDGs 8, 11)</p> <p>Action 2.6: Opportunity Site B: Explore options to develop a facility for water-based activities in the Mill Pond. This will entail ensuring that the water quality is classed as “good”. (Obj 1, 6, 7; SDGs 3, 11, 14)</p>	<p>RRDF / TVRS</p> <p>RRDF / TVRS</p> <p>RRDF / TVRS</p> <p>Heritage Council / RRDF / TVRS</p> <p>Fáilte Ireland / RRDF / TVRS</p> <p>RRDF / TVRS / Leader</p>	<p>ST-MT</p> <p>ST-MT</p> <p>ST</p> <p>ST-MT</p> <p>MT-LT</p> <p>MT-LT</p>	<p>Funding applications submitted (RRDF).</p> <p>New café or restaurant operational.</p> <p>Projects identified and feasibility established</p> <p>Measurable increase in number of visitors to Town</p> <p>Funding applications submitted (RRDF). Popular recreational area created.</p>

13.4 Action Plan

Table 13.1 – Actions and roadmap (continued)

Theme	Funding	Timeline	KPI
Theme 3 – Improving Access and Connectivity			
<p>Action 3.1: Work with relevant stakeholders to improve public transport links for Rathdowney (Obj 4, 9; SDGs 11, 13)</p>	NTA	MT-LT	<p>Number of new bus routes and bus frequency increased.</p> <p>All Local Link bus routes go into the middle of the town.</p> <p>Direct connection with Ballybrophey Train Station. Where possible, match arrivals at the station with the train timetable.</p>
<p>Action 3.2: Reconfiguration and improvements of parking spaces within Rathdowney. This action incorporates Opportunity Sites A, C and D (Obj 1, 3; SDGs 10, 11) Priority 1</p>	RRDF	ST-MT	<p>Funding application submitted (RRDF).</p> <p>Number of car park facilities enhanced.</p>
<p>Action 3.3: Deliver traffic calming measures identified through Opportunity Area projects. This action incorporates Opportunity Sites A, B and D. (Obj 1, 3, 6; SDGs 3, 11) Priority 1</p>	RRDF	ST-MT	<p>Funding application submitted (RRDF)</p> <p>Number of traffic calming measures implemented</p>
<p>Action 3.4: Deliver key street enhancements as identified through Opportunity Area projects. This action incorporates Opportunity Sites A, B, D and E. (Obj 1, 2, 6; SDGs 3, 11) Priority 1</p>	RRDF	ST-MT	<p>Funding application submitted (RRDF).</p> <p>Number of local streets enhanced.</p>
<p>Action 3.5: Provide improved footpaths and street lighting across the town. (Obj 1, 3, 6, 9; SDGs 3, 11) Priority 1</p>	RRDF	ST-MT	<p>All estates connected with good quality footpaths and streetlighting to the Square.</p>
<p>Action 3.6: Utilise the findings of the Digital Blueprint for Rathdowney to improve the digital readiness of town and connectivity. (Obj 2; SDGs 8, 10, 11)</p>	RRDF	MT	<p>Digital Town Score of minimum of 50.</p>

13.4 Action Plan

Table 13.1 – Actions and roadmap (continued)

Theme	Funding	Timeline	KPI
Theme 4 – Physical Regeneration of Town Centre			
<p>Action 4.1: Identify vacant and derelict properties, and liaise with local authority representatives to contact landowners to encourage intervention. (Obj 8; SDGs 11, 13) Priority 1</p>	N/A	ST	Reduction in number of vacant and derelict properties.
<p>Action 4.2: Liaise with local authority representatives to ensure derelict site register is up to date and encourage compulsory purchase of sites where required. (Obj 8; SDGs 11, 13)</p>	Housing for All	ST-MT	Successful acquisition of long-term vacant sites.
<p>Action 4.3: Opportunity Site A: Explore options to develop an open shelter / market house in the Town Square, as part of comprehensive public realm scheme for the Square. (Obj 1, 6; SDG 11)</p>	RRDF	ST-MT	Detailed designs prepared and funding sought.
<p>Action 4.4: Introduce a streetscape enhancement scheme, targeting the painting of buildings and improvements to shopfronts. (Obj 1; SDG 11)</p>	TVES	ST	Funding secured and improvements delivered to town centre streetscape.
<p>Action 4.5: Prepare and implement a landscaping strategy for Rathdowney which will identify opportunities for, and a consistent approach to, a significant increase in biodiversity rich planting in the Town. (Obj 9; SDGs 11, 15)</p>	TVES	ST	Landscaping Plan developed and initiatives implemented.
<p>Action 4.6: Adequate number of electric car charge points installed across the Town. Particular attention is to be paid to ensuring sufficient charging opportunities for residents living along the streets. (Obj 9; SDGs 10, 11, 13)</p>	SEAI	ST-MT	Substantially increased provision of electric car charging points.

13.4 Action Plan

Table 13.1 – Actions and roadmap (continued)

Theme	Funding	Timeline	KPI
Theme 5 – Inclusive, Healthy and Equitable Town			
<p>Action 5.1: Develop and implement initiatives that support and celebrate a diverse, inclusive, and connected community. (Obj 7; SDGs 10, 11)</p>	Community Support Fund (CSF) / Local businesses	ST-MT	Integration plan developed and implemented. Number of inclusion programmes developed, and awareness sessions held.
<p>Action 5.2: Identify funding opportunities to ensure the Community Centre has adequate facilities to be able to cater to the diverse needs of the Town. (Obj 5, 6, 10; SDGs 10, 11)</p>	RRDF, TVES	MT-LT	Refurbished or new community centre building which better serves the community.
<p>Action 5.3: Identify and address specific needs of Ukrainian refugees and ensure adequate provision of services. (Obj 7; SDG 10)</p>	Community Support Fund (CSF)	ST	Forum established and number of meetings held. Number of refugees accommodated.
<p>Action 5.4: Liaise with Laois Healthy Ireland representatives to promote programmes to help address and respond to local community health and well-being needs in the town. (Obj 6; SDG 3)</p>	Healthy Ireland Laois Fund	ST-MT	Number of programmes and initiatives supported in the areas of health and social inclusion. Healthy Rathdowney strategy developed.
<p>Action 5.5: Liaise with Laois Sports Partnership and Rathdowney Errill Activity Hub and improve sports and recreation facilities in the town. (Obj 6; SDG 3)</p>	Healthy Ireland Laois Fund	ST-MT	Projects identified and funding secured.

Theme 1 – Empowering the Community for Growth

Rathdowney is a small town with an active community and a number of community groups. Notwithstanding the wider catchment area, the small nature of the town reinforces the importance of ensuring that the community is at the centre of its development and growth. Furthermore, there is a need for the town to implement a more coordinated approach to its development and ensure that an empowered community is central to its economic growth. As such the following should be implemented.

Action 1.1 Establish the Rathdowney Town Team and build the capacity of the group, both internally and externally with other community groups

A Town Team should be established to drive development in the town. This group will drive not only community development but also the economic development of the town. In doing so, the group will have a pivotal role to play in Rathdowney's future, which will include verifying the town's strengths and identifying projects and initiatives that can have the greatest impact in relation to its residents. Most importantly, the Town Team will put the community at the heart of coordinating town development and allow them to access funding for small and large interventions and projects.

It is important that the Town Team has the capacity in terms of membership, skills and resources to fulfil its role. The Town Team can also play central role in supporting the wider network of community groups in Rathdowney, and building efficiencies and linkages.

Strong governance practices must be adhered to. It is recommended that the Town Team be transparent with its decision making. The Town Team should undertake an annual review of the progress it has made with regard to the implementation of the plan. All minutes of Town Team meetings should be made available online. Finally, plain English principles should be followed for all published material.

Action 1.2. Establish a working group with surrounding areas to coordinate regeneration efforts and learnings

Once the Town Team is created, a working group with other community groups (and where relevant local authorities) in surrounding areas should be established (e.g. Mounthraught, Abbeyleix, Durrow). The aim of this working group will be to share lessons learned and innovative ideas and participate in joint bids for funding. This could assist in meeting requirements to demonstrate the regional benefits of projects in applications required by certain streams of funding or for larger amounts of funding. Similarly, for smaller projects which individually would not meet application requirements (e.g. €25,000 or below), the opportunity to combine with other nearby projects of similar scope could allow it to meet funding application requirements. Potential funding streams to consider include RRDF, the Voids Programme, the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant, NTA Sustainable Transport Measures Grant, Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS), Safe Routes to School Programme, National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme and Heritage Council Community Grants.

Theme 1 – Empowering the Community for Growth

Area to learn from: Abbeyshrule

The development of the new rural work hub in Abbeyshrule has been driven by a local community group, The Yard Hub CLG. The project was successful in their bid for funding from the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and received €522,265. Rathdowney can learn from this in relation to two aspects.

Firstly, the community led project highlights what can be achieved through coordinated development with the community at its centre. Secondly, as outlined previously this study is not recommending the development of a remote working hub in Rathdowney at present. Nonetheless, there did appear to be interest for a similar space in the consultation.

The Yard Hub project offers Rathdowney a live case study on the development and viability of a rural/remote work hub in small villages (Abbeyshrule has a population of approximately 200). As such, once established, the Rathdowney Community Development Group/Town Team, should liaise closely with The Yard Hub CLG to ascertain the level of success and uptake in relation to the rural working hub which could provide evidence for a business case and model that could be replicated.

Action 1.3 Work with education and skills providers to develop a more competitive workforce

With relatively high levels of unemployment and lower levels of skills attainment evident in Rathdowney, enhancing skills and educational attainment will be an important aspect of driving economic development in the town. This will contribute to a more competitive workforce, which in turn should improve employment outcomes for the town's residents, as well as providing an attractive talent pool for potential investors and businesses. Rathdowney already benefits from the Brand Central Hub and remote working facilities that provide state of the art facilities and a good environment for businesses to grow. Furthermore, Laois County Council should work with the ETB, the TUS, other educational and skills providers to explore options and initiatives to create further linkages with training and education providers to enhance access and provision of training and professional development for the town's residents. Some quick wins to support the local economy could include digital skills, hospitality, and tourism training along with existing supports in relation to skilled trades.

Theme 1 – Empowering the Community for Growth

Action 1.4 Support community efforts to reduce carbon emissions, enhance biodiversity and reduce waste through the rollout of renewable energy, adopting biodiversity friendly habitat management and embracing circular economy practices.

National and international policy now places climate change and sustainability at the core of how our society operates. Its importance in shaping both human behaviour and the economy is only likely to grow in the coming years.

Although much is being done at a national level, there is still a great amount that individual communities such as Rathdowney can do to address the challenge of climate change. There are already some excellent examples across the country of what communities can do (e.g. solar panels on community buildings, increasing the planting of native plant species as part of tidy towns efforts, managing green areas for nature, finding ways to reuse waste locally).

This action allows for the creation of initiatives that work for the people of Rathdowney. It acknowledges their imagination and ingenuity. It also acknowledges the rapid changes in national policy and improvements in technology associated with renewable energy and energy conservation. Complementing this action are specific actions throughout this report which work to reduce carbon emissions and increase biodiversity levels in the Town (e.g. sustainable travel, compact growth, building reuse).

Theme 2 – Leveraging Strengths for Growth: Sustainable Hospitality Development

Rathdowney provides a range of services and facilities for the population of the surrounding hinterland. It is a focus for social interaction in the west of the county and provides linkages to smaller settlement nodes in the district, such as Errill and Donaghmore. The town has several close-by attractions including Cody’s Castle, a ruined tower house in Castletown, and the Donoughmore Famine Workhouse Museum. Yet, Rathdowney has more to offer than just access to services. The town has a range of amenity attractions and recreation facilities that include extensive natural open space areas associated with the River Erkina, with historic pedestrian links to Church Street, generous car parks, a modern playground and a new town park as well as a GAA club. Rathdowney Golf Club is located less than 1km south-east of the town centre at Coolnaboulwest, set within a rural parkland extending to around 42ha. A large area of land zoned for tourism uses adjoins the western edge of the Golf club.

As Rathdowney possesses large public spaces, such as the main square and the mill pond, the town has significant opportunities to develop and benefit from the development of sustainable hospitality. The Mill Pond offers the opportunity for the development of water activities as well as an area for small artisan markets/festivals. A large public square offers additional potential for community uses. Therefore, the square and pond in particular have the potential to provide new impetus in the development of the sector in the town, as they could be used as ideal places for community gatherings as well as leisure and recreation activities. Thus, ample opportunities exist to develop the hospitality sector in the town along with associated services and facilities that could drive economic development.



Hospitality businesses at Town Square

Theme 2 – Leveraging Strengths for Growth: Sustainable Hospitality Development

Action 2.1: Pilot an artisan market/festival in the Town Square

Develop a pilot artisan market in the Main Square or the Mill Pond area to support local producers and further enhance the use and awareness of the pond area. Once established, the market could be held at regular intervals from June – August to benefit from seasonal trade. The market will provide an opportunity for those in the vicinity to sell local produce and arts and crafts, initiate street food pop-up events, or offer spaces for food or coffee trucks to attract footfall and further enhance Rathdowney as a destination in the Midlands. The market should be visible to passing traffic.

Action 2.2: Explore options to provide a space for the arts and creative sector in the town, and establishment of an Arts Festival. The preference should be to reuse an existing structure.

To support the creative sector and those involved in arts and crafts, an exhibition/performance space could be identified within the town centre. For example, such a space could be hosted by the Community Centre or the local library. This space could be similar to the Laois Arthouse in Stradbally, which promotes local artists with the aim of bringing art to the community. Once established, this space could subsequently form the catalyst for an annual Arts Festival or similar event which would help reinforce the cultural identity of Rathdowney.

AREA TO LEARN FROM: TULLAMORE FOOD FAYRE

The largest indoor farmers market in the Midlands, with a range of foods from local and regional producers. On the first Saturday of each month, the food traders are joined by local crafters and artists selling a range of beautiful and skilfully made artefacts.

Tullamore Food Fayre arose from the food market established in 2014 by the Offaly Delicious Food Network and became a self-standing entity under its current name the following year. It is less than ten minutes' walk from the Town Centre, but offers a very different shopping experience.

Theme 2 – Leveraging Strengths for Growth: Sustainable Hospitality Development

Action 2.3: Explore opportunities and advertise incentives to encourage the opening of a café or restaurant in the town centre. To ensure long term success, this action will likely need either Opportunity Site A or B to be complete.

With a lack of accommodation and hospitality services currently evident, a café or restaurant could greatly enhance the town’s offering in this area and allow it to compete with nearby settlements for day-time socialising spaces. The Council could consider ways to encourage the set-up of such an establishment by offering competitive rates or exploring options on how progress in relation to bringing a vacant or derelict site back into use can be accelerated for the benefit of the town. The long-term success of any café or restaurant would be significantly enhanced by the delivery of Opportunity Site A or B, preferably both.

Action 2.4: Examine the heritage and history of the town to explore options for heritage-based activities and events (e.g. heritage trail, community festival)

Rathdowney has a rich cultural and physical heritage which should form an important part of the Town’s sense of identify. A primary example is the former Perry Family Brewery, a major business which had a critical influence on the local economy and community from the early 19th century to the mid 20th century, and helped to establish wide ranging social and economic connections. There is clear opportunity for this to be explored in greater detail as the basis for future activities and events. Heritage Week is a very useful event to galvanise interest and enthusiasm.

Action 2.5 Examine the potential of cost-effective tourism-based opportunities, by building synergies with Donaghmore Famine Workhouse Museum and other historical sites

Donaghmore Famine Workhouse Museum is a significant tourism asset in the local area. Additionally, the nearby village of Durrow attracts significant numbers of visitors. There is the potential for Rathdowney to capitalise on links to these destinations to increase the numbers of visitors to the town. Other nearby sites include: Granstown Lake and Aghaboe Abbey.

There are a variety of potential projects which could assist with improving the tourism potential of Rathdowney. In the context of Rathdowney, tourism initiatives aimed at active recreation are likely to have the greatest impact in taking advantage of areas assets. One such option could be a future greenway links to surrounding towns, in particular Durrow. The Erkina River is an asset which should also be examined in terms of its potential for active recreational opportunities.

While such facilities would be located outside the town centre, there would be substantial benefit to the town in establishing it as a destination and capitalising on existing tourist destinations in the surrounding region. Any action that is proposed should be carefully considered to ensure its cost effectiveness.

Theme 2 – Leveraging Strengths for Growth: Sustainable Hospitality Development

Action 2.6: Opportunity Site B: Explore options to develop a facility for water-based activities in the Mill Pond. This will entail ensuring that the water quality is classified as “good”.

As in section 13.3.2, to capitalise on the asset of Rathdowney’s Mill Pond, it is proposed that options are explored in relation to the development of a small-scale community type pavilion acting primarily as a facility for light water sports activity (swimming, kayaking, paddle boarding) and providing direct access to the Mill Race. The facility, which could include a sheltered area, would also offer a space for both formal and informal gatherings and a focal point for activity at the pond. Close cooperation will be needed with site owner, Dawn Meats.

AREA TO LEARN FROM: THOMASTOWN ISLAND WEIR POOL – KILKENNY

The Weir Pool in Thomastown on the River Nore was created in 2008 by Thomastown Community River Trust after the existing weir breached due to heavy flooding. The Island Weir swimming area is a private laneway that leads to the swim area and the Craft School. The pool is mostly shallow with easy access from a set of curved stone steps which also serve as comfy seats to perch after swimming. The site includes a large grassy area, picnic tables and a small café in a mobile structure. Lifeguards are on duty during the school summer holidays. Today, the Weir Pool is a popular space for wild river swimming, socializing and enjoying local biodiversity. Annual maintenance costs are modest.

Theme 3 – Improving Access and Connectivity

While enjoying a strategic location relative to Cork, Dublin and Limerick due to proximity to the M7 (10km), M8 (7 km) motorways and Ballybrophy Train Station (6km), Rathdowney suffers from a lack of bus connectivity. This is most evident in the low frequency bus service route operated by Slieve Bloom Coach Tours that services the town only during weekdays. Accessibility within the town centre itself could also be improved, leading to greater permeability and linkages with local amenities and attractions through public realm enhancements.

It is important that actions improving connectivity and accessibility are brought forward, to ensure Rathdowney is a connected place both in terms of access to services and its linkages with local amenities. This also featured in the visions for future put forward by Rathdowney residents who participated in the online community and business surveys.

Action 3.1: Work with relevant stakeholders to improve public transport links for Rathdowney

As of May 2022, there are three Local Link routes that incorporate Rathdowney. Two run on two days a week. The third runs on one day. None enter Ballybrophy Train Station. At least one of the Local Link services only skirts the town and does not enter the core.

Rathdowney is serviced on 3 weekdays by the 831 bus route to Portlaoise, which runs between Portlaoise Shopping Centre and Borris-in-Ossory in a looped fashion. The service passes, but does not enter, Ballybrophy Train Station.

It was noted during the consultation that the infrequent public transport provision in the town as well as the lack of a connection to Ballybrophy Train Station is problematic for those seeking employment and access to services (e.g. health services) and does not support commuters in the town. With the recent arrival of asylum seekers in the town, and proposed development of modular housing for Ukrainian refugees, improved access to public transport is becoming increasingly important.

It will be important to work with Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) to review and improve bus services serving the town. A particular issue is that current bus services do not go into Ballybrophy Train Station or complement the train timetable. A key priority should be to secure daily, peak time bus services to Ballybrophy Train Station which are synchronised with rail services. All bus services should also enter the middle of the town.

In addition to new services, there is a need to provide a new bus stop and shelter within the town centre, most likely at the town square as part of wider public realm improvements.

Action 3.2: Reconfiguration and improvements of parking spaces within Rathdowney. This action incorporates Opportunity Sites A, C and D.

While the overall number of parking spaces is to be reduced to allow for a better public realm, the configuration of remaining car parking is to be improved. There is to be particular attention provided to the elderly and those with a disability. In all areas, careful detailed design in close consultation with residents and businesses will be needed to ensure their concerns are addressed.

Theme 3 – Improving Access and Connectivity

Action 3.2 Reconfiguration and improvements of parking spaces within Rathdowney. This action incorporates Opportunity Sites A, C and D. (continued)

Main Street (Opportunity Site C)

At present, undesirable on-street parking (often partially or completely on footpaths) occurs on Main Street. This either reduces available footpath width, causing inconvenience to pedestrians, or blocks the footpath completely, forcing pedestrians to walk on the carriageway in places. It is proposed to upgrade this section of road by providing formal car parking facilities on one side of the road (alternating between the northern and southern sides of the street). The provision of formal car parking will discourage informal car parking from taking place, whilst also retaining available footpath provision for use by pedestrians.

There will also be some opportunity to increase footpath widths. Formalising parking provision will seek to balance improvements to the pedestrian environment whilst also seeking to allay concerns of local business owners who do not have the benefit of off-street parking facilities and would be concerned with complete removal of car parking.

The Square (Opportunity Site A)

A parking beat survey undertaken during November 2022 indicates that The Square may have an excess of car parking capacity, even at peak times. It is also noted that The Square is single use at present (i.e. car parking), significantly underachieving on its potential civic function. As such, it is proposed to remove a section of the car parking at the western end of The Square and introduce a new public realm area. Any additional car parking requirements can be accommodated on R433, with formal on-street car parking deemed beneficial given its excessive road width at this location.

Ossory Street (Opportunity Site D)

Ossory Street currently operates as a one-way street and typically features cars parked along (and typically partially on) a footpath along the eastern side of the road. It is proposed to reinvent this road as a shared surface, with a 1.2 metre wide pedestrian refuge also provided. This shall allow cars to still use the road, however the changes will accommodate an improved pedestrian environment, whilst still retaining a dedicated area for pedestrians who may not be comfortable using a shared (pedestrian-vehicle) space.

Action 3.3: Deliver traffic calming measures identified through Opportunity Area projects. This action incorporates Opportunity Sites A, B and D.

Mill Pond (Opportunity Site B)

A raised table in the vicinity of the Mill Pond which will connect the Mill Pond with Main Street, Mill Street and The Square should be introduced. This raised table will act to calm traffic whilst also providing improved connectivity and permeability in the centre of the town.

Theme 3 – Improving Access and Connectivity

Action 3.3: Deliver traffic calming measures identified through Opportunity Area projects. This action incorporates Opportunity Sites A, B and D. (continued)

Main Street (Opportunity Site A)

The proposed public realm concept features a series of physical build-outs along Main Street. These provide both an opportunity to calm traffic through a reduction in the effective width of the carriageway, whilst also discouraging parking on both sides of the road and also discouraging parking on footpaths. The traffic calmed areas shall both reduce vehicle speeds whilst also seeking to better engage drivers in the town centre through changes to the street's horizontal alignment.

Ossory Street (Opportunity Site D)

The proposed shared surface along Ossory Street shall act to calm traffic in the centre of the town and reinforce a slow speed environment, making it more comfortable for pedestrians in particular. This will form a key link between the proposals on Main Square and the SuperValu plaza in the centre of the town.

Action 3.4 Key street enhancements identified through Opportunity Area projects. This action incorporates Opportunity Sites A, B, D and E.

New pedestrian-only spaces shall be created at The Mill Pond (Opportunity Site B) and Main Square (Opportunity Site A). This will seek to support the transformation of the town from a car-centred to a pedestrian-focused environment.

Rathdowney GAA Club is located close to the town centre. It is proposed to improve pedestrian/cyclist links between the Club and the town, particularly along Cascade Street and on R435 in the vicinity of the entrance to SuperValu (Opportunity Site E).

Cascade Street shall be turned into a shared surface with possible one-way general traffic movements, making it more suitable for pedestrians and cyclists along this critical link. This short two-way local street, fronted by a terrace of houses with attractive front gardens along its northern side, provides important access between the town centre and the GAA Club. There is a narrow ill-defined footpath along the north side of the street, and a small off-street car park to the south. The street becomes wider and with better footpaths on approaching the GAA. The opportunity exists for the route to become a Quietway, possibly one-way, facilitating local access only and prioritising movement of people walking and cycling, supported by public realm improvements.

An existing footpath link from the northern edge of the street could be opened-up and extended to the football pitches at Clover United FC. This would create sustainable access links from the town centre via the traffic-calmed section of Ossory Street (Opportunity Site D).

Action 3.5: Provide improved footpaths, crossings and street lighting across the town

The quality of footpaths across the town varies in quality, while in some built up areas there are none. There are also gaps in the provision of adequate street lighting. Safe pedestrian crossings are mostly limited to within the core of the town centre. This incentivises car use rather than

Theme 3 – Improving Access and Connectivity

Action 3.5: Provide improved footpaths, crossings and street lighting across the town (continued)

walking and cycling. In addition, it makes the town inaccessible and unwelcoming for those with physical disabilities. Laois County Council is taking steps to address this issue. Nonetheless, it should be an action of this plan to ensure that all continuous built up areas in the town are connected to the town core with good footpaths and street lighting. Sufficient safe crossing points should also be created.

Action 3.6: Utilise the findings of the Digital Blueprint for Rathdowney to improve the digital readiness and connectivity of the Town

A Digital Blueprint was published for Rathdowney in March 2023. It provided an assessment of the digital readiness of the Town and integration of digital services. The Blueprint found that Rathdowney had a Digital Town Score of 35. This places Rathdowney at Level 2 of 5, where Digital Readiness is described as “Ad Hoc” and “Mostly Not Documented”.

Rathdowney is positioned well in terms of infrastructure, with the majority of the town and immediate environs having access to high-speed broadband. However, it was found that the town scored very poorly in terms of Digital Tourism, Digital Business and Digital Civil Society. This is largely due to businesses and services in the town not capitalising on the good quality network that exists.

The Town Team and Council should work with stakeholders to address the lack of digital integration, with an aim to gain a significant improvement in the Digital Score of the Town.

Theme 4 – Physical Regeneration of Town Centre

Action 4.1: Identify vacant and derelict properties, and liaise with local authority representatives to contact landowners to encourage intervention

As demonstrated in Section 5, vacancy and dereliction has been a long standing challenge in Rathdowney, and is a particular issue on Main Street and Ossory Street. There is now a strong suite of initiatives at both national and local level aimed at bringing vacant and derelict properties back into use. Central to this is the Croí Conaithe (Towns) fund. In engaging with landowners, the Council should set out how this may be used alongside other potential grants and supports to encourage significantly more property owners to take action.

The first priority in addressing vacancy and dereliction should be the identification of relevant property owners. The second should be engagement with them. The Council's Vacancy and Dereliction Register (see Action 4.2) will be a key tool in this process, while the vacant properties identified in Section 5 of this Plan should form a starting point.

A flexible approach should be taken to future uses for vacant properties, and future uses should be appropriate for the property and its location in the town centre. As opportunity sites in the town centre are identified, their potential to be repurposed for and/or brought back into use should be evaluated. Potential uses include: housing, commercial uses, pop-up shops, spaces for arts and crafts and as community space. While there is a clear need for new housing, and it is often the most attractive option for refurbishment, it is also important to ensure that high quality commercial premises are available within the town. There are a number of recent examples of successful, good quality refurbishments of vacant properties within the Town which can act as further encouragement for subsequent projects.



The recently refurbished Richard Williams & Sons property

Theme 4 – Physical Regeneration of Town Centre

Action 4.2: Liaise with local authority representatives to ensure derelict site register is up to date and encourage compulsory purchase of sites where required

The preference for addressing vacant and derelict sites should be for property owners to voluntarily take meaningful steps to either refurbish the properties or sell them. Where this doesn't occur, and where initial engagement by the Council does not result in progress, then the acquisition of properties through agreement or, if needed, compulsory purchase should be considered. It is also clear that national policy is increasingly in favour of Councils taking direct action where necessary and using their power to acquire properties, with increased funding and resources available to support this.

It is not reasonable or possible for the Council to acquire the majority of vacant or derelict properties, especially where there is a reasonable prospect of sites being brought back into to use through private development. However, there are particular cases where sites have been vacant for long periods and where they have a particularly negative effect on the vibrancy and quality of the place where the acquisition of a property by the Council is merited. In the case of Rathdowney, Council intervention would have the greatest effect in:

- Acquiring derelict sites which require significant investment, and where there is no clear evidence of landowners or potential developers bringing forward development on the sites.
- Acquiring longer term vacant properties, where landowners have not demonstrated an intent to either dispose of the property or bring the property back into a meaningful use.

The Council's Vacancy and Dereliction Register will be an essential tool in identifying sites which should be acquired. The Register should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure it is kept up-to-date and with all relevant properties in the Town included on the register. Acquisition may often be possible through landowner engagement, without the need for a formal CPO process.



Vacant and Derelict Properties along Main Street

Theme 4 – Physical Regeneration of Town Centre

Action 4.3: Opportunity Site A: Explore options to develop an open shelter / market house in the Town Square, as part of comprehensive public realm scheme for the Square

Opportunity Site A identifies the potential for public realm improvements to the Town Square and realignments of parking and vehicular access. To capitalise on the impact of public realm improvements, it is proposed that an open shelter or open market house be developed to offer a space for both formal and informal gatherings, such as an occasional farmers' market, community fairs, or Christmas markets. This area could also be used for small artisan markets or festivals to support local producers.

This space could also function as a shelter for a new bus stop which will service the town centre.

AREA TO LEARN FROM: STRADBALLY MARKET HOUSE

The Market House in Stradbally, Co Laois is an open shelter of very distinctive pagoda-roof design. Located in the village's Market Square, it was built in 1899. The structure was renovated during the mid-2010s. In 2020, after Laois County Council were approached by traders who wanted to get an outdoor market set up in the town, arrangements were made to allow the Stradbally Farmers' Market commence trading in Market Square. Stradbally Farmers' Market has been operating in Market Square since October 2020, where it takes place every Friday from 2pm to 5pm.

Action 4.4: Introduce a Streetscape Enhancement Scheme, targeting the painting of buildings and improvements to shopfronts

Moderate interventions such as simply painting a building can make a major impact to the condition of a property and overall impression of a street. A streetscape enhancement scheme would help fund the painting of buildings and shopfronts. This will help ensure improvements are carried out to buildings which may not otherwise be done.



Well presented building in Town Square

Theme 4 – Physical Regeneration of Town Centre

The scheme could also provide design guidance to help ensure a consistency on palettes and style across the Town, without limiting preference or individuality. The scheme could be implemented in partnership with existing local committees, with Rathdowney Tidy Towns well placed to deliver such improvements.

Action 4.5: Prepare and implement a Landscaping Strategy for Rathdowney which will identify opportunities for, and a consistent approach to, delivering biodiversity rich planting in the Town

Green infrastructure has well established benefits in urban settings, even in smaller towns with rural hinterlands such as Rathdowney. It provides proven physical and mental health benefits, makes an area more attractive, and adds measurable commercial value. Crucially, there is now an increasing awareness on the value and importance of biodiversity rich landscaping in climate adaptation, climate resilience and in reversing the severe decline of biodiversity witnessed over the past century.

A Landscaping Strategy should be prepared for Rathdowney to support the enhancements of existing and delivery of new biodiversity rich planting in the town. The strategy should identify the most valuable natural assets in the Town, and set out how they could be enhanced and managed. The strategy should focus on opportunities for landscape improvements within the public realm and streetscape, including within the transformative projects that have been identified within this TCF Plan, and within publicly owned sites – including housing estate green areas – within the town. It should also, in consultation with landowners and occupiers, identify opportunities for planting and landscaping on prominent privately owned sites which could be delivered in partnership.

Action 4.6: Adequate number of electric car charge points to be installed across the Town. Particular attention is to be paid to ensuring there are sufficient charging opportunities for residents living along the streets.

With the mass movement towards electric cars, there needs to be adequate charging facilities installed for both residents and visitors in the Town's core. Charging of electric cars is likely to be a key issue in the near future regarding the maintenance of a strong residential function for the town's streets. Consequently, careful consideration is needed to ensure there are sufficient charging facilities within reasonable distance of residences. There is a strong overlap between this action and Action 3.2: reconfigured parking.

Theme 5 – Inclusive, Healthy and Equitable Town

Laois County Council, in collaboration with key stakeholders, will work to ensure that Rathdowney becomes an equitable town that promotes social inclusion and diversity. In line with the Healthy Ireland Framework 2019-2025, work will continue to improve health and wellbeing of its residents. This will be done by creating and continually improving the town’s physical and social environments and develop community resources that help people to support each other and achieve their potential. The actions under this theme will also look to support those that are most vulnerable and address all forms of deprivation where it exists, including the arrival of new communities such as Ukrainian refugees.

Action 5.1 Develop and implement initiatives that support and celebrate a diverse, inclusive, and connected community

A range of initiatives can be developed to support the inclusion of minority groups, new communities, those living with disability and older people living in Rathdowney to create a more socially inclusive community. These actions could include:

- Develop an integration plan for new communities, including asylum seekers and refugees but also immigrant workers, that addresses their specific needs.
- Develop training and education programmes around diversity and inclusion, including actions launched in collaboration with the two schools in the town (e.g. culture nights or diversity weeks events that celebrate the various communities living in Rathdowney).
- Continue to raise awareness and seek interventions around important social and integration measures such as isolation, autism awareness, literacy awareness, equality awareness, and LGBTQ+ awareness (e.g. partner with local organisations to organise ‘awareness days’ at the Community Centre or local library).

AREA TO LEARN FROM: LAOIS INTEGRATION NETWORK

Laois Integration Network (LIN) is a community organisation that promotes cultural diversity and effective integration throughout the County. LIN was established in February 2016 as the Syrian resettlement programme. It has highlighted the need for work to break down barriers and misconceptions of different cultures to allow migrants, asylum seekers and refugees feel equal members of the community.

Recently, LIN has launched the “Anti-Rumours” campaign, which is an EU wide project that sets out to dispel the widespread myths and misconceptions around the topic of immigration and migrant integration. Another recent initiative launched by LIN is the zero cost shop for Ukrainian refugees set up in Portlaoise, which offer items free of charge to those who have fled the war.

LIN initiatives are funded by local communities, businesses, and donors. The Council, together with other community organisations and local businesses may find it beneficial to explore potential collaborations with LIN to promote and invest in the integration of new communities in Rathdowney.



Laois Integration Network



Theme 5 – Inclusive, Healthy and Equitable Town

Action 5.2 Identify funding opportunities to ensure the Community Centre has adequate facilities to be able to cater to the diverse needs of the Town

The Community Centre in Rathdowney is a key facility. Its central location means that its a key driver for bringing people into the Town Centre. The Mill Pond Opportunity Area B identified earlier in the section, and the potential for opening up the pond up to the Community Centre site, would significantly improve its setting. It also opens up the opportunity for additional water based activities related to the centre, and to create one cohesive space which could act as a node for social activity in the town.

However, the present Community Centre building is dated, and in generally poor condition. An improved facility, through either a refurbishment of the current building (preferred option) or potential replacement, is needed to serve the needs of a growing and more diverse population.

A new or preferably improved facility would provide spaces of a higher quality, with the potential additional facilities and more flexible spaces to better support a broader range of activities.

AREA TO LEARN FROM: Donaghdee Community and Leisure Centre, Co. Down

The Donaghdee Community and Leisure Centre is a new community hub built in the town Donaghdee, County Down. It is a crucial facility for the town of almost 7,000 people. The new centre provides a large multipurpose sports hall, and smaller hall/gymnasium space, catering facilities, changing accommodation, offices, first aid rooms, as well as offices and meeting rooms.

The facility is located on a constrained site, located within an architectural conservation area. As a result, smaller scale spaces were focused to edges with the large community hall at the centre. The scale of the facility and range spaces and uses demonstrates what would be appropriate for a refurbished/new facility in Rathdowney.



Theme 5 – Inclusive, Healthy and Equitable Town

Action 5.3 Identify and address specific needs of Ukrainian refugees and ensure adequate provision of services

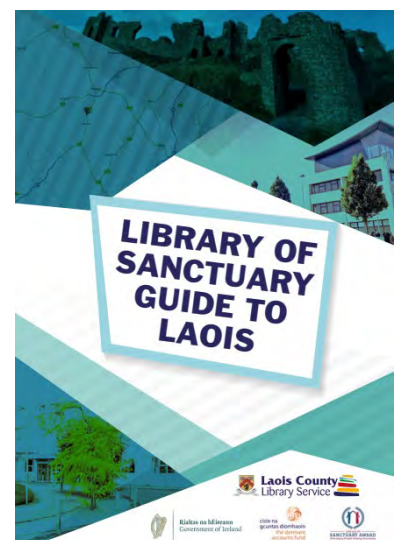
Plans as of May 2023 for offering accommodation to Ukrainian refugees in Ireland include a 42 semi-detached modular homes estate in Rathdowney. The houses will be located on half of an 11 acre site in Rathdowney owned by central Government and built by the Office of Public Works. The development is expected to add some 168 people to the community between 2023 and 2025.

Potential avenues to develop a coordinated response from County Laois and Rathdowney town to the Ukrainian refugee crisis include: 1. the establishment of a community and inter-agency forum to co-ordinate service delivery, 2. minimising duplication of service, 3. addressing gaps in service provision, and 4. to address the provision of emergency accommodation. A notable example in this regard is the Ukrainian Response Inter Agency Working Group established by Laois County Council. Its role is to bring local agencies together to ascertain the combined organisational capacity and to assist each other through the current evolving crisis on a collaborative basis.

AREAS TO LEARN FROM: CCC COMMUNITY SUPPORT PROGRAMME, LIBRARY OF SANCTUARY

The Community Help Programme of Cork County Council has been reinstated as part of the county's effort to help the people of Ukraine. In order to ensure dedication and consistency in the provision of services, the Community Support Programme, established during Covid, brings together representatives of statutory and volunteer agencies working throughout Cork County. The Council also set up a dedicated email address and contact number to address queries from the public. This local initiative mainly focuses on providing adequate emergency shelter and other accommodation facilities for Ukrainian refugees. The Council seeks support from the general public to identify potentially available multi-occupancy facilities like community halls, sports or leisure facilities or other former accommodation facilities in private or public ownership that might be utilised for Ukrainians.

Another initiative designed to facilitate the integration of Ukrainian refugees is Laois's Library of Sanctuary. The goal of this initiative is to foster a sense of acceptance and affirmation, to provide a place where individuals can feel at home, gather in a welcoming and judgement free environment, study, access news and literature in their own language, acquire new skills, and make new friends.



Theme 5 – Inclusive, Healthy and Equitable Town

Action 5.4: Liaise with Laois Healthy Ireland representatives to promote programmes to help address and respond to community health and well-being needs in the town

In line with the Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan, the Council in collaboration with the Town Team will continue to promote healthy life choices (e.g. diet), positive mental health and build on community well-being initiatives. These could include:

- (a) Developing a Healthy Rathdowney Strategy for the town. This could be a local interagency framework to develop collaborative local programmes that align with the Healthy Ireland Fund including programmes to address health inequalities .
- (b) Developing necessary supports and programmes for new and existing campaigns to encourage healthy mobility and social inclusion. This could include building on existing investments in walking, cycling, and outdoor products, and promoting the use of outdoor open spaces through creative community engagement initiatives.
- (c) Promoting active travel within the town by the delivering the new and enhanced pedestrian and cycle routes identified elsewhere in this plan.

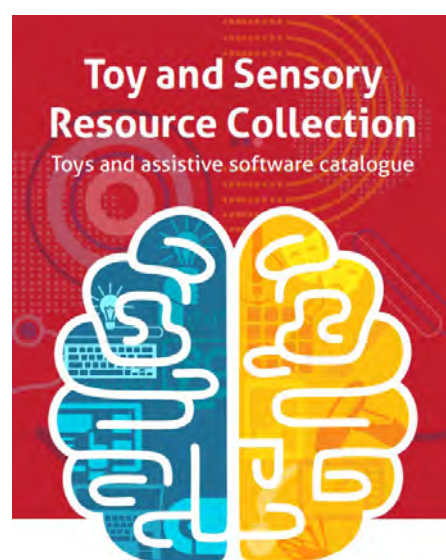
Moreover, the Council will seek opportunities to develop and implement actions that have the support of the local community. As was noted in the consultation section, Rathdowney residents who participated in the community survey emphasised the need to bring the community closer together to ensure that locals are more involved in the development of the town. Respondents noted the need to focus more on bringing people together as a community with classes and upbeat gatherings to fundraise for the upkeep of the town. Such actions would provide incentives for everyone in the community to work together to make Rathdowney a place people want to be in.

AREA TO LEARN FROM: TOY AND SENSORY RESOURCE COLLECTION

Laois County Library Service has made available a Sensory Toy Collection to assist children and adults with additional needs.

Based in Portarlinton and Mountmellick Libraries, this collection can be accessed free of charge to anyone who lives, works or goes to school in County Laois.

The collection was chosen by staff of Laois County Library Service with advice from professionals working in the community. The toys are designed to support the development of gross motor skills, fine motor skills, communication skills and visual perception skills.



Theme 5 – Inclusive, Healthy and Equitable Town

Action 5.5: Liaise with Laois Sports Partnership and Rathdowney Errill Activity Hub and improve sports and recreation facilities in the town

Respondents to the community survey pointed to the improvement of community facilities as a key element for ensuring a better quality of life in Rathdowney. This included ambitions for additional facilities to enable healthier lifestyles, such as a pop-up swimming pool, secondary school gym and more public spaces to facilitate participatory arts, sport and physical activities. There was also an emphasis on the need for activities for all ages, including children and older people.

The Rathdowney Errill Activity Hub, with the support of the Laois Sports Partnership, has played a key role in creating opportunities for all members of the Rathdowney community to participate in sport and physical activity, regardless of age, background or ability. The Hub provides an excellent platform through which improvements to existing facilities and the delivery of potential new facilities, can be secured alongside a programme of activities and initiatives to support active and healthy lifestyles.

AREA TO LEARN FROM: LEITRIM BE ACTIVE EUROPEAN CHALLENGE

As part of the Healthy Ireland Leitrim Fund, Leitrim Sports Partnership in partnership with Carrick on Shannon Gymnastics club delivered the Junior School Gymnastics Programme in three local primary schools. The students spent one hour a week in the gymnastics club being coached by gymnastics coaches for four weeks, with 150 children benefiting from this programme.

The primary schools gymnastics program is an initiative to impart active lifestyles on children. Gymnastics is a foundation sport for all other sports. This is because it develops agility, balance, coordination and speed (the ABC's of athleticism).

14

Implementation



The importance of implementation

Creating a good plan is only the start of a process. Without determined and adaptive implementation there is a risk that this document could undermine long-term efforts to renew Rathdowney. This is due to the risk of hopes being unfulfilled and belief lost if the actions are not implemented. This in turn would undermine any future attempts at rejuvenation.

For Rathdowney to become the town residents want it to be, there needs to be stronger, more collaborative local leadership which is representative of the community. The creation of the Rathdowney Town Team is likely the best opportunity to accomplish such a requirement. A key part of the successful town regeneration stories across Ireland and overseas has been the role of the relevant local authority. The presence of a dedicated Regeneration Officer within the Council presents the opportunity for Rathdowney to deepen its relationship with the local authority. This will lead to stronger collaboration on the projects and decisions necessary to rejuvenate the town.

Below is an analysis and associated recommendations concerning the required capabilities and management systems needed to create a robust regeneration ecosystem conducive to the long-term success of Rathdowney.

Capabilities

Training and mentoring for the Town Team and other local leaders

The members of the Town Team and other community leaders – including emerging leaders – need to be supported by more training and mentoring. This could take the form of:

- Regular training and mentoring on regeneration strategy, governance, obtaining grants and local fundraising.
- Annual research trip to comparable towns that has undergone a prolonged period of successful regeneration (e.g. Kildare Town, Westport, Boyle, Carrick-on-Suir, Conwy and Caernarvon in Wales).

Responsibility: Laois County Council

Management structures

The actions within this report should be at the core of the Town Team's work programme. Drift away from the actions within this plan is likely to dilute efforts and reduce long term impact.

The eventual governance structure of Rathdowney's Town Team will be heavily informed by the forthcoming recommendation from the National Town Regeneration Office concerning the governance structure of the country's town teams. Whatever governance structure is decided upon will need adequate administration support from Laois County Council. Regardless of the eventual governance structure for Rathdowney's Town Team, the Town Team should create and abide by a simple constitution. The constitution will address Town Team composition and processes. Importantly, it will help manage inevitable conflicts.

14 – Implementation

To aid transparency and grow the level of trust in the wider community for the Town Team the following is recommended:

- The Town Team should undertake an annual review of the progress it has made with regard to the implementation of the plan.
- All minutes of Town Team meetings should be made available online and their presence publicised on relevant social media channels.

To ensure the regular renewal of the Town Team itself and address the effects of volunteer fatigue, the following is recommended:

- The creation as required of themed sub-committees. This could be a useful way of encouraging wider participation from the community in renewal actions and developing local leadership.

Finally, it is recommended that this report be used as the basis of more detailed work programmes for the Town Team and Laois County Council.

Appendix 1: Online Community Survey

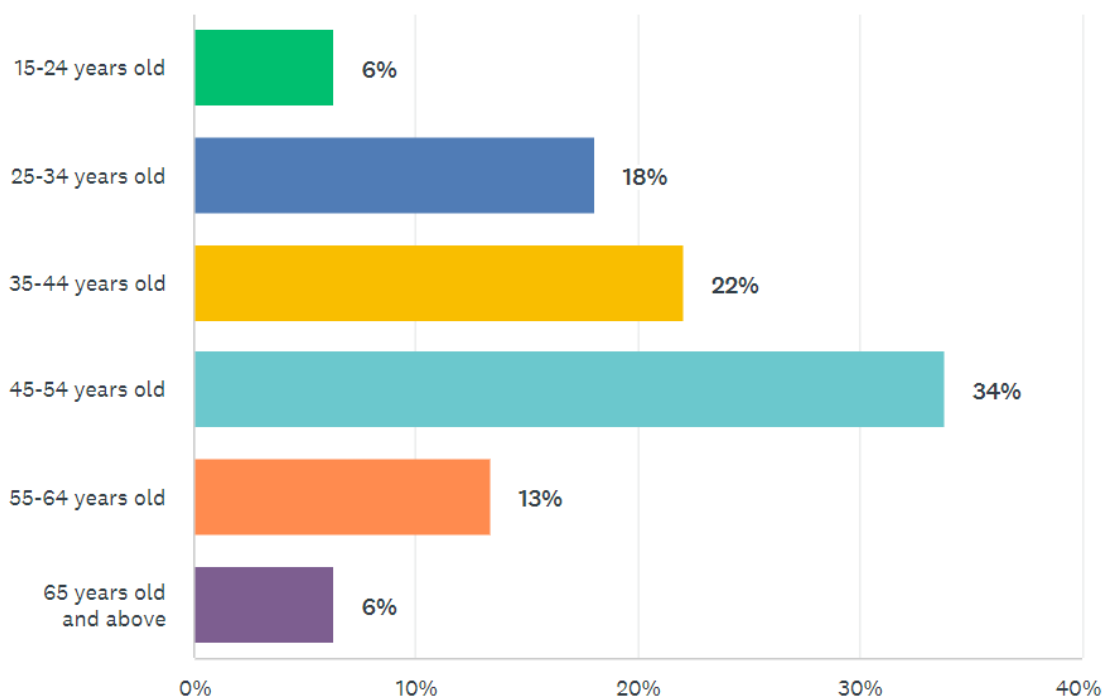


Community Survey Results

This section details the feedback received to the online community survey. The information presented in this section is a summary of the 127 answers received. Questions 1 to 7 allow us to ascertain the demographics involved in the survey, while questions 8 and 9 relate to town amenities.

Q1: How old are you?

Answered: 127 Skipped: 0



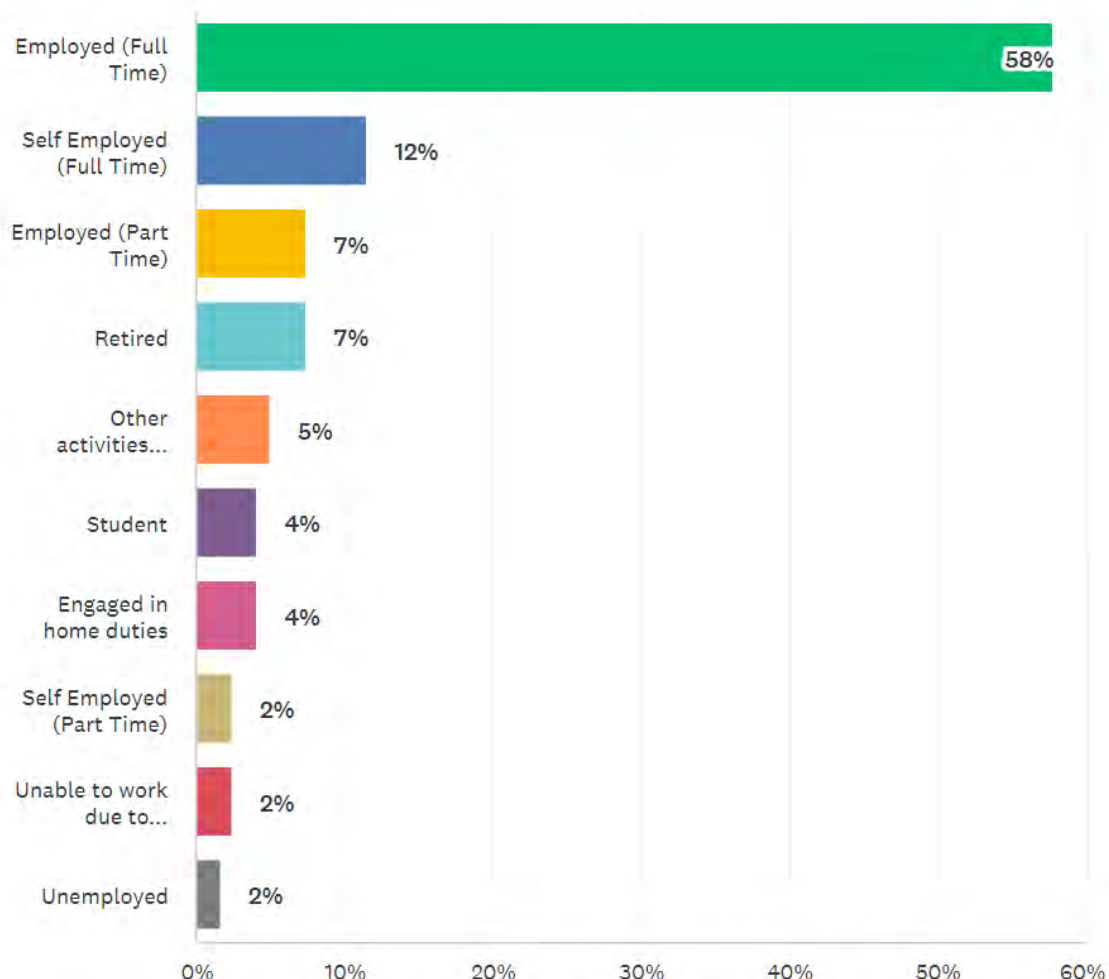
A total of 127 people participated to the community survey. As the demographics presented in the chart above show, the distribution of participants across age groups is relatively symmetric. As a result, we can be satisfied that the responses gathered by the survey reflect the views of the Rathdowney community to a satisfying extent.

Just under one quarter (24%) of respondents were aged 34 years old or younger. An additional quarter (22%) were aged between 35-44 years old. Middle-aged respondents (45-54 years old) made up a third (34%) of respondents, while a fifth (20%) were aged 55 years old and above.

One quarter (24%) of the people surveyed are 34 years old or younger, half (56%) are aged between 35 and 54 years old, and the rest (20%) are 55 years old and above.

Q2: How would you describe your present principal status?

Answered: 121 Skipped: 6



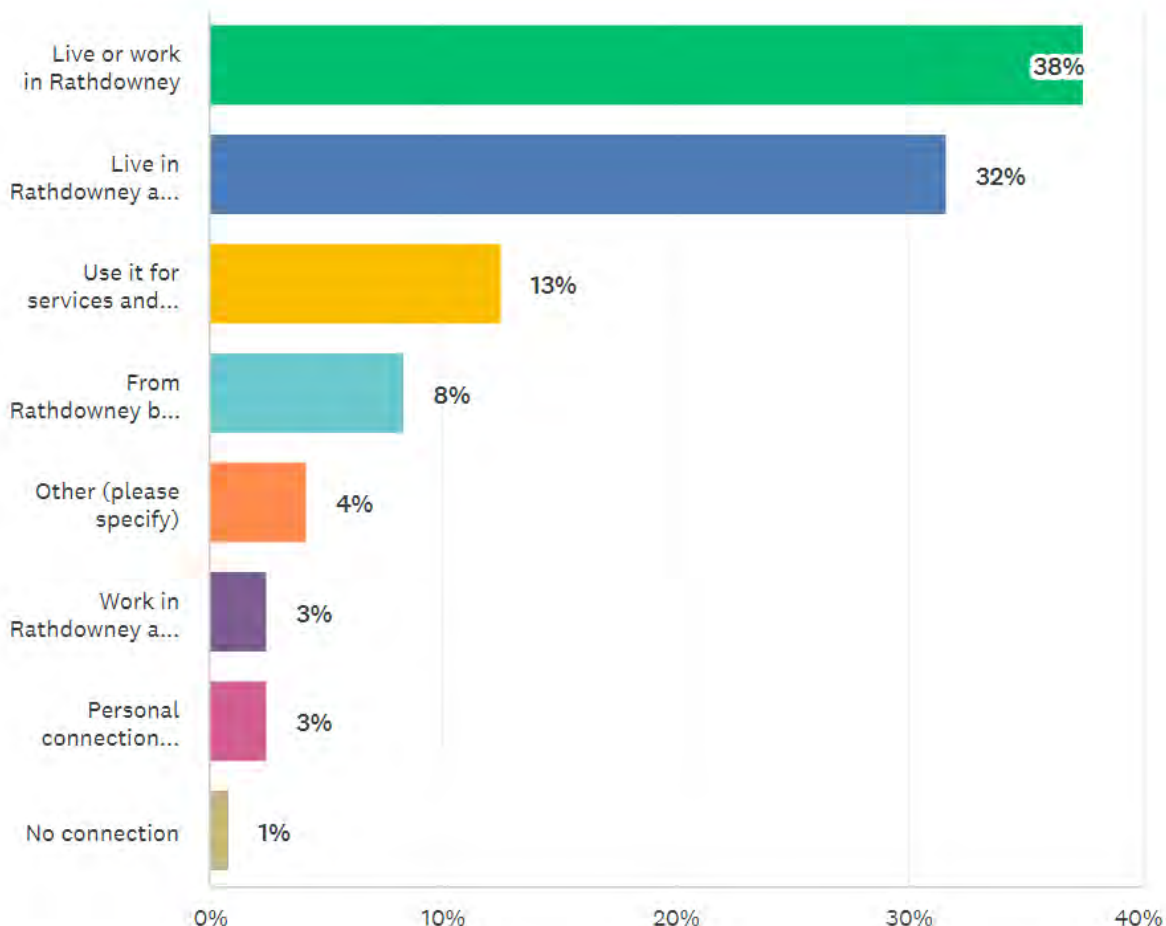
More than three quarters (79%) of the people surveyed (96 out of 121 respondents) were either employed or self-employed, full time or part time. Additionally, 6 respondents (5%) were engaged in other activities, such as carers.

7% (9 respondents) were retired and 4% (5 respondents) were students. Only 2 respondents were unemployed (2%), 3 people were unable to work due to permanent sickness or disability (2%), and 5 people (4%) were engaged in home duties.

More than three quarters (79%) of the people surveyed were either employed or self-employed, full time or part time.

Q3: How would you describe your main connection to Rathdowney?

Answered: 120 Skipped: 7



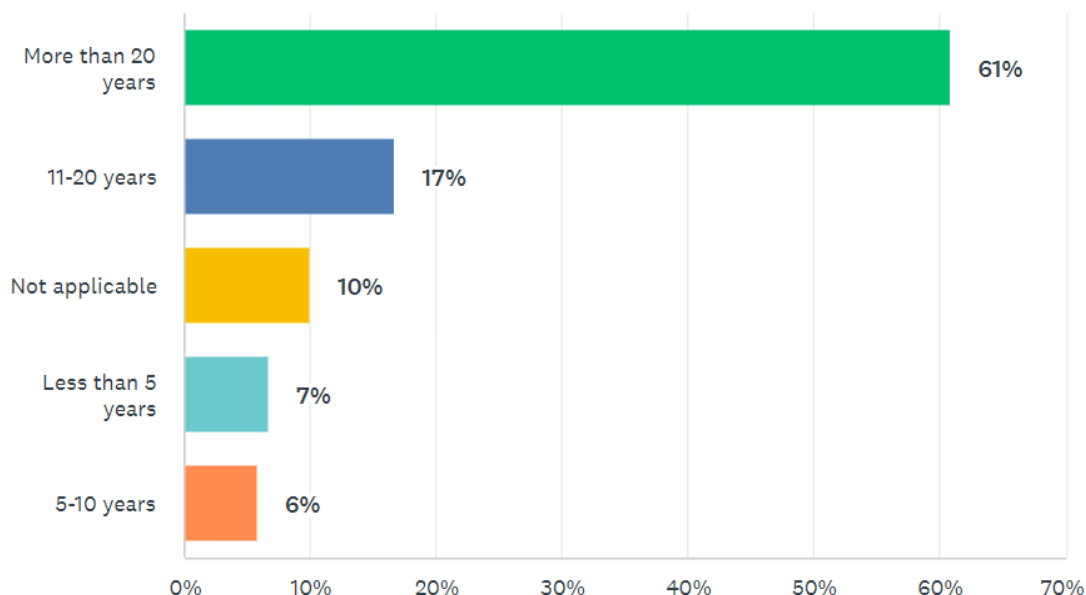
Over two thirds (72%) of the people surveyed (i.e., 86 out of 120 respondents) lived and/or worked in Rathdowney. Another 8% (10 respondents) were from Rathdowney but not currently living there.

Just 13% (15 respondents) use Rathdowney for services and/or recreation purposes and 3% (3 respondents) know this town through personal connections such as friends or relatives.

Over two thirds (72%) of the people surveyed lived and/or worked in Rathdowney.

Q4: How long have you lived in Rathdowney?

Answered: 120 Skipped: 7

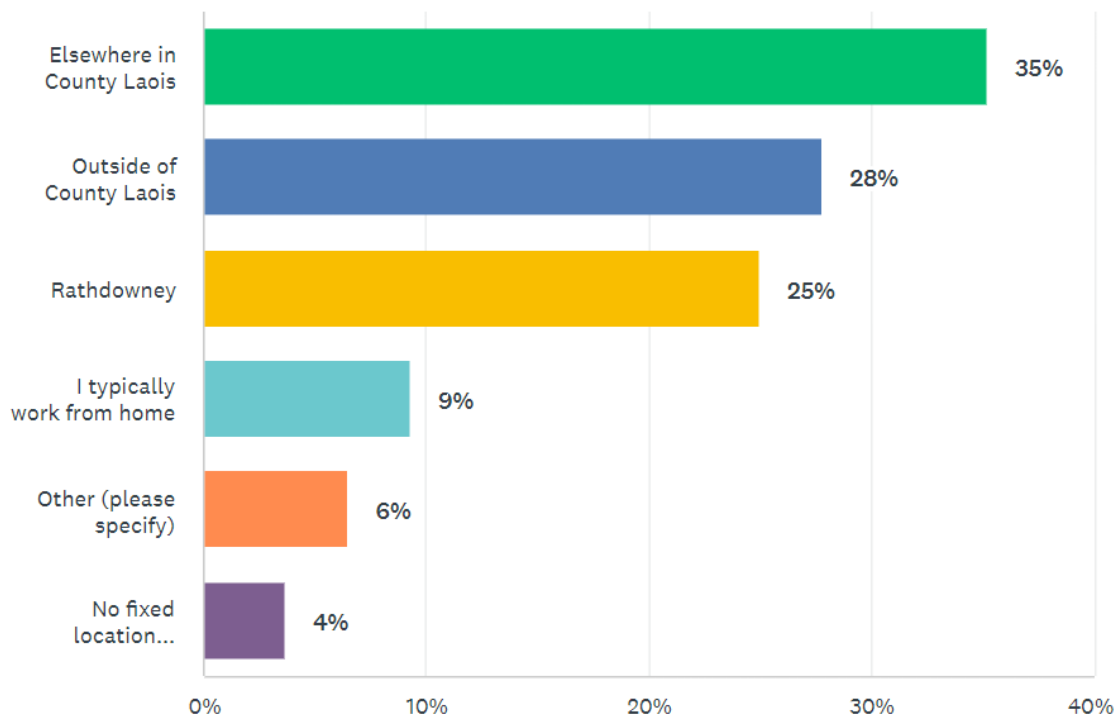


The majority (61%) of people surveyed (73 out of 120 respondents) had lived in Rathdowney for more than 20 years, while 17% (20 respondents) had been residents for between 11 and 20 years. About 6% (7 respondents) had lived in Rathdowney between 5-10 years and 7% (8 respondents) for less than 5 years.

The majority (61%) of the people surveyed had lived in Rathdowney for more than 20 years.

Q5: If employed, where is your usual place of work?

Answered: 108 Skipped: 19

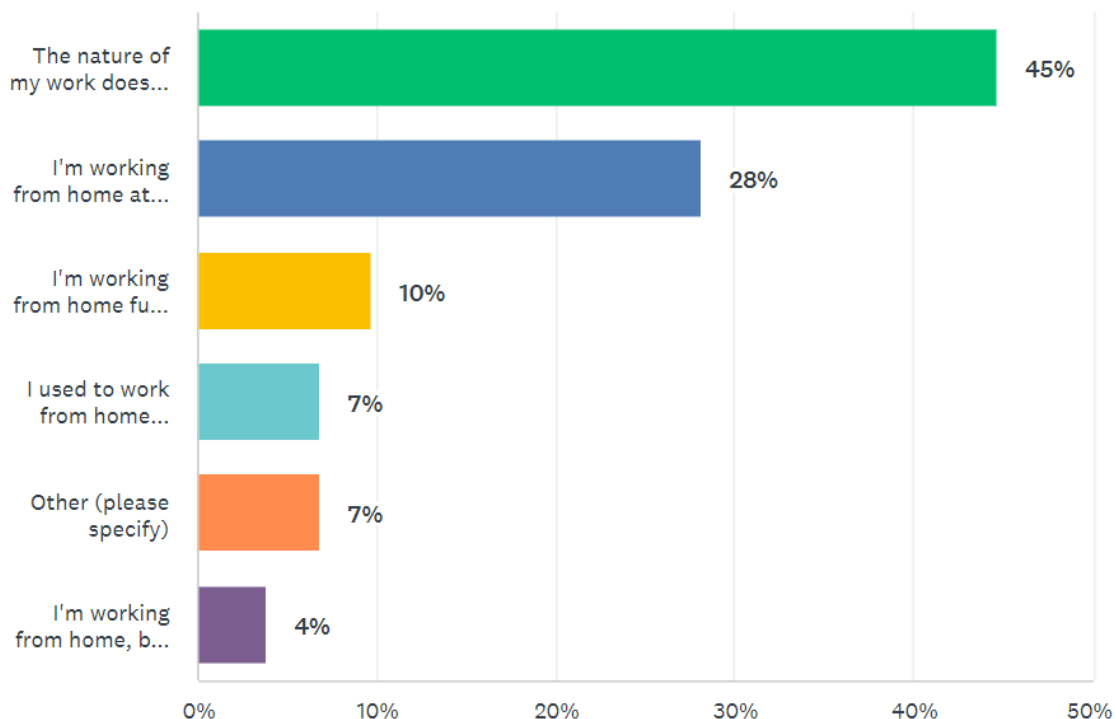


The majority (60%) of employed respondents either worked in Rathdowney (25% or 27 respondents) or elsewhere in county Laois (36% or 38 respondents). 28% of respondents (30 people) worked outside county Laois and about 13% (14 respondents) either worked from home or had no fixed working location.

The majority (60%) of employed respondents either worked in Rathdowney or elsewhere in county Laois.

Q6: How have your work practices changed after the Covid-19 pandemic?

Answered: 103 Skipped: 24



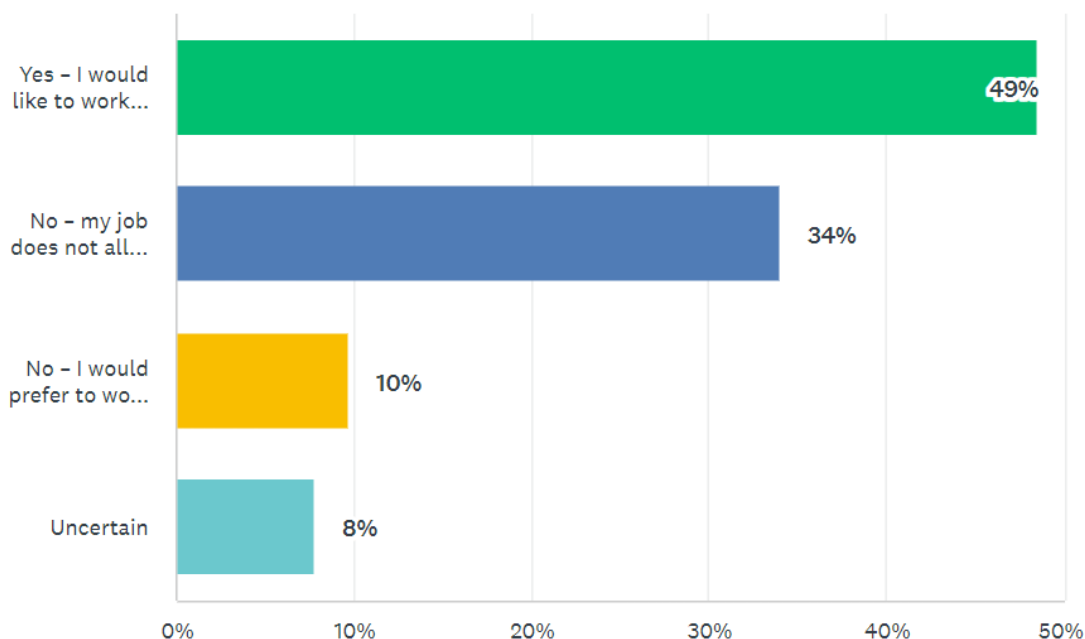
A slim majority of employed respondents do not work from home. About 45% (46 respondents) indicated that the nature of their work does not allow them to work from home, while 7% (7 respondents) stated that they used to work from home during the Covid-19 lockdowns, but had returned to the workplace full-time since then.

Just under half of the respondents benefit from some form of working from home arrangements. Almost a third (28% or 29 respondents) indicated that they were working from home at least one day a week, while 10% (10 respondents) were working from home full time. Moreover, 4% (4 people) of respondents used to work from home at least part time before the pandemic and continued to do so in its aftermath.

Roughly half of the people surveyed do not work from home, while the other half benefit from some form of working from home arrangements.

Q7: Would you be interested in working from home on a more regular basis?

Answered: 103 Skipped: 24



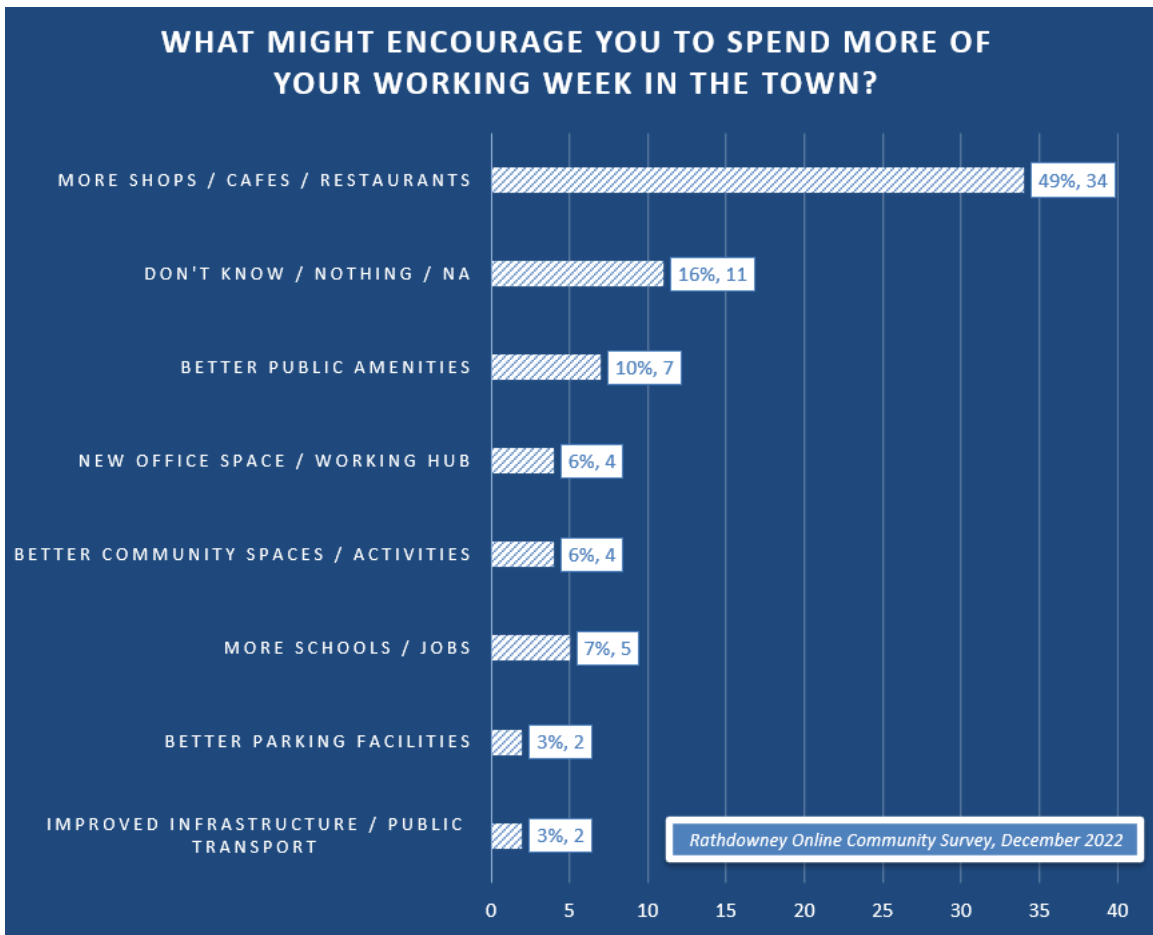
Just under half (49%) of the employed respondents (50 out of 103 people) would like to work from home more often. This category includes 24% of respondents who said that their job does not allow for remote working, 71% of those who stated that they used to work from home during the Covid-19 lockdowns, but had returned to the workplace full-time since then, and 86% of those who said that they are working from home at least 1 day a week.

Just over one third (34% or 35 people) stated that their job does not allow for remote working, while 18% expressed no interest in working from home (10% or 10 people), or were uncertain about their preferences (8% or 8 respondents).

Roughly half of the employed people surveyed would like to work from home more often.

Q8: What might encourage you to spend more of your working week in the town?

Answered: 69 Skipped: 58



Just under half (49%) of respondents indicated that they would spend more time in the town if there were more small shops, cafes, and restaurants available.

“More options for families, as we would like to do things for all types of weather, and a nice restaurant for dinner, maybe a baby and toddler group set up too”.

“It’d be great to have a ‘proper’ coffee shop to pop out to at tea break or to go to on Saturdays. A small restaurant would be wonderful.”

“A decent cafe is badly needed in Rathdowney, there is nowhere to go if you wanted to meet someone at lunch for coffee.”

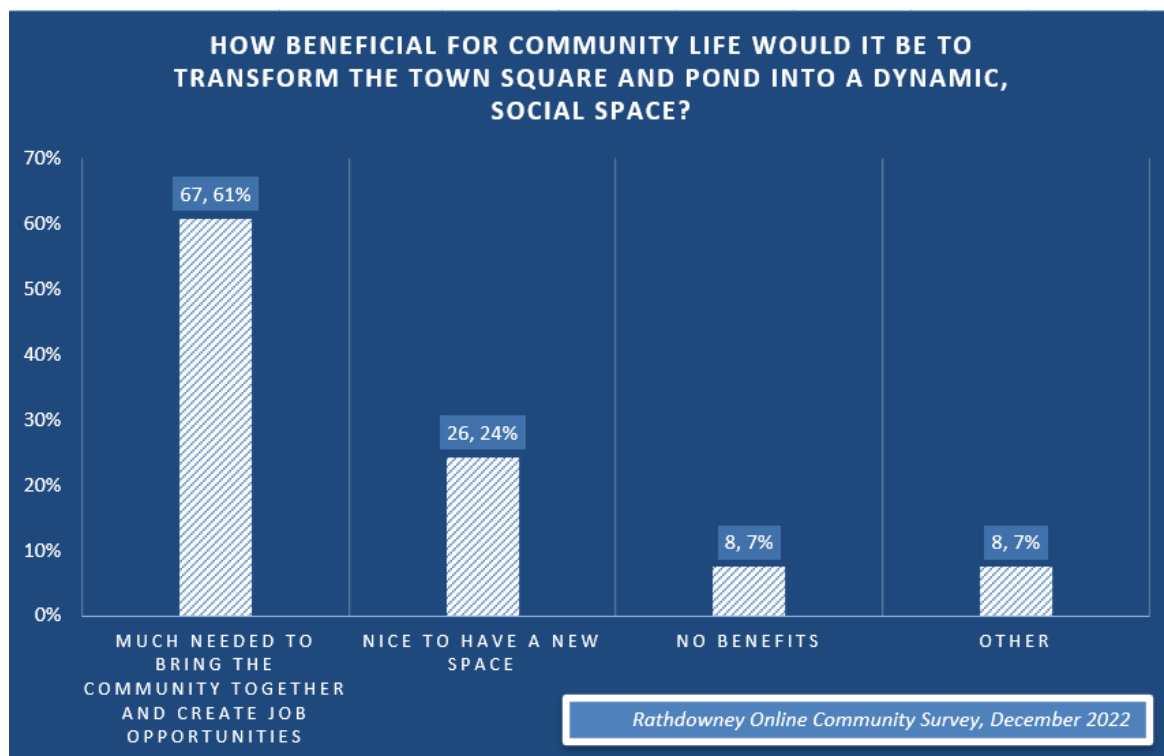
Additionally, people pointed to the lack of public amenities (10%), such as public lighting, green spaces, and local services, including GP offices. Better parking and disability-friendly infrastructure, public transport, community areas and activities, better broadband, and properly fitted office spaces were also mentioned.

“I would like to see public lighting so that a woman feels safe walking the streets in the evening time.”

“I would like better parking arrangements from Main Street and Moore street area and also more activities for people of all age groups”

Q9: How beneficial for community life do you think it would be to transform the town square and pond into a dynamic, social space?

Answered: 109 Skipped: 18



The majority (61%) of respondents believed that transforming the town square and pond into a dynamic, social space would be a much needed initiative to bring the community together and potentially create job opportunities and another quarter (24%) thought it would be nice to have a new public space in the town centre. The strong majorities in favour of transforming the town square are consistent across all age groups.

“It could unlock numerous benefits-socially, economically, culturally and even ecologically. It would be huge in promoting a sense of place and pride of place, it would encourage a sense of aspiration acting as a catalyst for future development, funding and investment and activities. It would have huge potential as a “hub” for events etc, it would definitely support more collegiality to the many wonderful groups already in town, providing a platform for their needs helping to showcase how amazing the community is!”

The overwhelming majority (85%) of respondents believed that transforming the town square and pond into a dynamic, social space would be a positive initiative.

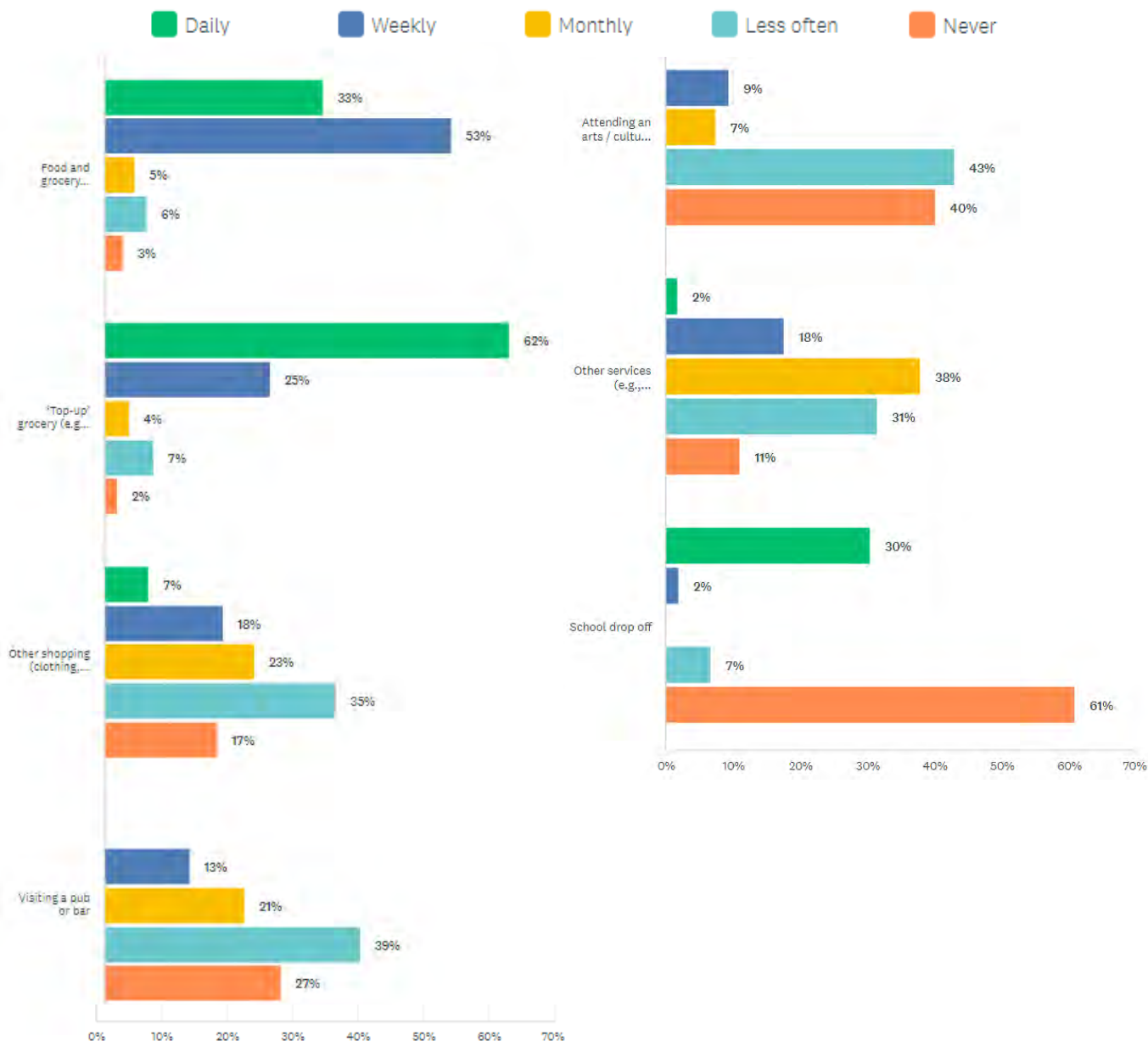
Community Survey Insights:

Understanding use of Rathdowney Town



Q10: How often do you typically visit Rathdowney town centre for the following activities or services?

Answered: 108 Skipped: 19



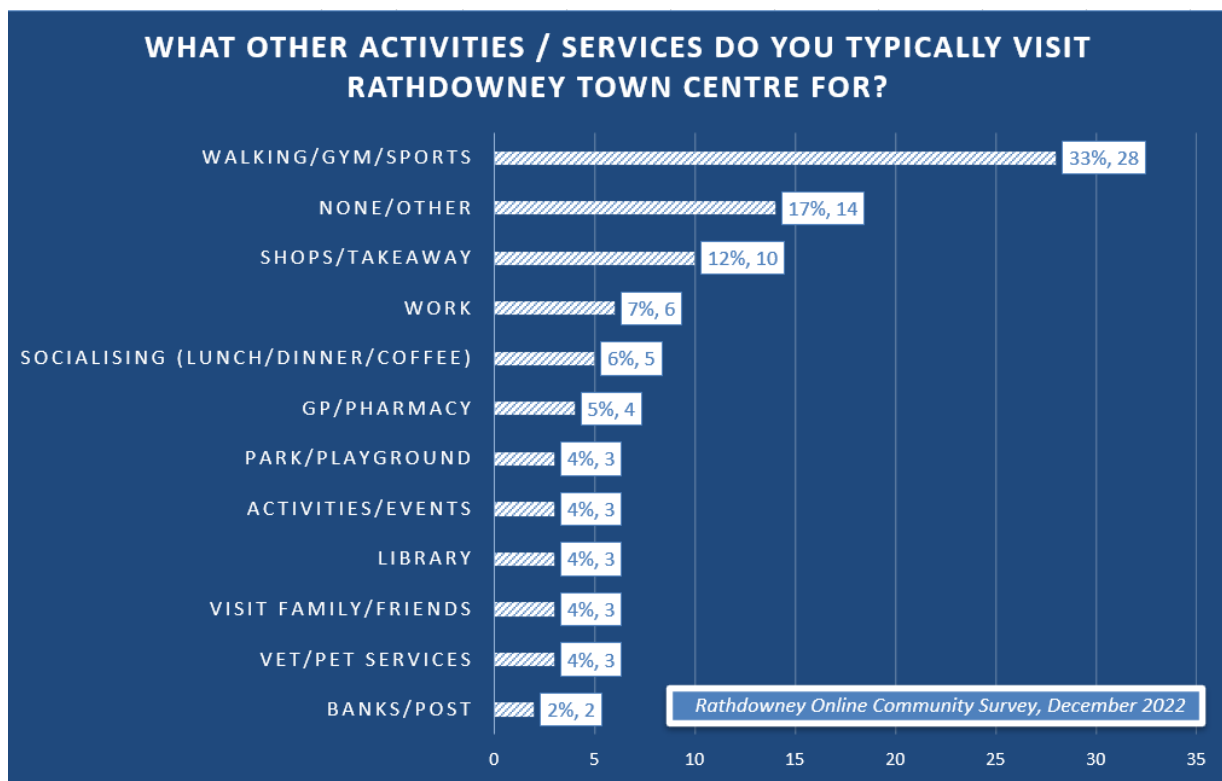
The majority (62%) of respondents visit Rathdowney town centre daily for “top-up” groceries, and just over half (53%) do a weekly food and grocery shopping.

Shopping trips for other items happen monthly (23%) or even less often (35%) for the majority of respondents. Just over a third (38%) of participants would come to the town centre for other services (such as hairdressing / banking / health care etc.) monthly.

About a third of participants come to the town centre to visit a pub or a bar weekly (13%) or monthly (21%) and even less rarely to attend an arts, cultural, or faith-based event (i.e., 42% would do so less often than monthly and 41% never have such experiences). Just under a third (31%) of respondents come to town centre daily for school drop off (but this proportion increases to 50% for the 35-44 and 45-54 years old).

Q11: Aside from the activities and services listed in the previous question, what other activities / services do you typically visit Rathdowney town centre for, and how often?

Answered: 66 Skipped: 61



Most (33%) of respondents visit the town centre for sport activities, such as GAA, golf, and camogie, to attend the local gym, or for walking. Other notable mentions include visits to the pharmacy, GP, and the veterinary clinic, using the local library, post services, or Credit Union, visits to the town park and playground, as well as occasional socialising trips for lunch, drinks or visiting family. Notably, almost one fifth (15%) of participants stated that they rarely visit the town centre as few activities or socialising opportunities are available.

“GAA, camogie & soccer matches. When these [are] being hosted, you often see large crowd of cars in town. Nearly every week from Jan - Oct.!”

“No amenities for a place to meet or just be to spend a break.”

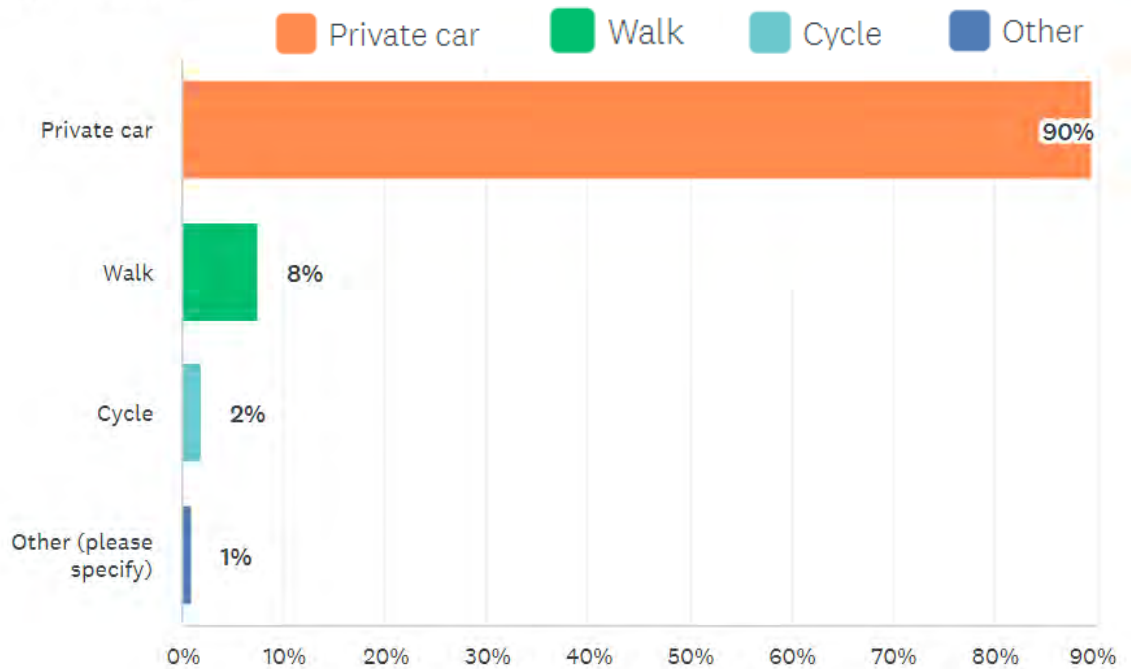
“Walking but feel afraid as lighting is non existent or really bad.”

“Nothing to visit for. Rathdowney needs a major overhaul. The community centre need a major upgrading and would be a great starter point to have two accessible locations for freelance artists to make use of.”

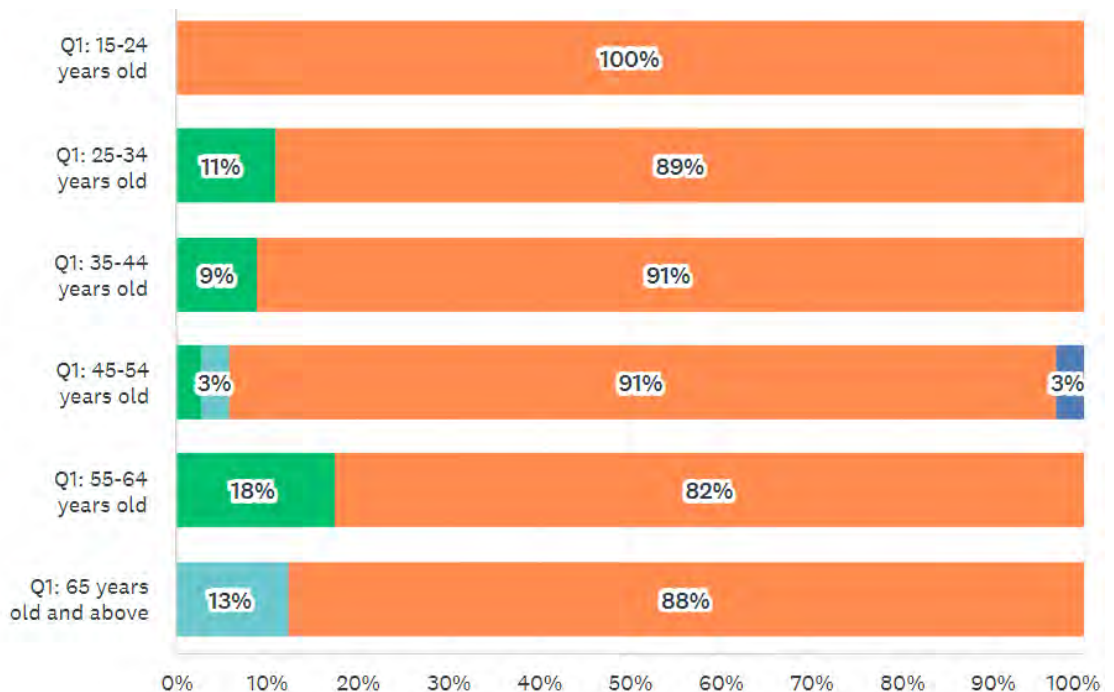
Most respondents visit the town centre for sport activities, such as GAA, golf, and camogie, to attend the local gym, or for walking.

Q12: What is your primary mode of travel to and around Rathdowney?

Answered: 106 Skipped: 21

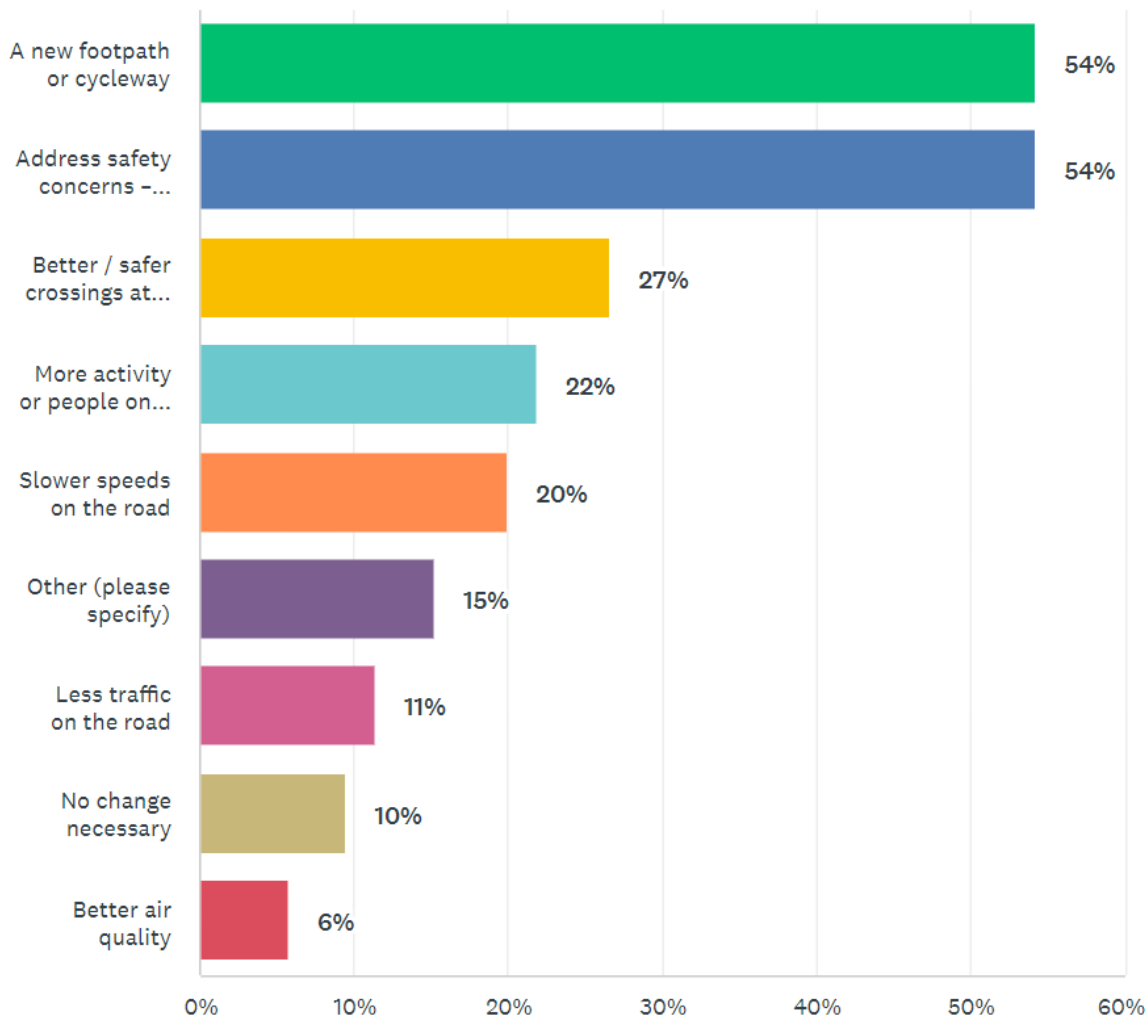


The vast majority (90%) of respondents used their private car to travel to and around Rathdowney. Only 7% are walking and just 2% are cycling. Notably, none of the respondents indicated public transport as their primary mode of travelling. The strong majorities using their private car as a primary mode of transportation are consistent across age groups, as shown in the chart below.



Q13: What would encourage you to cycle or walk more into and within the town?

Answered: 105 Skipped: 22



The majority (54%) of respondents stated that a new footpath or cycleway would encourage them to cycle or walk more into the town.

53% of the people surveyed would also like to see safety concerns, such as better lighting and crowded footpaths, addressed. Better or safer crossings at all junctions and more activity and people on the street would persuade 27% and 22% respectively to walk or cycle more. Slower speeds (19%) and less traffic (12%) on the road as well as better air quality (6%) were also mentioned as factors that would encourage walking and cycling.

“The foot path in Rathdowney are in parts not wide enough often cars parked completely on footpaths. Lighting is bad in many areas in Rathdowney.”

“A safe area where one can walk their dog. The current walking tract does not allow dogs and the street lighting is very poor quality/dim. A suitable walkway would be an improvement.”

“Less cars blocking footpaths.”

“Better lighting definitely needed on outskirts of town.”

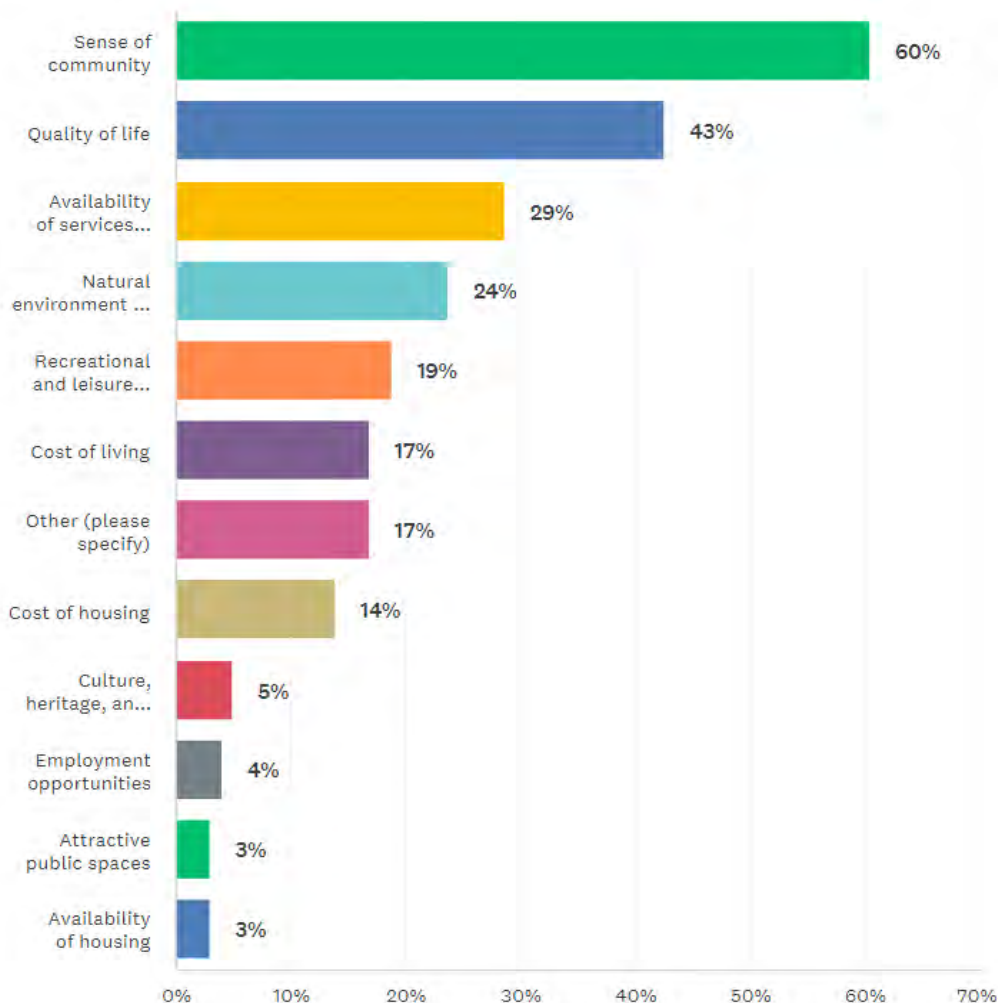
Community Survey Insights:

Understanding perceptions of Rathdowney Town



Q14: What are Rathdowney’s greatest assets?

Answered: 101 Skipped: 26



The majority (60%) of respondents believed that a sense of community was Rathdowney’s greatest asset, followed up at a distance by quality of life (43%) and availability of services (29%), such as healthcare and education.

Natural environment and landscape (24%), recreational and leisure facilities (19%) such as parks, and cultural attractions, the cost of living (17%) and housing (14%) were also picked up by respondents. Notably, the attractiveness of public spaces and culture, heritage, and the arts attracted only 5% of the respondents’ options.

“Hurling field”

“None of the above even the shops are complaining now too many non-nationals and they don’t spend in the community.”

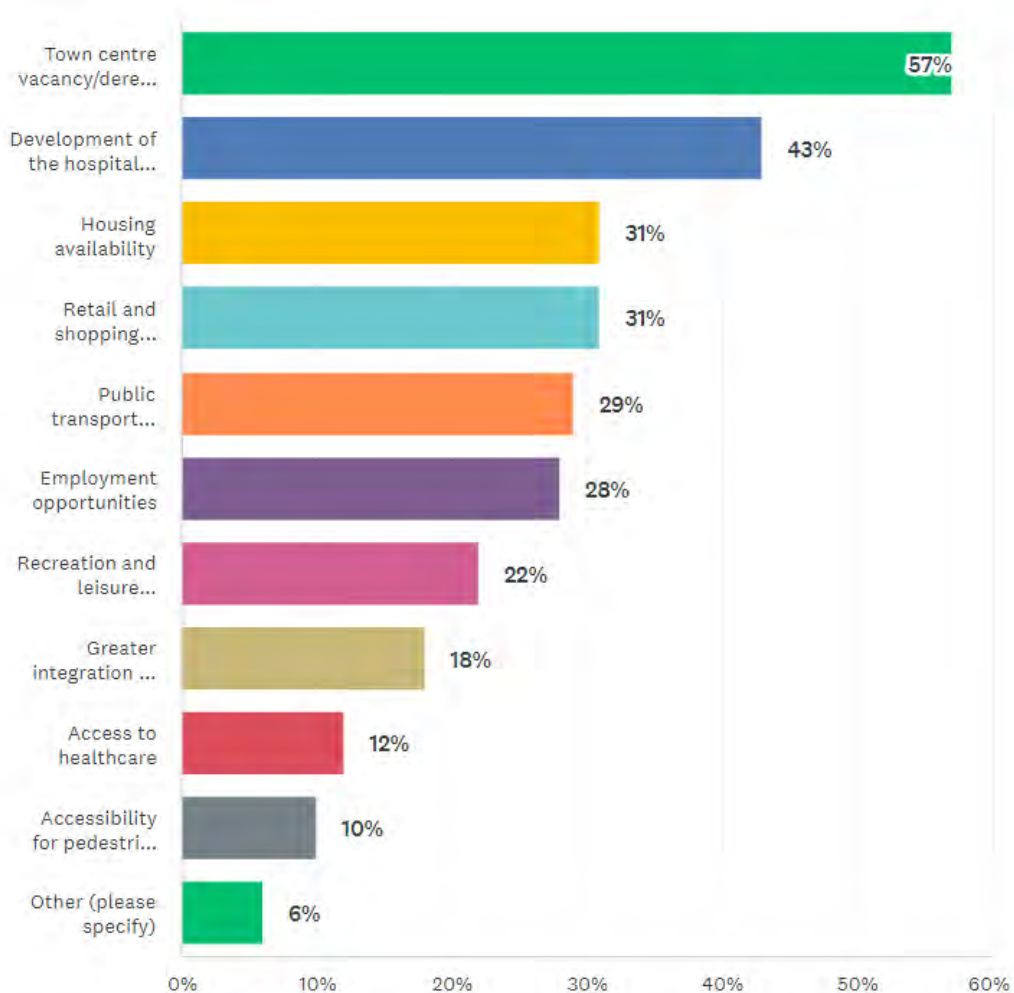
“There are excellent educational facilities and sporting organisations, there will be a state of the art primary care facility but there is no real public transport network, if this was improved it would significantly improve all.”

“To be honest, apart from a small bit of community spirit there’s not a whole lot else to say. Our town has changed and has lost its local appeal.”

“Safety for raising a family/ friendly caring community.”

Q15: What are the three biggest challenges, issues, or concerns for the future development of Rathdowney?

Answered: 100 Skipped: 27



Over half (57%) of respondents chose town centre vacancy and dereliction as the biggest challenge of Rathdowney, followed by the development of the hospitality sector (43%), including accommodation, food, and beverages, and retail and shopping opportunities (31%).

Housing availability (31%), employment opportunities (29%), and public transport availability (29%) followed very closely as top challenges for the town. High among other concerns identified were recreation and leisure opportunities (22%), greater integration of migrants into the community (18%), access to healthcare (12%), and accessibility for pedestrians (10%).

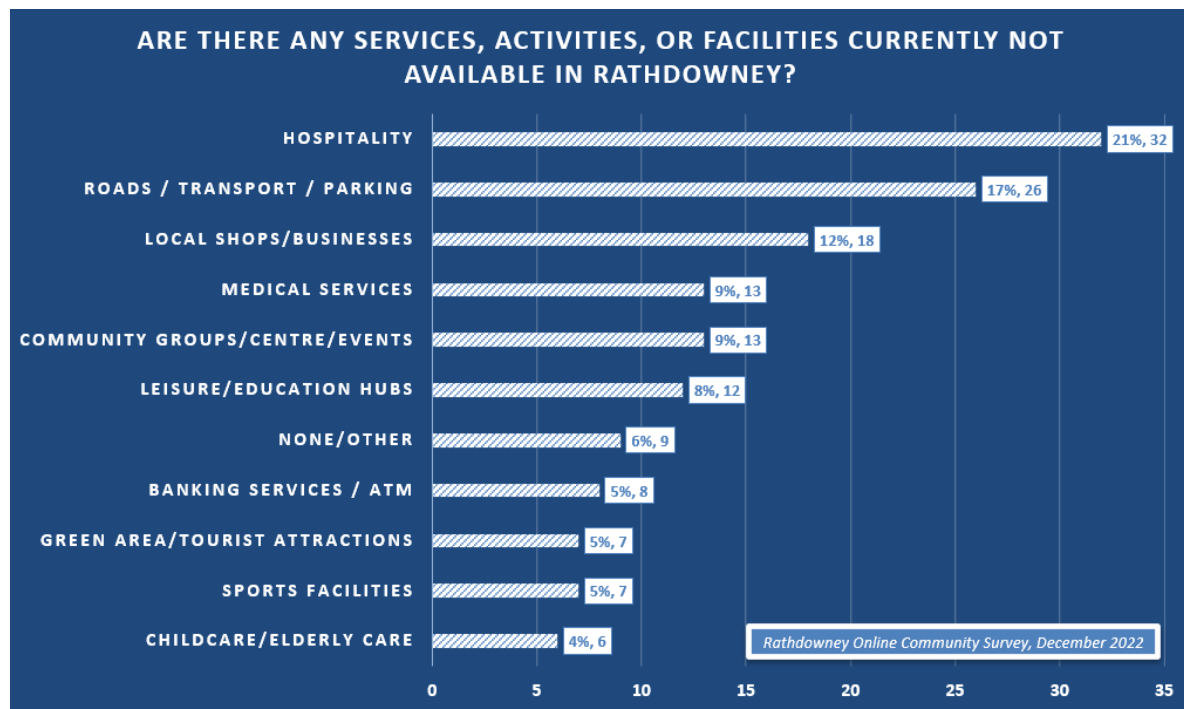
“We need another childcare facility.”

“No housing, too many foreign nationals being looked after other than people of Rathdowney”

“Better road infrastructure to town and development of Brand Central.”

Q16: Are there any services, activities, or facilities currently not available in Rathdowney that you feel are needed?

Answered: 81 Skipped: 46



The lack of social places to meet in the town centre, such as a restaurant or a café, as well as the scarcity of accommodation facilities for both locals and visitors received the most mentions (21%). Closely following (17%) were the need to **improve public transport links to nearby towns and train stations** and to **add taxi services**. Better road conditions for pedestrians and cyclists, such as street lighting and dedicated lanes, were also mentioned. The need for **improved medical services**, such as additional GPs, physios, dentists, and an upgraded and well-staffed health centre was also highlighted, as were requirements for **more shops and retail options**. An **improved community centre** with more activities for all ages, including adult education options, as well as childcare and elderly care facilities, were also emphasised by respondents.

“We need a cafe, somewhere to meet a friend for coffee. Be ideal in the square. There's a serious lack of accommodation for locals and the prices are unaffordable to the normal working person. There are no hotels or B&Bs around.”

“A shuttle bus to the railway station to tie in with existing train timetable, overall public transport links.”

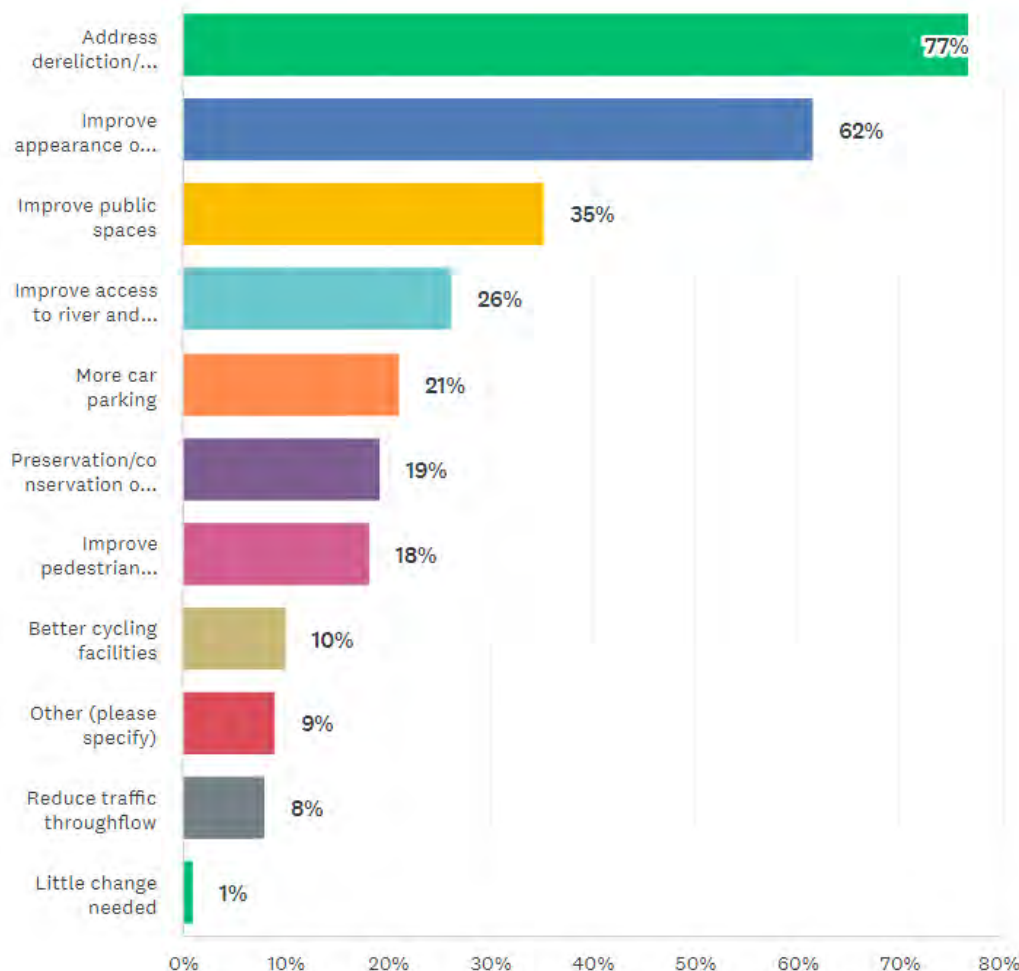
“More GPs. Current one is over worked and understaffed (trying to cover too big an area)”

“An on street ATM. Coffee shop needed. Community creche. Town woodland walk similar to Abbeyleix. More frequent public transport possibly to coincide with train times of Ballybrophy”.

The lack of social places to meet in the town centre, such as a restaurant or a café, as well as accommodation facilities for both locals and visitors received the most mentions (21%). Closely following were the need to improve public transport and road safety and facilities for pedestrians and cyclists (17%) and the need for more local shops (12%).

Q17: What would be the top 3 priorities to improve Rathdowney town centre?

Answered: 99 Skipped: 28



Addressing dereliction and vacancy and improving the appearance of buildings were picked up as the clear top priorities for the town centre by 77% and 62% of respondents respectively.

These actions were followed at a significant distance by the improvement of public spaces (35%), improving access to river and pond (26%), and the preservation and conservation of historical and cultural assets (19%). Several transport-related priorities were also singled out, such as increasing the availability of car parking (21%), improving pedestrian facilities (18%), creating better cycling facilities (10%), and reducing traffic throughflow (8%).

“Improve amenities and services.”

“Tourism - make the town a destination which will bring visitors. This focuses people to improve the environment and facilities.”

“Replace the current stone paths as they are slippery in bad weather. They retain moss on them. You can stick your toes in the current paths and fall. Plus they slanted and it's hard to walk on.”

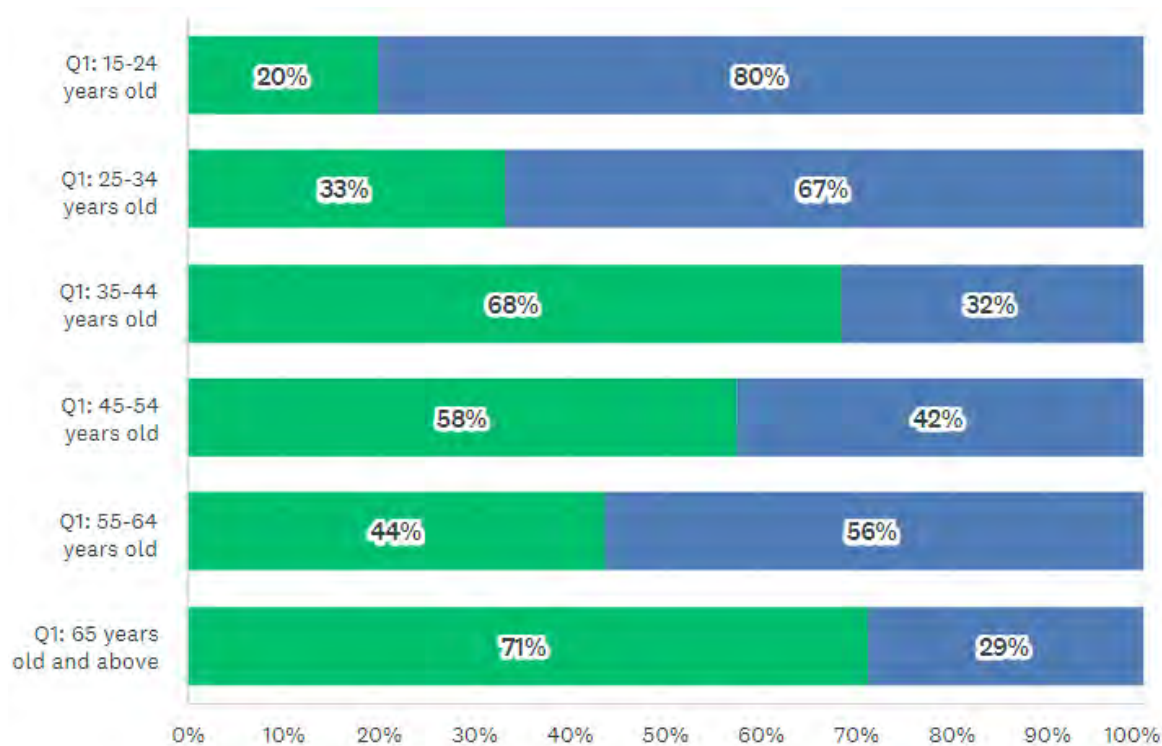
“Provide proper public transport to and from the town and railway station.”

“Prevent parking on footpaths.”

Q18: Do you agree with the statement “people of all age groups, backgrounds, and areas enjoy a good quality of life in Rathdowney”?

Answered: 95 Skipped: 32

Yes No



When disaggregated by age groups, the statement that the town centre has little to offer to people of all ages received supports across age groups. In general though, there is a greater tendency for young people (34 years and younger) to express disappointment with the quality of life in Rathdowney.

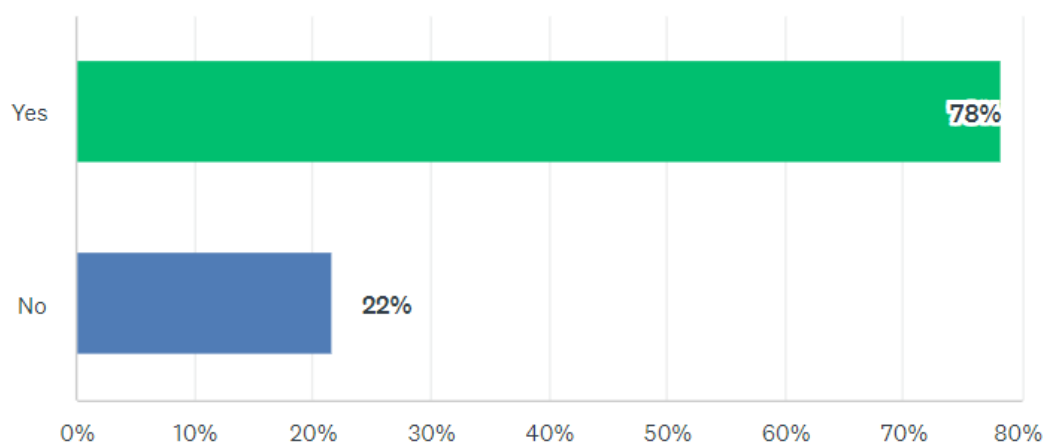
More than two-thirds (70%) of people aged up to 34 years old (20 respondents) disagreed with the statement that people of all age groups enjoy a good quality of life in Rathdowney.

The proportion of those agreeing with this statement increases for the 35-44 and 45-54 years old groups (62% agreement across both groups). Nevertheless, the majority of those aged 55-64 years old do not believe that Rathdowney offers good quality of life, unlike a strong majority (71%) of people aged 65 years old and above.

Respondents across younger age groups are less likely to agree with the statement that people of all age groups, backgrounds, and areas enjoy a good quality of life in Rathdowney.

Q19: Is Rathdowney supportive and inclusive for minority communities?

Answered: 92 Skipped: 35



Over three quarters (78%) of respondents believed that Rathdowney is supportive and inclusive for minority communities. This statement is supported by strong majorities (60% or more) across all age groups.

High among the reasons cited by those who did not share this opinion was the fact that migrants and refugees have not been properly integrated in the community, poor facilities for people with disabilities, and the absence of social, retail, and education amenities.

"I feel Rathdowney community try their best to be inclusive but there is are limitations such as amenities, further education prospects, majority of people need to leave Rathdowney for further education, retail, social amenities."

"Rathdowney is NOT supportive and inclusive towards people with disabilities, quite the opposite in fact."

"As mentioned before, very little effort to have refugees integrated into our community."

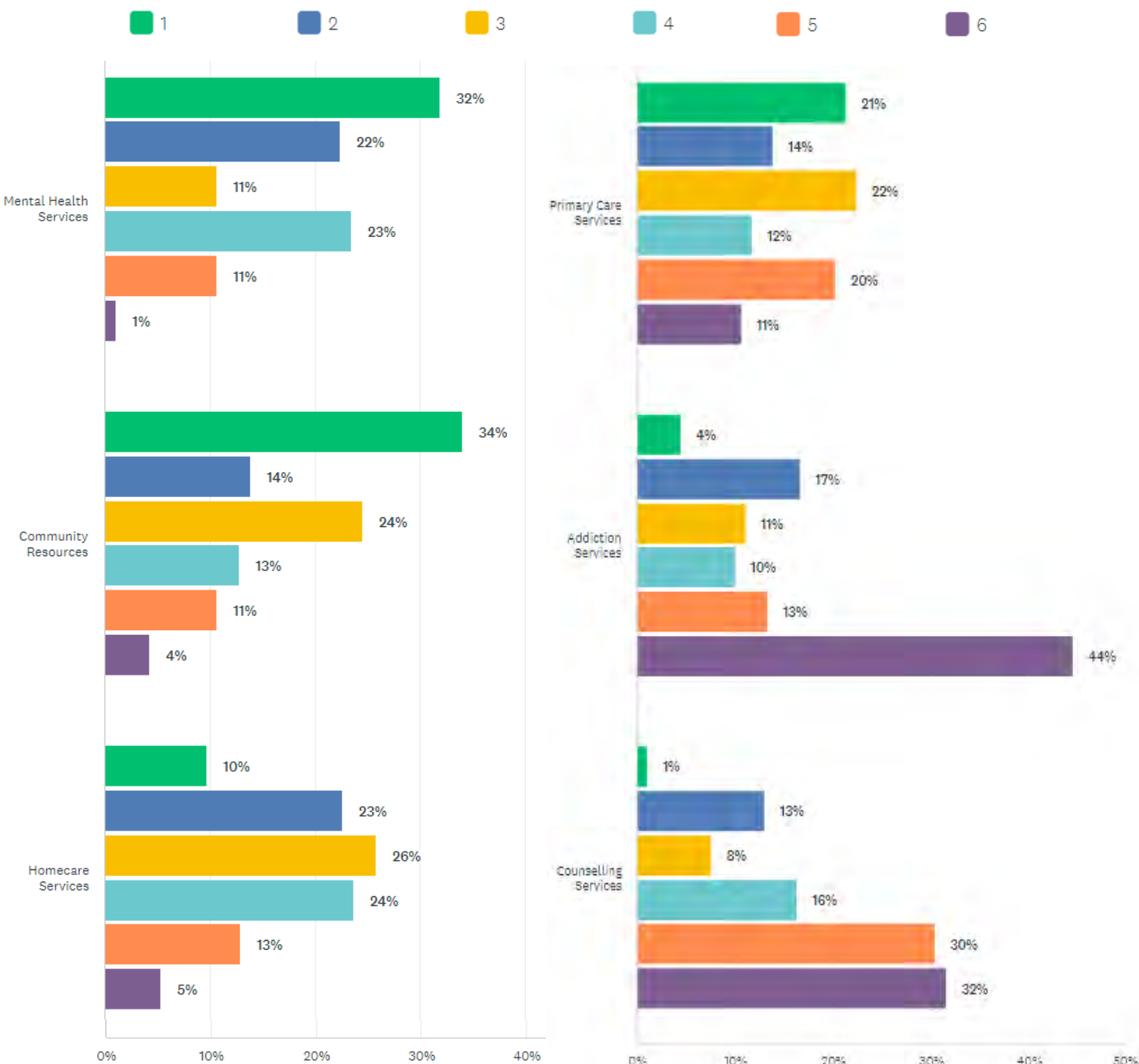
"I believe it could do a lot better. There is large Brazilian population in the town and their living conditions are very poor, there is a serious lack of quality housing or indeed lack of any housing. They have very poor command of the English language and I believe not enough is being done to tackle and help with this."

"I don't know how inclusive it is but the population would drop considerably if they were no minority communities there."

Respondents across all age groups largely agree with the statement that Rathdowney is supportive and inclusive for minority communities.

Q20: In terms of supporting the health and wellbeing of the people of Rathdowney what do you believe should be the most important priority for investment? Please rank the following actions in order of importance, with 1 being the most important to you.

Answered: 96 Skipped: 31



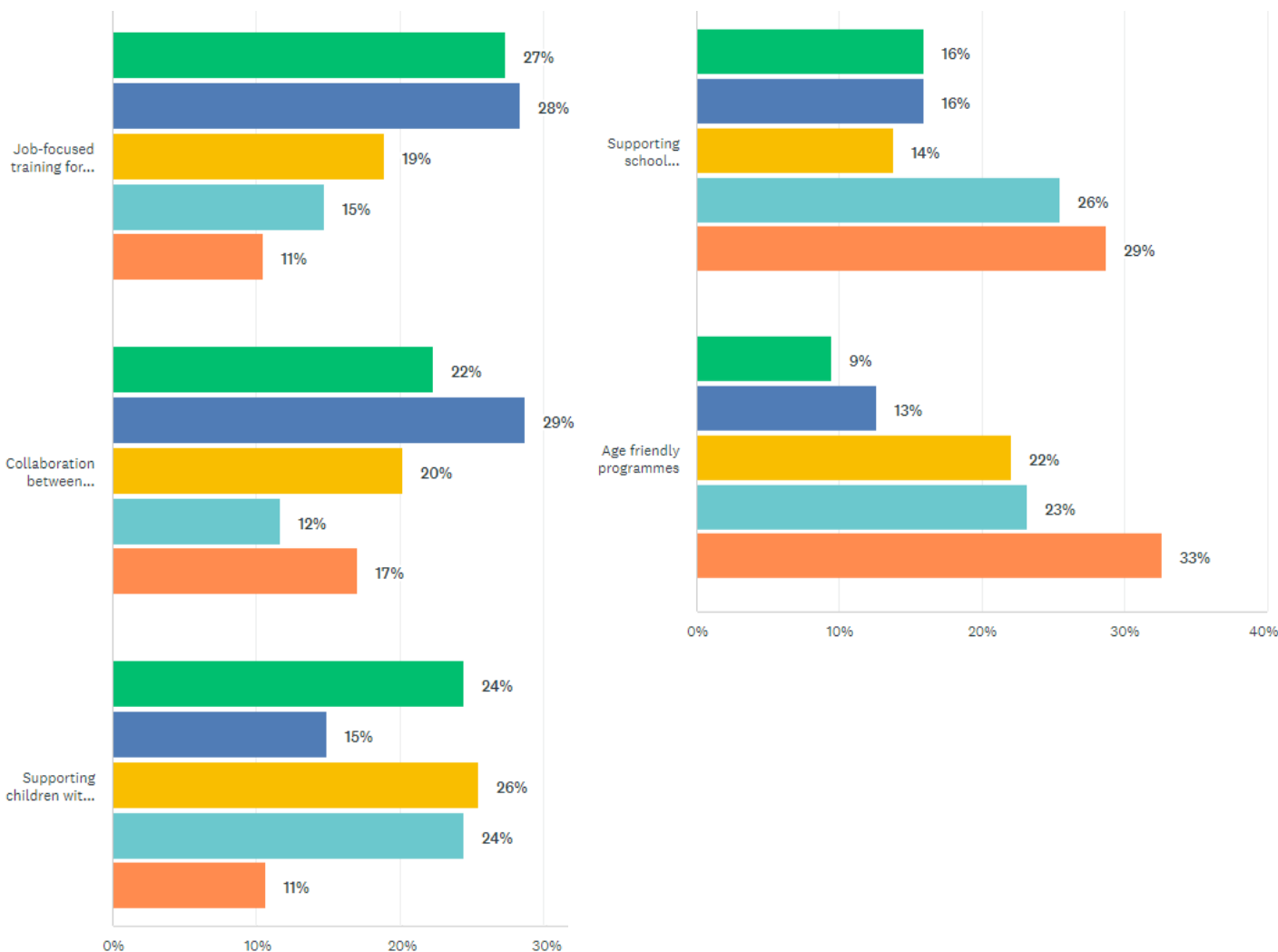
Community services and **mental health** services were picked up by most respondents (34% and 31% respectively) as the top areas that should be prioritised for investment.

These were followed up by **homecare** services and **primary care** services, which were consistently positioned among the top three priorities. By comparison, **addiction** and **counselling** services more often occupied the bottom two places.

Q21: In terms of supporting the people of Rathdowney’s opportunity to access education and employment, what do you believe should be some of the priority areas to address? Please rank the following actions in order of importance, with 1 being the most important to you.

Answered: 95 Skipped: 32

1 2 3 4 5



Job-focused training for those who wish to enter the labour market and Collaboration between employers and education providers to identify required skills were picked up by most respondents (28% and 23% respectively) as the top areas that should be prioritised to support the people of Rathdowney’s opportunity to access education and employment.

These were followed up by **Supporting children with specialist learning needs**, which was consistently positioned among the top three priorities. By comparison, **Supporting school attendance and participation rates** and **Age friendly programmes** more often occupied the bottom two places.

Feedback for Town Centre First Plan

As previously outlined, an online survey was hosted via Survey Monkey and contained 25 questions which comprised of a mixture of both open and closed questions. A total of 127 valid submissions were received via this channel. An overarching coding framework was developed to analyse the qualitative sections of the submissions and to provide a structured, thematic analysis of the views expressed in these submission responses. This section thematically presents the results stemming from the following three open questions:



Are there any other important issues or goals that should be given priority in the Rathdowney Town Centre First Plan?



Can you think of any actions or objectives that could help achieve these goals?

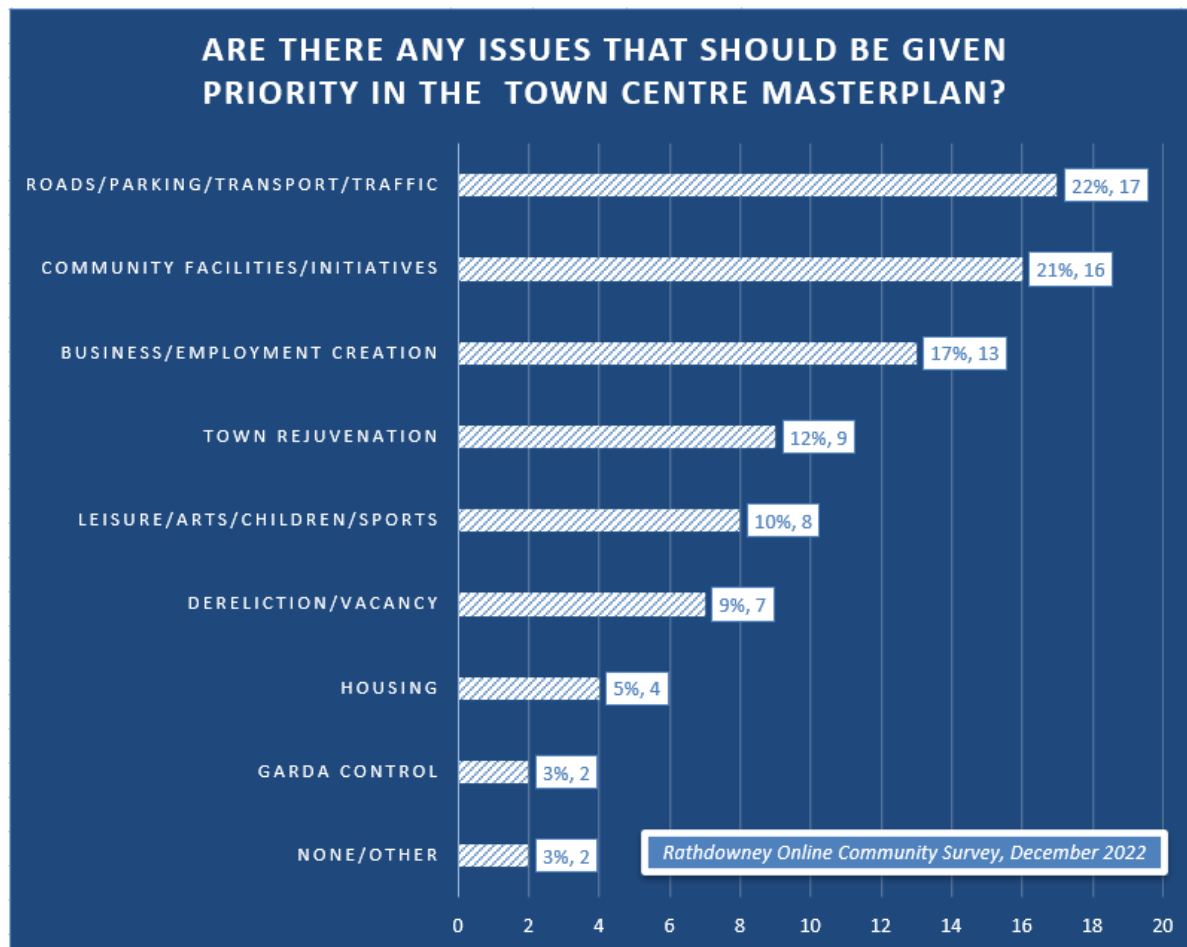


What is your vision for Rathdowney moving forward?



Are there any other important issues or goals that should be given priority in the Rathdowney Town Centre First Plan?

In response to this question, respondents highlighted several issues for consideration. The most popular themes and their frequency are shown in the chart below. Note that although only 57 people answered this question, typically respondents highlighted more than one issue in their answers.



Roads / Parking / Transport / Traffic

Almost one quarter of respondents singled out roads and transport-related issues, such as roads structure, street lighting, pedestrian and cycling facilities, parking, and availability of public transport, that should be given particular attention in the Town Centre First Plan.

Indeed, respondents expressed frustration with **parking on footpaths**,

Including along the Main Street, and highlighted the need for **adequate on street parking**.

“Also parking on the path on Main Street, very hard to get up and down with parking on both sides of the street.”

“Stop people parking along the Main Street.”

There were also calls for **better footpaths for pedestrians, better lighting**, including on the Main Street, as well as better **cycling and walking facilities**.

“Begin by making the town accessible. Easy for people to get in and out of town. Those in town safely walk around the town - footpaths and sufficient lighting.”

“A safe loop for walking and cycling around the country roads into town would really benefit everyone, allowing children and adults to choose to cycle to school and work. it would also encourage tourism into the town.”

“Several pedestrian crossings needed, not just the new one at St Fergal's. There should be at least two more going up the Main Street and more close to Dunnes stores.”

Improving road structure at all points of entry to town, the need for a **taxi service**, as well as better **public transport connections** were also mentioned, as were **speeding along the Main Street** and **traffic congestion** problems.

“Public transport link to Ballybrophy train station highlighting access to Cork, Limerick and Dublin.”

“Traffic congestion is a big problem in the town centre.”

Community Facilities / Initiatives

Improving community facilities was identified as a key element for ensuring a better quality of life in Rathdowney. Respondents called for a **community-based approach to identify priorities and actions for the town**. Several facilities, such as the community centre, were singled out for improvement so that they can be accessible for all.

“A more holistic, activity, community based approach. Give the town back to the people and the businesses. Bring life back to Main Street and the pond area.”

“A well thought out plan for the community hall available to all with suitable facilities.”

“Better use should be made of community buildings and their facilities should be greatly improved.”

There were also calls for **further education opportunities**, such as evening classes and small events that could be hosted by the community centre. Additional facilities were suggested for day-time community activities, such as a pop up swimming pool and a cinema.

Respondents also emphasised that the **needs of people with disabilities** should be considered more carefully. **Age friendly initiatives** were also called for.

“An improvement on the community centre and small events taken place mod week at evening times. Classes and further education facilities are badly needed.”

“The needs of people with disabilities of ALL ages in Rathdowney is a huge issue that has never been catered for.”

There were also calls for additional public amenities, such as a holistic health centre, as well community inclusion actions and better integration of foreign nationals.

Business / Employment Creation

The need to bring more businesses to town, revitalise retail and night life, and help create more jobs in the area was also highlighted.

“Encourage businesses to open the town and modernise the town.”

“Main Street and the Square need a massive injection to improve retail offerings in Rathdowney. A focus on new businesses must be part of the plan.”

“More employment, appropriate use of buildings and businesses.”

Respondents suggested ways to create more opportunities for small businesses, such as developing the area around Brand Central of joining up efforts to open and share business premises.

“Develop the area up in Brand Central to attract more investment. During the Covid pandemic, people came to Rathdowney to shop because of no parking fees and easy access to town. This should all be highlighted in the town plan, people are tired of the hustle and bustle of larger centres.”

“Have more small shops in the town, even if 2/3 employers were selling products that could merge into one shop (e.g., shoe shop, accessories shop, and hat shop and share cost of rent and bills). This would create a wider sense of community amongst the town and get people to support local.”

Town Rejuvenation

Respondents were also keen to see the a general clean up of the town so that it looks inviting and more attractive for people to visit.

“Improve visual appearance of buildings on main street.”

“The town needs massive rejuvenation and community initiatives.”

“Give the town back to the people and the businesses. Bring life back to Main Street and the pond area.”

“Revive market place. Get young people involved in painting and rubbish issue. Help with good dinner / food as opposed to all take-away shops. A place to meet, eat and greet.”

Leisure/Arts/Children/Sports Facilities

Several respondents drew attention to the need to facilitate participatory arts, sport and physical activity, as well as children activities.

“A central arts centre, for exhibitions and performances and tuition. We have amazing artists and musicians and a Panto group.”

“A ladies football team.”

“A place to gather and play boules.”

Housing / Dereliction / Vacancy / Garda Control

Vacancy and dereliction were seen as major problems for Rathdowney, with the town centre and the Main Street being specifically singled out. Insufficient housing supply as well as the need to increase Garda presence on town centre streets received several mentions as well.

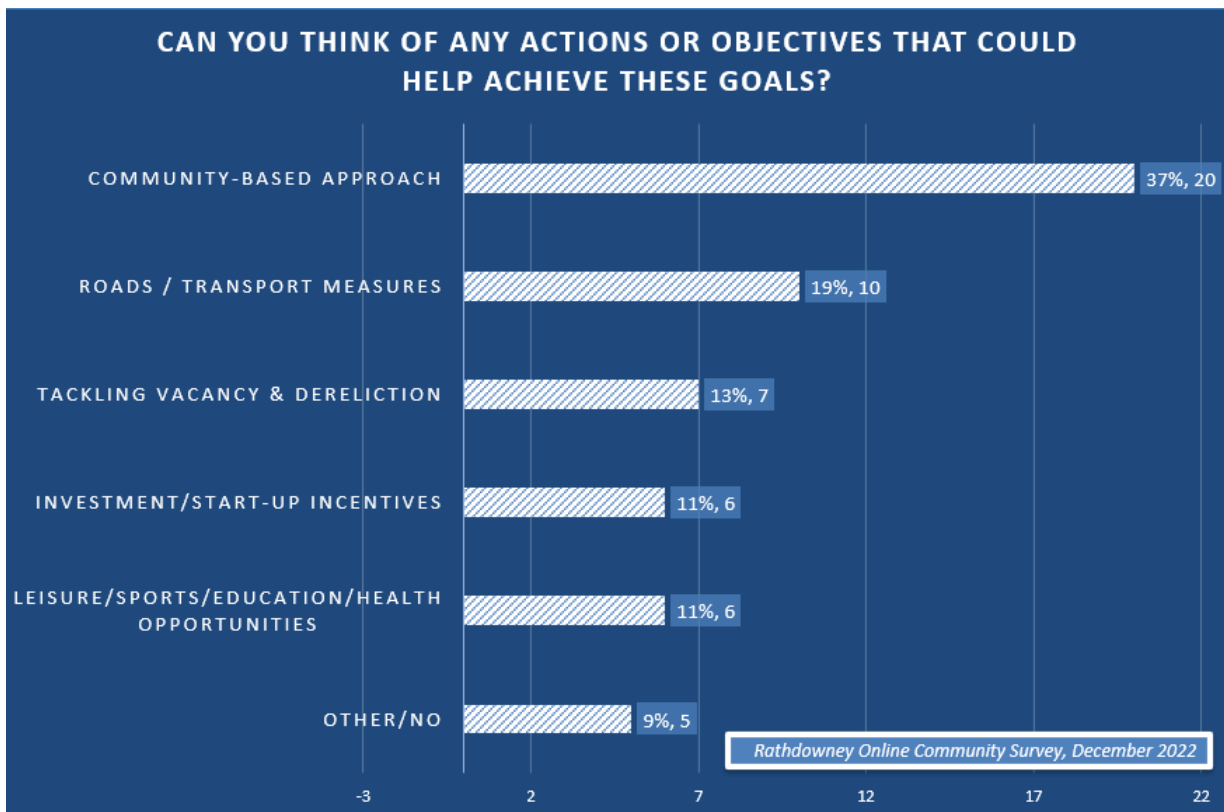
“Addressing dereliction is a major issue, the Tidy Towns do their best to keep Rathdowney tidy but these derelict buildings are taking away from their good work.”

“I believe the community needs to be more educated on what supports are available in terms of grants available to tackle dereliction and this explained well and support given in grant application process and support given in terms of affordable funding to start the process. Grants should be made available to businesses to help tackle dereliction, whereas currently it only applies to individuals as far as I am aware.”



Can you think of any actions or objectives that could help achieve these goals?

In response to this question, respondents put forward several actions for consideration. The most popular themes and their frequency are shown in the chart below. Note that although only 46 people answered this question, some respondents highlighted more than one issue in their answers.



Community-Based Approach

The most frequent suggestion put forward by the community survey respondents was that the Town Centre First Plan should be grounded in a community-based approach. Specifically, more local consultations and public meetings were suggested, as well as topic-based town meetings, such as that of business owners in the town or people interested in setting up a small business.

“All relevant authorities/committees in charge of these community buildings should sit down together with Town Centre group to see can agreements be reached.”

“A meeting of all business owners in town including small businesses or anyone who wants to start a business or rent a space.”

“A committee set up to encourage more community spirit with events and fundraisers. Get young people involved and include the older generation too.”

“Designated discussions organised with people in the locality who are experienced in areas (kids, teens, adults, elderly) identify specific needs, make realistic plans within agreed timeframes and identify people to action and more importantly to effectively monitor progress.”

“Make more public spaces for people to gather.”

Roads / Transport Measures

Several suggestions were made to improve the roads structure around the town centre, as well as pedestrian access and cycling facilities.

“Pedestrianisation of the street between the old Bank of Ireland and Supervalu.”

“A cycle way and cycle lane.”

“More pedestrian crossings, some sort of slow down signs.”

“Vehicular access through Main Street is a nightmare and does not entice people to stop. Too many cars parked on the footpath making Main Street unsafe for pedestrians and vehicles.”

“A better taxi service to allow people from the hinterland to socialise in the town.”

“A walkway out the Errill Road, turning right at the “Carroll’s crossroads” turning right at Bealady and back in to the town. Road widening measures on the Errill road to remove the verge for the walkway required.”

Several recommendations regarding street lighting and improved parking facilities, including restricting or banning parking on the Main Street were also made.

“Support of An Garda Siochana to clear path and redirect to nearest available parking e.g. church car park.”

“The town lighting need to be seriously looked at as it is not adequate. Serious consideration should be given to erecting bollards on the path of main street and at Clarkes pharmacy to stop illegal and

dangerous parking.”

“More Garda presence, Enforcing parking laws and some bollards on edges of footpaths.”

Tackling Vacancy & Dereliction

Increasing housing supply, as well as tackling vacancy and dereliction were emphasised as key actions required to improve the quality of life in Rathdowney. Among the suggested measures were increased penalties and taxes for owners of derelict buildings.

“Heavily tax owners of derelict, empty or unused properties, to bring them up to standard and available for rent/sale.”

“Address the properties on Main Street and square which have been abandoned for years and look terrible.”

“A penalty to be applied to those holding on empty commercial buildings.”

Investment / Start-Up Incentives

Respondents also called for investments – from sources such as the IDA or the Local Authority – in new businesses.

“Some incentive needs to be applied to encourage business people to take a risk.”

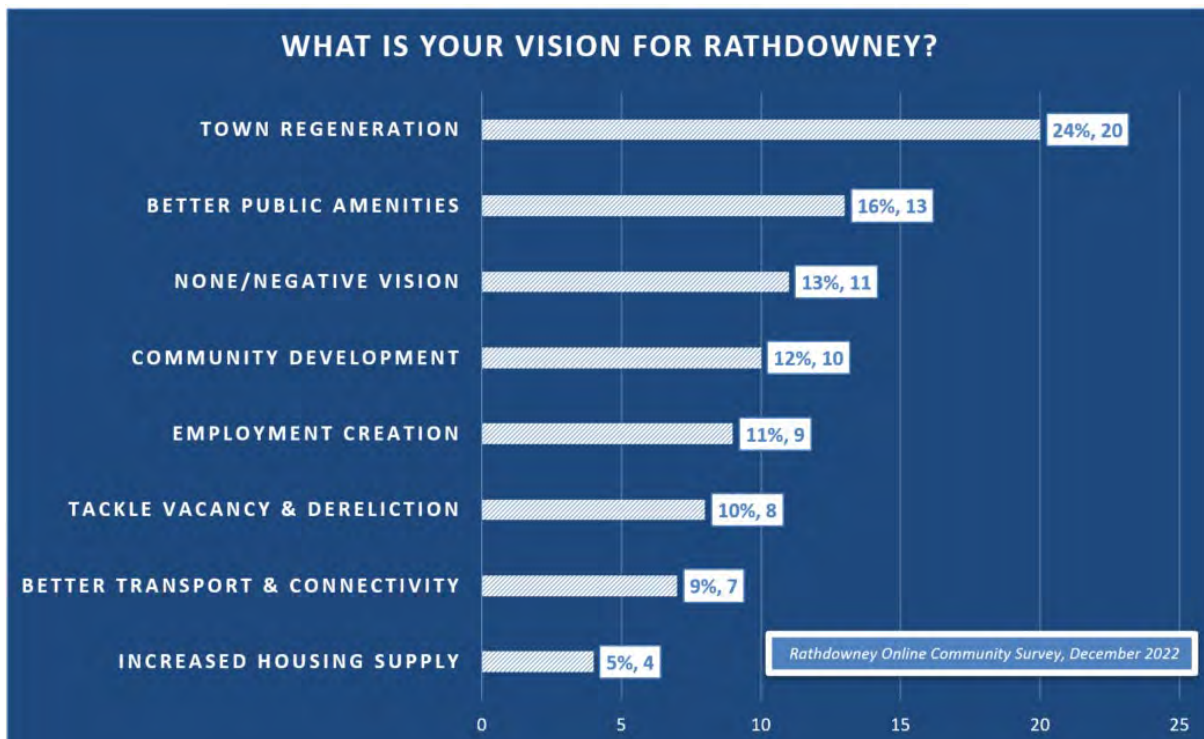
Leisure / Sports / Education Opportunities

Increasing opportunities to visit the town for leisure activities, exercise, take up sports, and participating in education activities for children and adults alike, as well as setting up a health centre with therapy rooms facilities were also mentioned as ways to transform Rathdowney in a more attractive place to visit.



What is your vision for Rathdowney moving forward?

In response to this question, respondents put forward several actions for consideration. The most popular themes and their frequency are shown in the chart below. Note that although only 60 people answered this question, some respondents highlighted more than one issue in their answers.



Town Regeneration

The most common vision for Rathdowney respondents put forward centres around the regeneration of the town. People would like to see a new “buzz” in the town so that it becomes a place that attracts visitors and where young people want to stay and/or move to.

“A friendly, happy place to live where people are proud of the town and proud of the services it provides”.

“A town that is vibrant not only in appearance but to have plenty of hustle and bustle from all age groups via suitable facilities and groups to meet needs.”

“I want this to be a safe place for my family to live. It has potential to be a fantastic town. Although it’s lost its spark, we need to make it beautiful again.”

“I would like to see growth. An inclusive active community, keeping the small town charm, whilst upgrading it to a warm welcoming place to visit for shopping and events. I think it could also be marketed as the “heart” of Ireland, being right in the middle of the motorway from Dublin to Cork. Once regenerated, it could be a hive of activity for business, festivals, sport and leisure.”

Better Public Amenities

Increasing and improving public amenities in the town was also mentioned by many respondents. Among the needed amenities mentioned were a public garden, facilities for disabled people, a nursing home, childcare and mental health services, improved library space, banking services, as well as shopping and recreational facilities, such as a skate park.

“To create a community garden for people to meet and a nice area to bring our children.”

“Two large indoor complex would be ideal. One to bring together primary care, GP, therapies, counselling etc, chemists, social dept etc. Another to give a large vibrant indoor space that offers room for babies to elderly with a variety of activities and groups to include a café/diner, hair & beauty etc.”

“A cafe in the town square, the linking of the town with other areas within walking distance and a pleasant pond natural habitat area, an excellent public transport and primary care centre and young families moving into the area. All of this will help build new business and drive future employment. It's all very possible and doable.”

None/Negative Vision

Several participants expressed doubts that anything can be done to rejuvenate the town. Moreover, a few respondents singled out migrant workers as one of the reasons housing is scarce and local traditions are loosening.

“There's no political will to rejuvenate the town. It's so far off the beaten track, it'll just get worse.”

“Migrant workers are not adding to the local community and the lack of housing for local people is driving them to seek employment elsewhere or abroad.”

“[...] need to limit immigration in the town or it will lose its culture and traditions.”

Community Development

Respondents emphasised the need to bring the community closer to ensure that locals are closely involved in the development of the town.

“We should focus more on bringing people together as a community with classes and up beat gatherings to fundraise for the upkeep of the town.”

“A quaint rural town with a vibrant community well integrated with any immigrants who come to the area and there will be more as we are being continually told we will be taking in New people across Ireland.”

“Everyone in the community work together to make it a place where people want to visit and be made welcome.”

Transport / Connectivity

Employment / Housing

Better public transport links and connectivity, as well as improved conditions for pedestrians and cyclists also featured in the respondents' visions for future, as were better employability and a tighter grip on vacancy and dereliction in the town centre.

“Love to see better lighting, footpaths, cycling lanes, new footpaths, better use made of all the empty houses in town! Remove the new skeleton houses in Moore Street, more jobs and more activities for all age groups.”

“Turning it into an employable town in order to stop the emigration of our young townspeople out of the country.”

“Vibrant community that creates jobs and homes to keep a mixed age profile population in the town.”

Community Feedback for Town Centre First Plan



Are there any other important issues or goals that should be given priority in the Rathdowney Town Centre First Plan?

Roads and Transport

A quarter of respondents identified roads and transport-related issues as requiring particular attention in the Town Centre First Plan. This included roads structure, street lighting, pedestrian and cycling facilities, parking, and availability of public transport..

Respondents expressed frustration with **parking on footpaths**, including along the Main Street, and highlighted the need for **adequate on street parking**. There were also calls for **better footpaths for pedestrians, better lighting**, including on the Main Street, as well as better **cycling and walking facilities**.

Community Facilities

Improving community facilities was identified as a key element for ensuring a better quality of life in Rathdowney. Respondents called for a **community-based approach to identify priorities and actions for the town**. Several facilities, such as the community centre, were singled out for improvement so that they can be accessible for all.

There were also calls for **further education opportunities**, and that the **needs of people with disabilities** should be considered more carefully. **Age friendly initiatives** were also called for.

Business and Employment

The need to bring more businesses to town, revitalise retail and night life, and help create more jobs in the area was also highlighted. Respondents suggested ways to create more opportunities for small businesses, such as developing the area around Brand Central of joining up efforts to open and share business premises.

Leisure and Amenity

Several respondents drew attention to the need to facilitate participatory arts, sport and physical activity, as well as children activities.

Respondents were keen to see the a general clean up of the town so that it looks inviting and more attractive for people to visit.

Dereliction and Vacancy

Vacancy and dereliction were seen as major problems for Rathdowney, with the town centre and the Main Street being specifically singled out. Insufficient housing supply as well as the need to increase Garda presence on town centre streets received several mentions as well.

Community Feedback for Town Centre First Plan



Can you think of any actions or objectives that could help achieve these goals?

Community Based Approach

The most frequent suggestion put forward by the community survey respondents was that the Town Centre First Plan should be grounded in a community-based approach. Specifically, more local consultations and public meetings were suggested, as well as topic-based town meetings, such as that of business owners in the town or people interested in setting up a small business

Roads / Transport Measures

Several suggestions were made to improve the roads structure around the town centre, as well as pedestrian access and cycling facilities.

Several recommendations regarding street lighting and improved parking facilities, including restricting or banning parking on the Main Street were also made.

Tackling Vacancy & Dereliction

Increasing housing supply, as well as tackling vacancy and dereliction were emphasised as key actions required to improve the quality of life in Rathdowney. Among the suggested measures were increased penalties and taxes for owners of derelict buildings.

Investment / Start-Up

Incentives

Respondents also called for investments – from sources such as the IDA or the Local Authority – in new businesses.

Leisure / Sports / Education Opportunities

Increasing opportunities to visit the town for leisure activities, exercise, take up sports, and participating in education activities for children and adults alike, as well as setting up a health centre with therapy rooms facilities were also mentioned as ways to transform Rathdowney in a more attractive place to visit.

Community Feedback for Town Centre First Plan



What is your vision for Rathdowney moving forward?

Town Regeneration

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Better Public Amenities

Increasing and improving public amenities in the town was also mentioned by many respondents. Among the needed amenities mentioned were a public garden, facilities for disabled people, a nursing home, childcare and mental health services, improved library space, banking services, as well as shopping and recreational facilities, such as a skate park.

None/Negative Vision

Several participants expressed doubts that anything can be done to rejuvenate the town. Moreover, a few respondents singled out migrant workers as one of the reasons housing is scarce and local traditions are loosening.

Community Development

Respondents emphasised the need to bring the community closer to ensure that locals are closely involved in the development of the town.

Transport / Connectivity

Employment / Housing

Better public transport links and connectivity, as well as improved conditions for pedestrians and cyclists also featured in the respondents’ visions for future, as were better employability and a tighter grip on vacancy and dereliction in the town centre.

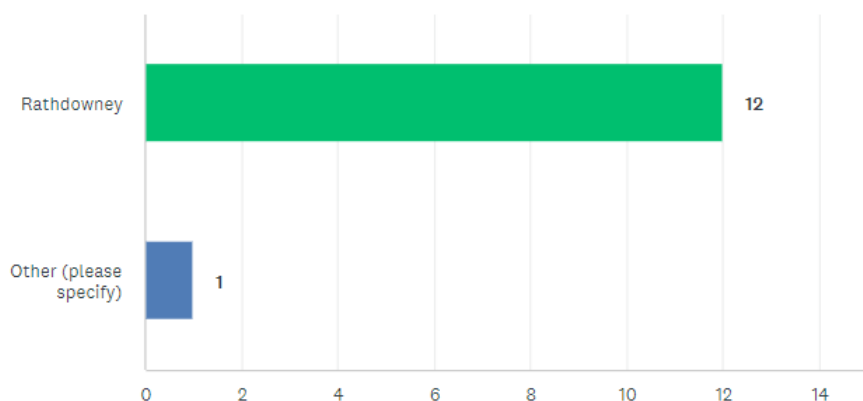
Appendix 2: Online Business Survey Results



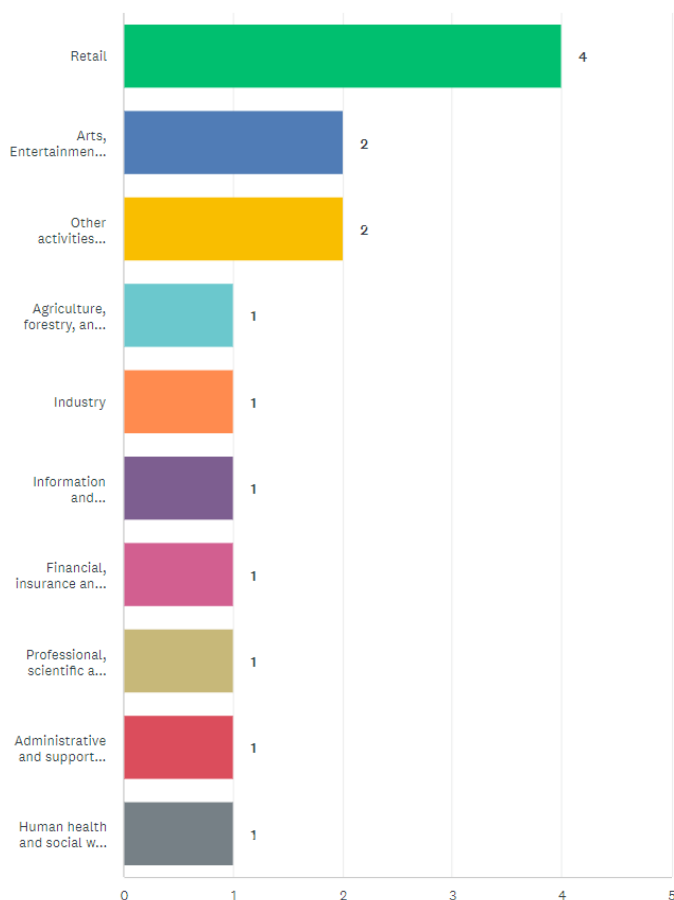
Business Survey Results

This section details the feedback received to the online business survey. The information presented in this section is a summary of the 14 answers received. Questions 1 to 7 allow us to ascertain the demographics involved in the survey, while questions 8 and 9 relate to town amenities.

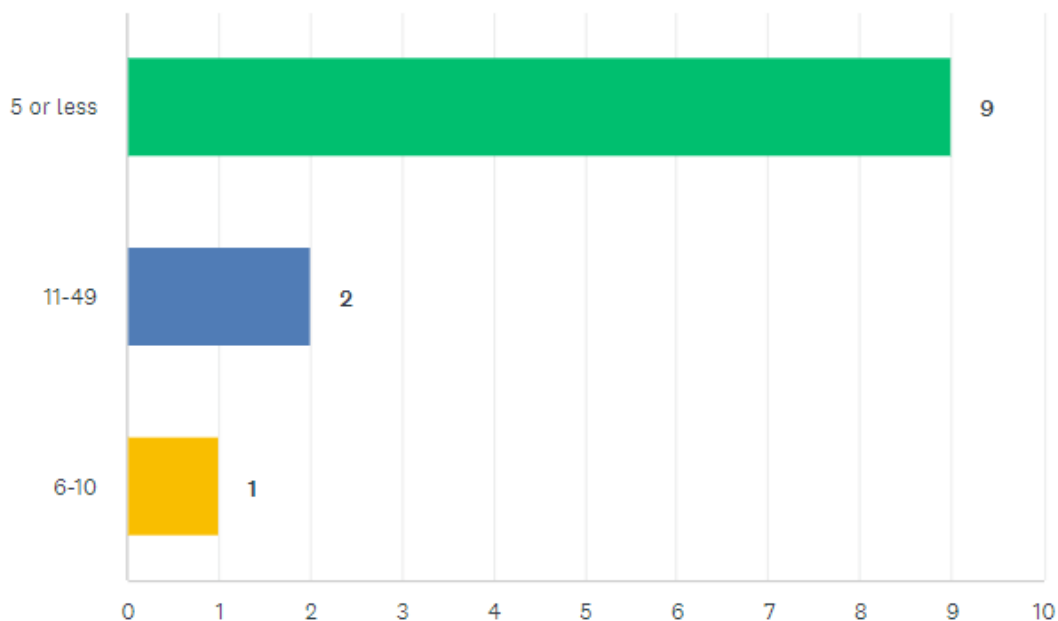
Q1: Where is your business / organisation based?



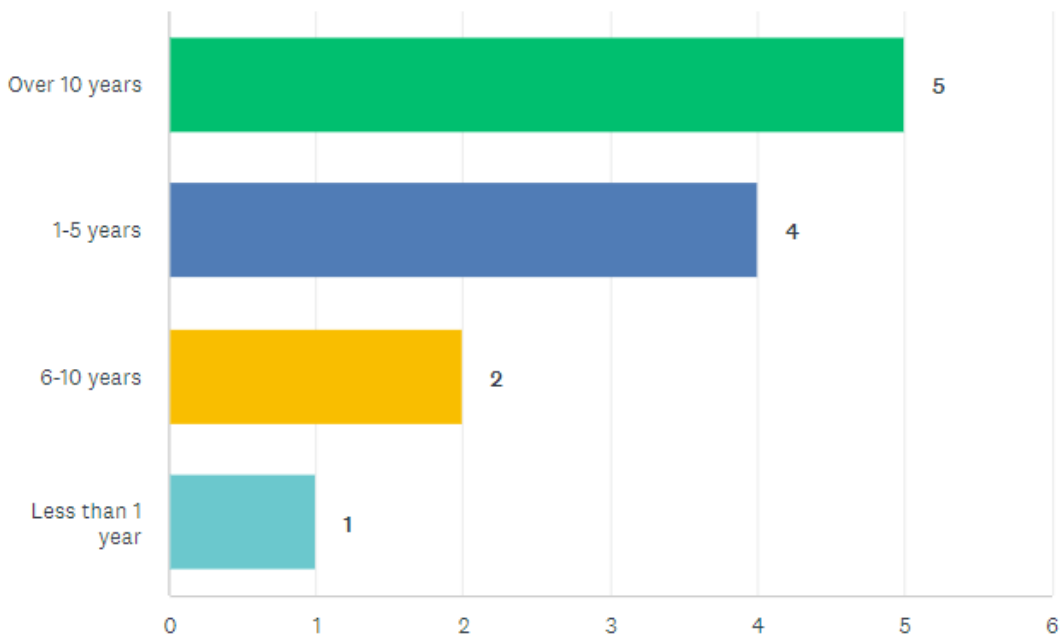
Q2: In which sector does your business/organisation operate?



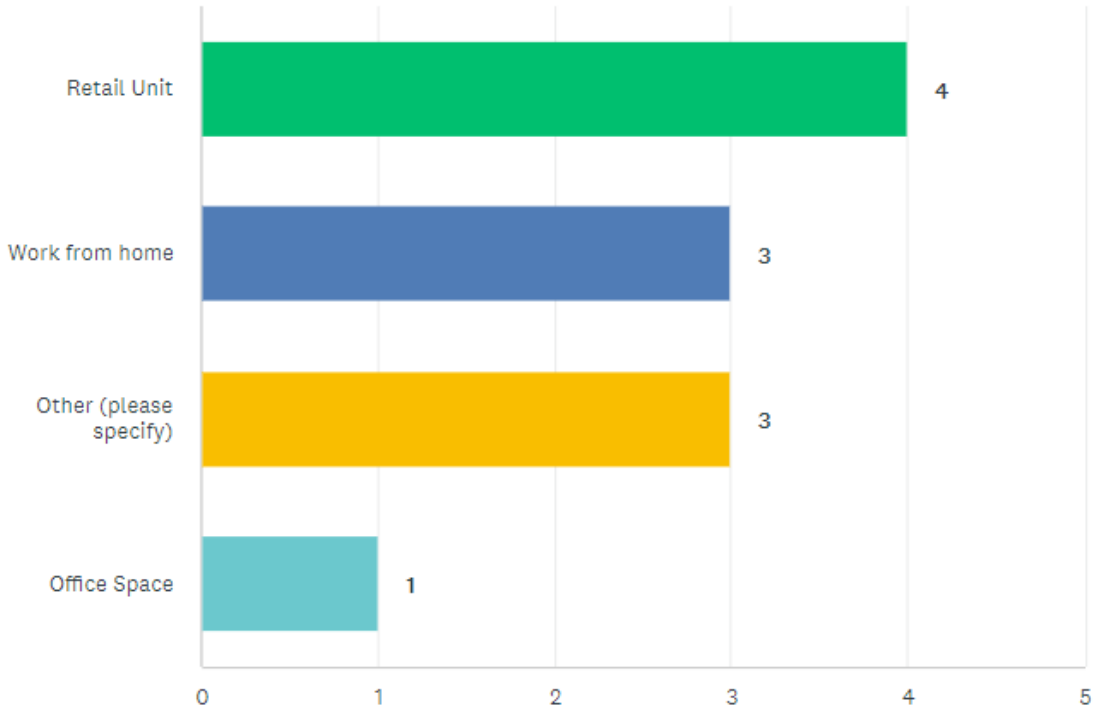
Q3: Approximately how many people does your business/organisation directly employ?



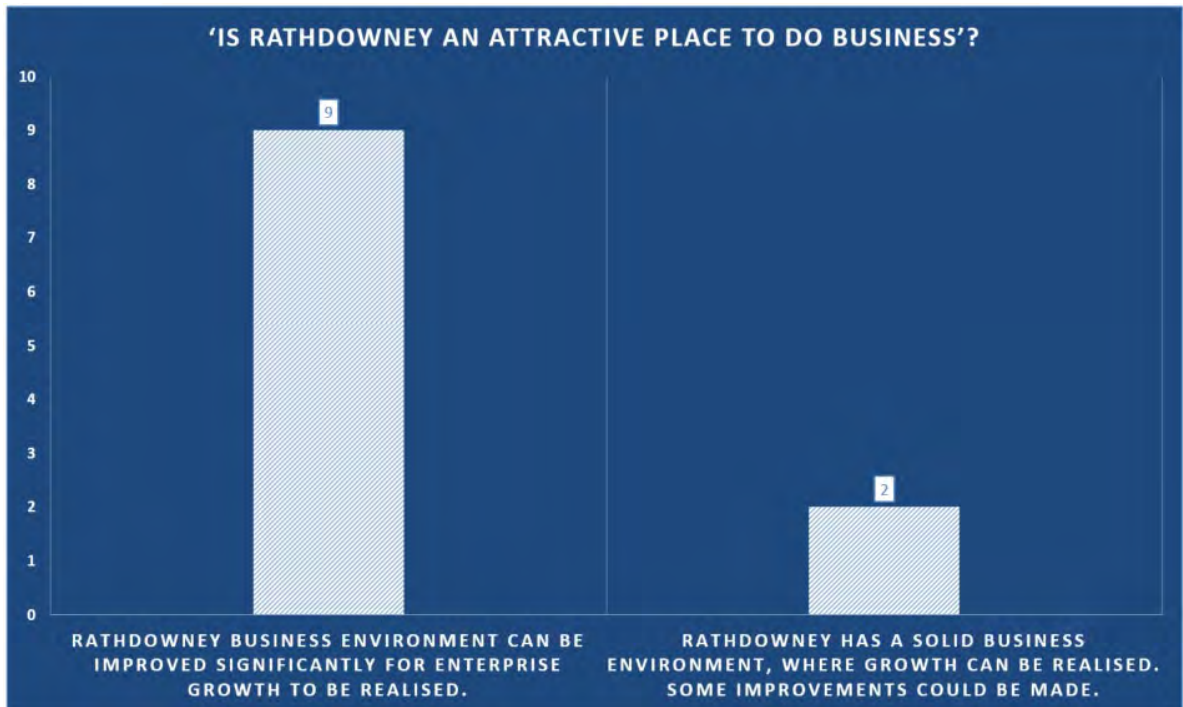
Q4: How many years have you been operating at your current location?



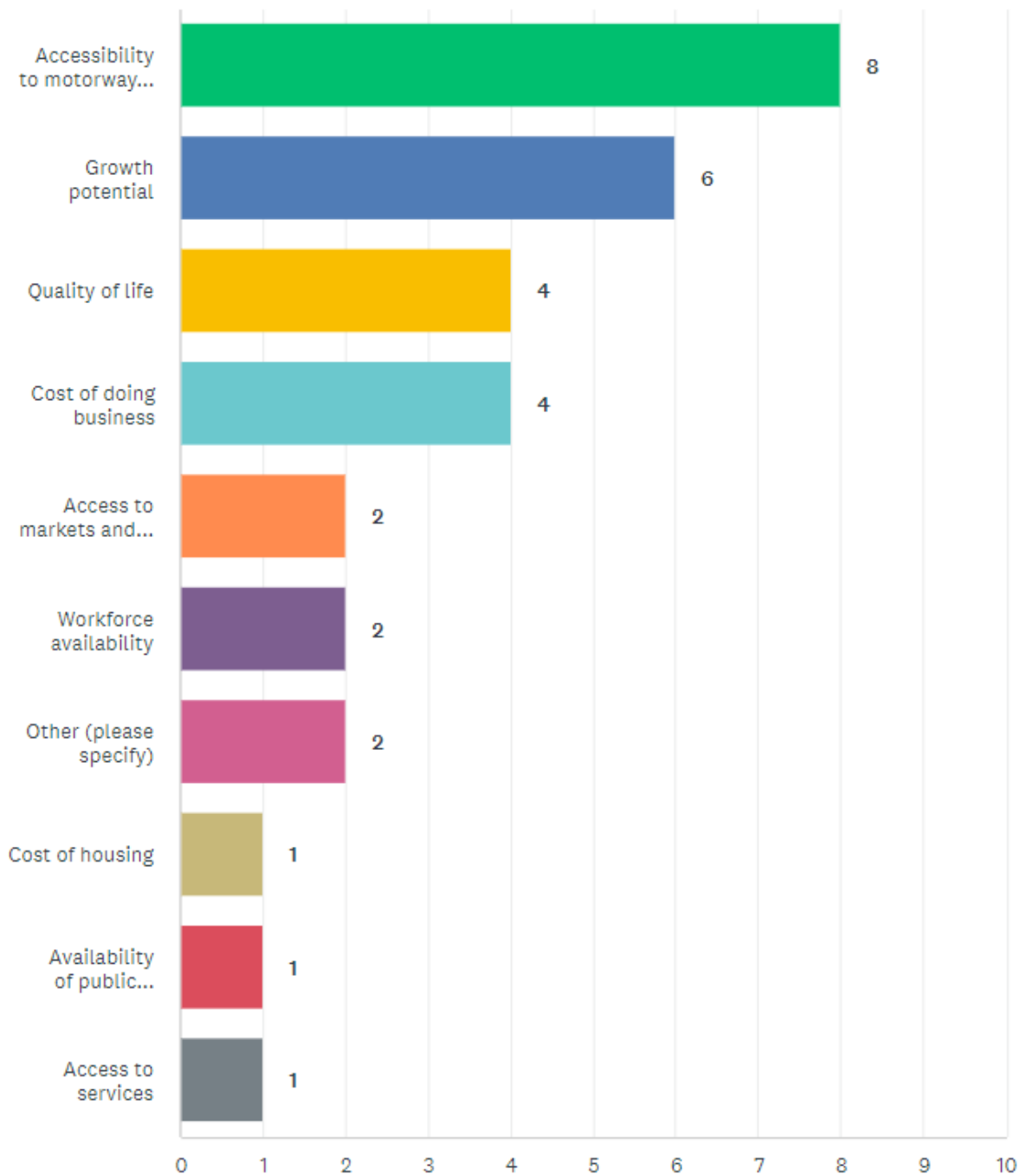
Q5: What type of facility does your business / organisation primarily use?



Q6: How would you respond to the question 'is Rathdowney an attractive place to do business'?

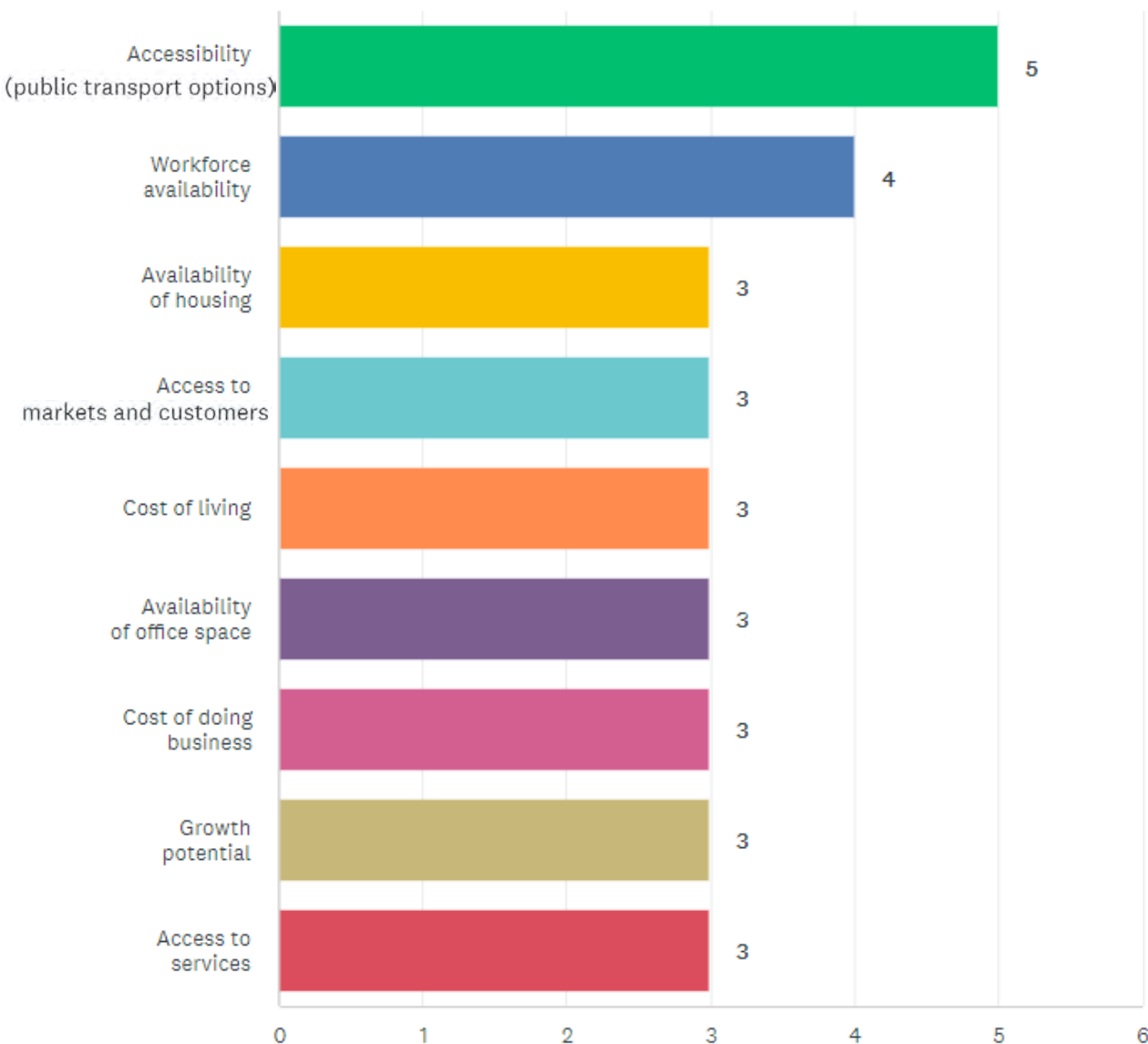


Q7: In your view, what are Rathdowney’s three main strengths as a place to do business?



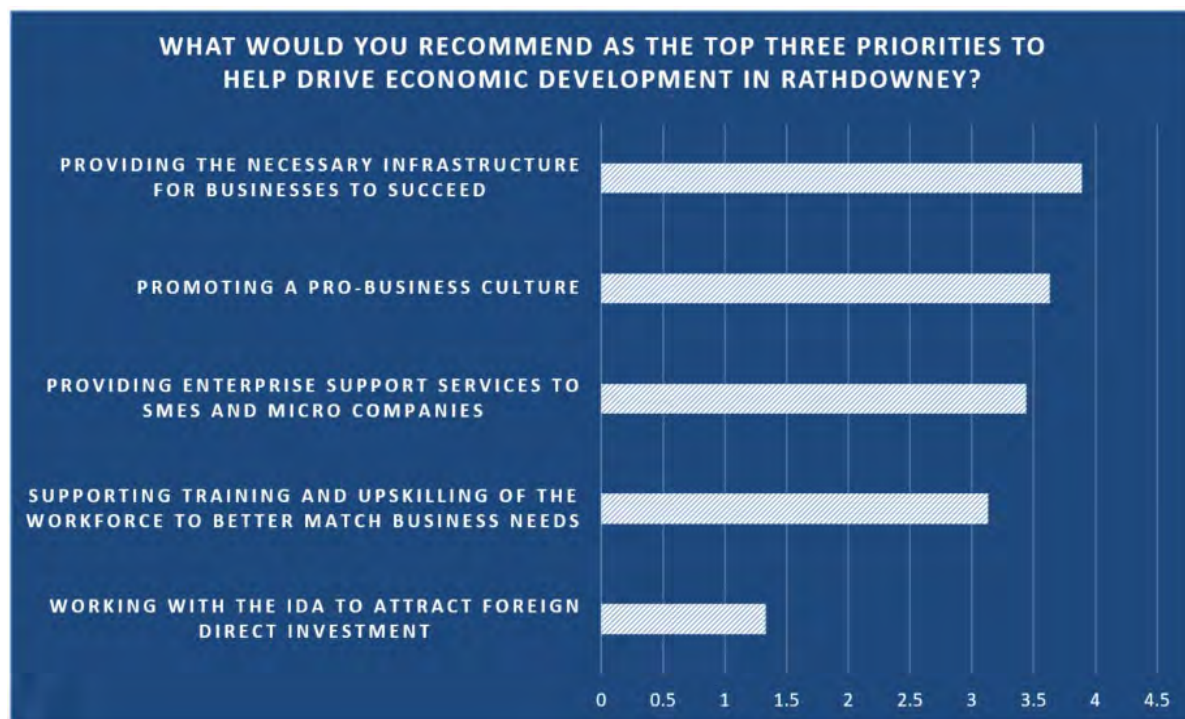
Accessibility to motorway network and growth potential were consistently singled out the town’s main strengths as a place for doing business.

Q8: In your view, what are Rathdowney’s three main constraints as a place to do business?



While accessibility to motorway network was overwhelmingly identified by respondents as Rathdowney’s main strength, accessibility to public transport options was highlighted as one of the town’s main constraints for doing business.

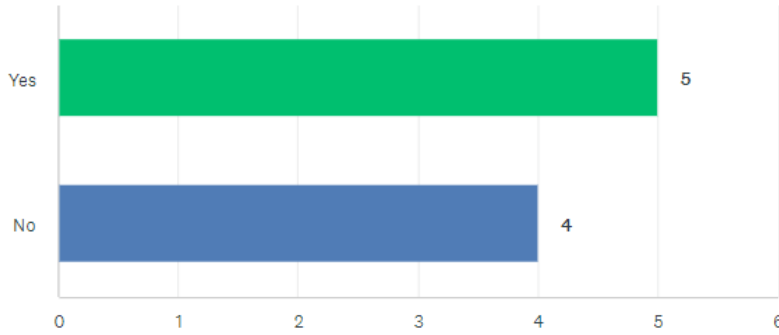
Q9: What would you recommend as the top three priorities to help drive economic development in Rathdowney? Please rank the following actions in order of importance, with 1 being the most important to you.



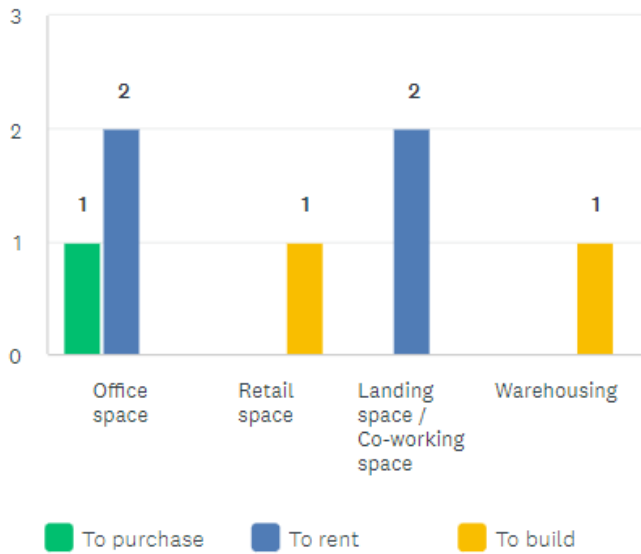
Providing the necessary infrastructure for businesses to succeed, Promoting a pro-business culture, and Providing enterprise support services to SMEs and micro companies were consistently placed in the top three positions by respondents.

By comparison, **Supporting training and upskilling of the workforce** and **Working with the IDA to attract FDI** more often occupied the bottom two places.

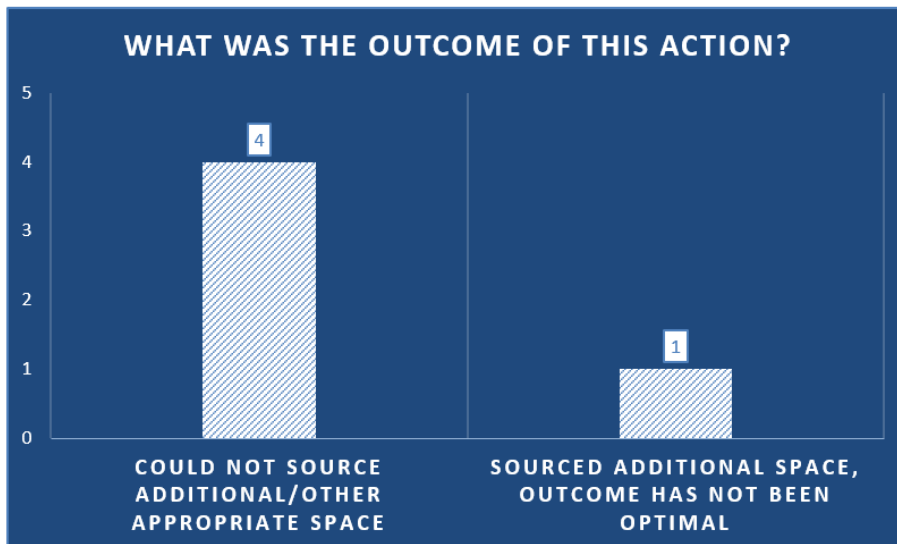
Q10: Have you tried to source space in Rathdowney in the past 3 years?



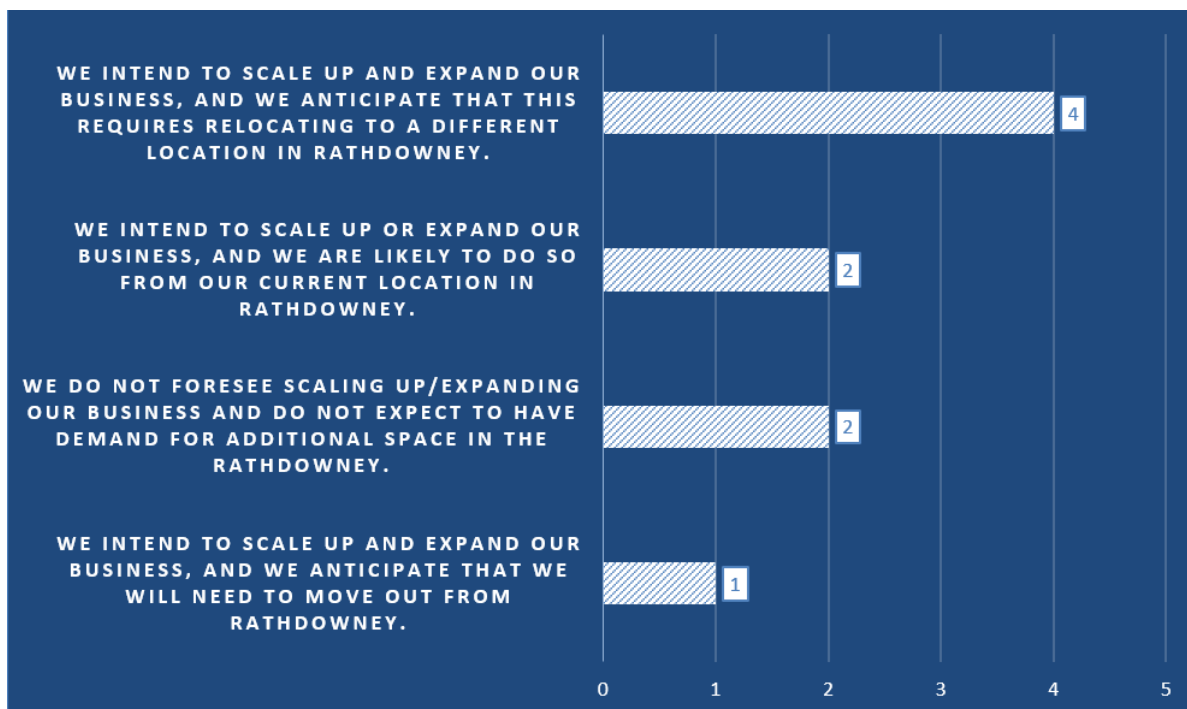
Q11: What type of space was this?



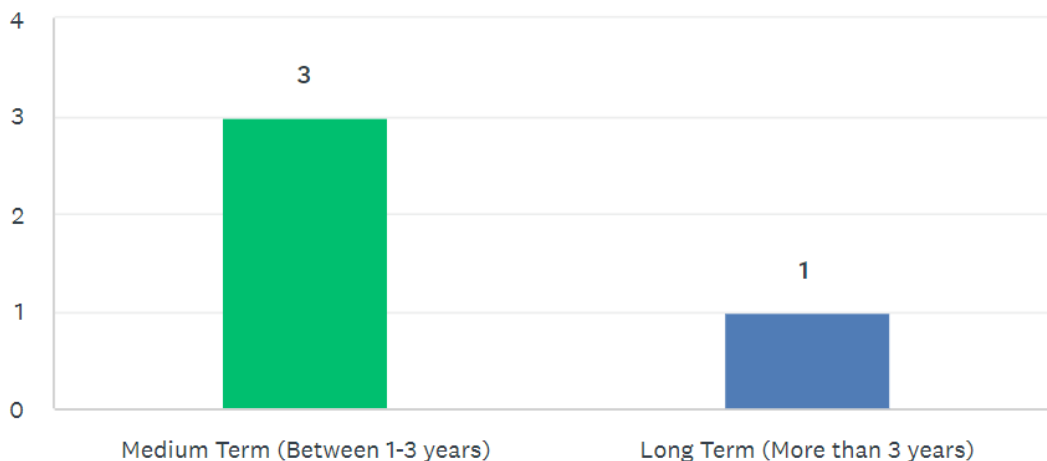
Q12: What was the outcome of this action?



Q13: Considering your own firm if currently located in Rathdowney, what is your own position on scaling-up, expanding or relocating your operations in the future?

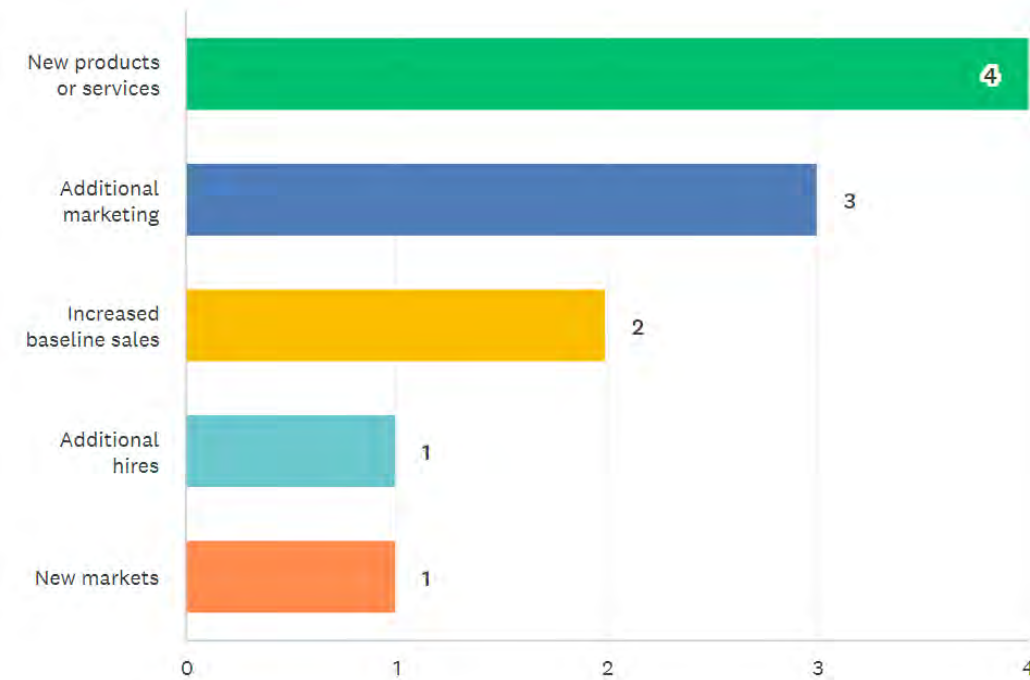


Q14: If you are planning to scale up / expand, what timeframe are you planning this over?



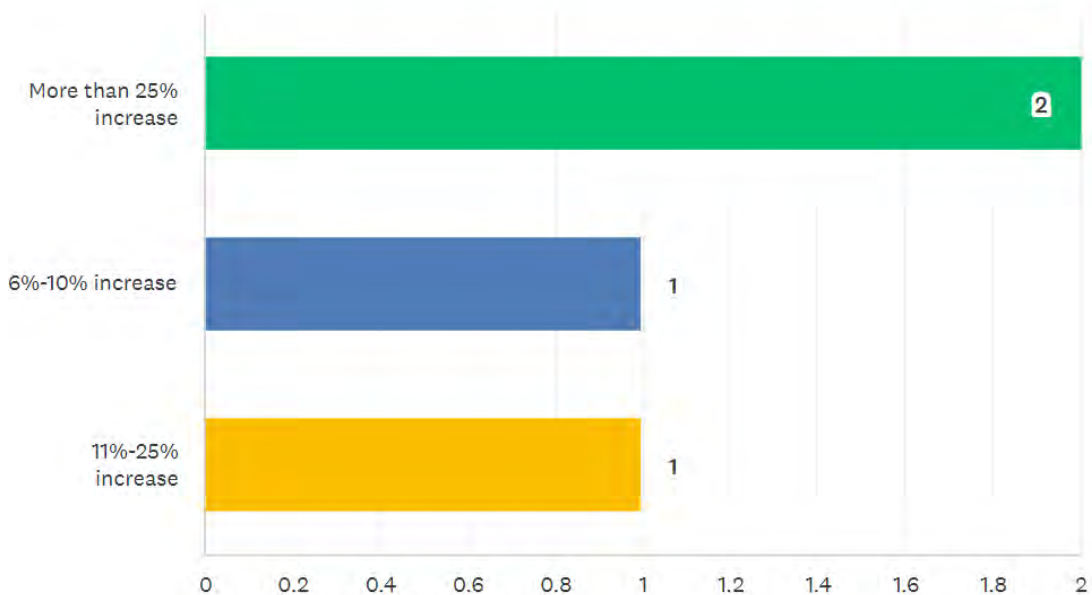
Q15: Please outline the ways in which you plan to scale-up (e.g., new products, increased production, more staff, etc.) or expand (e.g., areas, target markets, new site locations).

Answered: 4 Skipped: 10



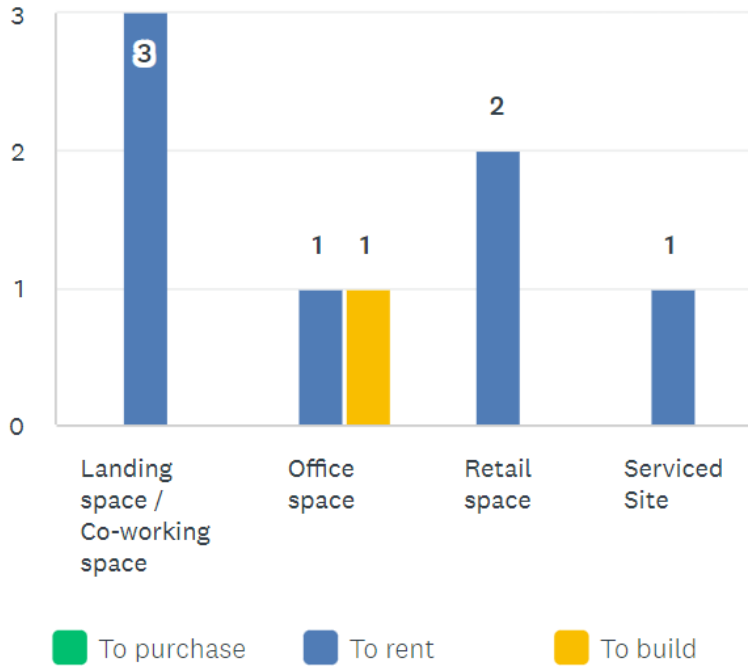
Q16: If additional staff are required to realise your growth targets in the next 3 years, by how much do you think headcount might change?

Answered: 4 Skipped: 10

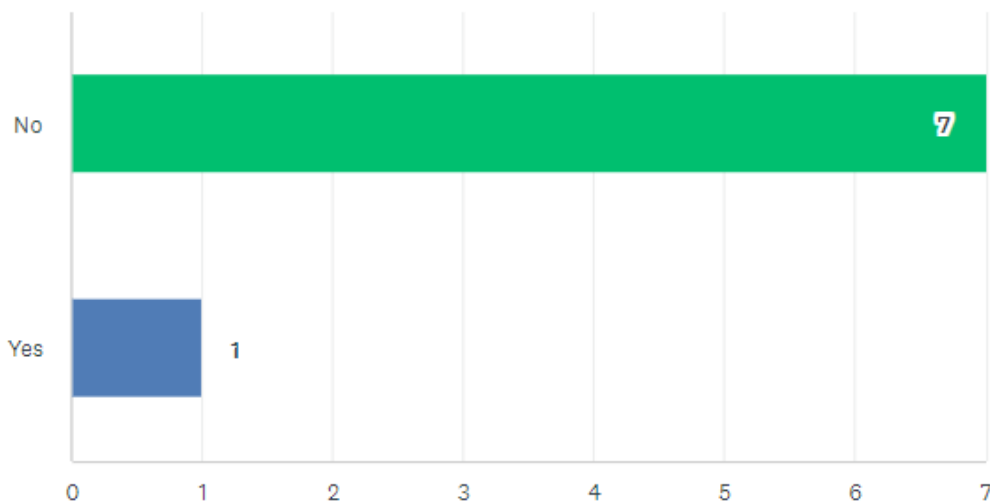


Q17: To grow in the next 1-3 years, what types of spaces would you consider and what tenure type would you prefer?

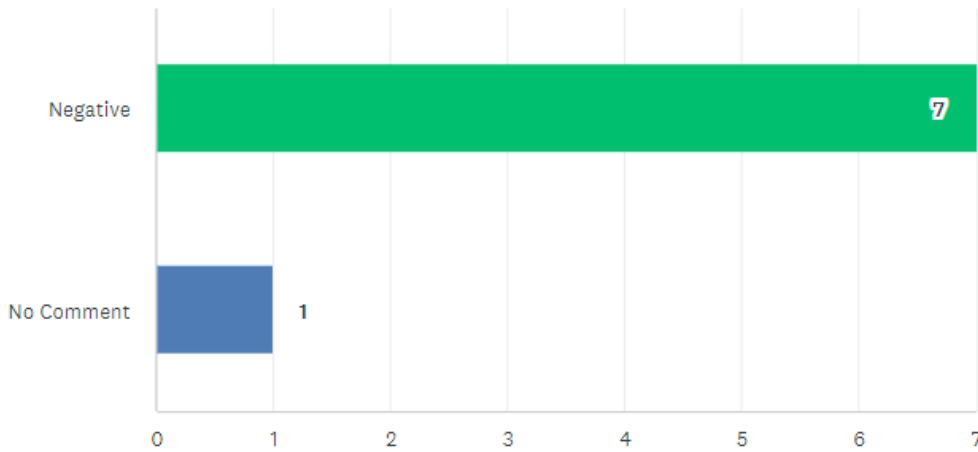
Answered: 4 Skipped: 10



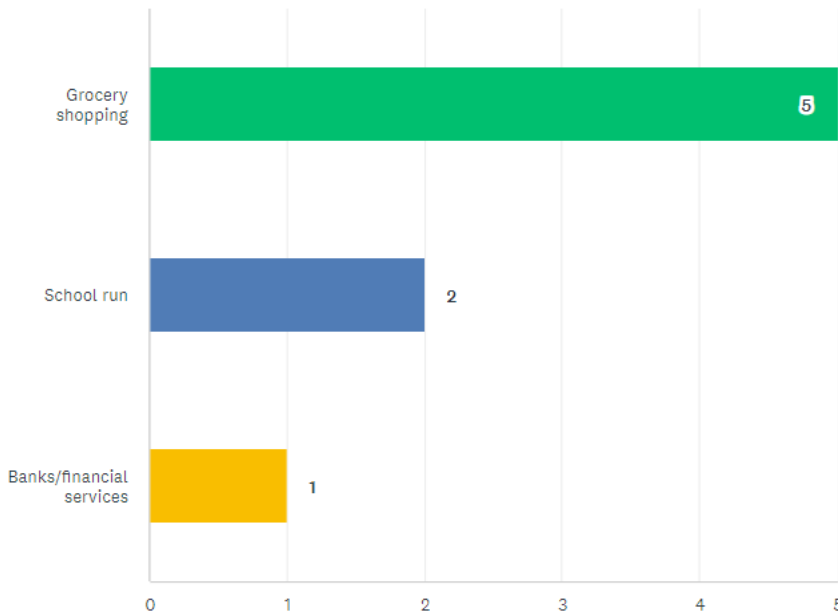
Q19: Have you considered availing of available grants to upgrade vacant or derelict buildings in the town centre?



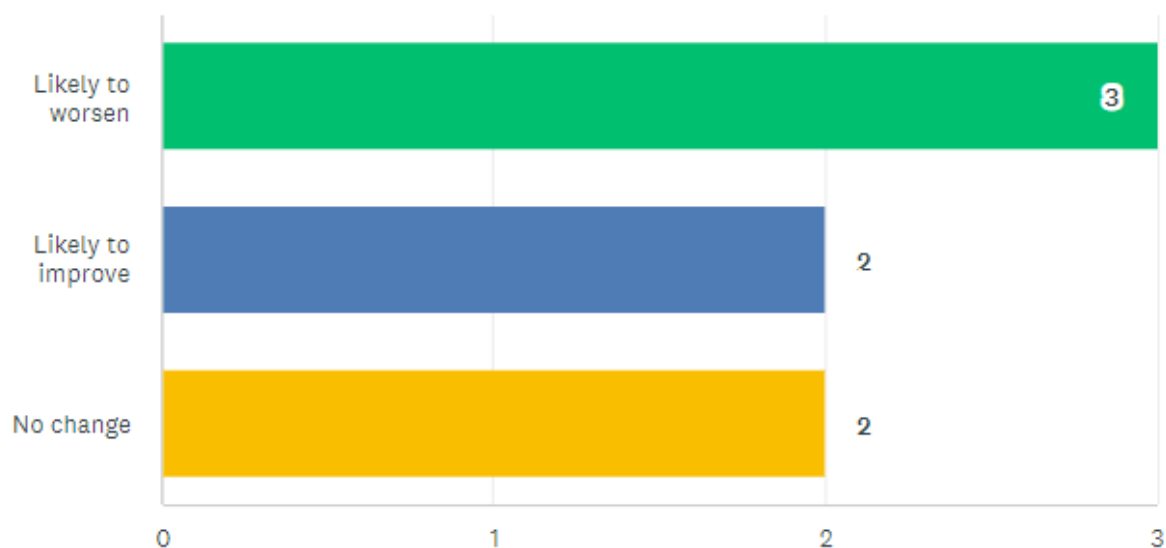
Q20: When you are asked what you think of Rathdowney Town Centre, what are your first thoughts?



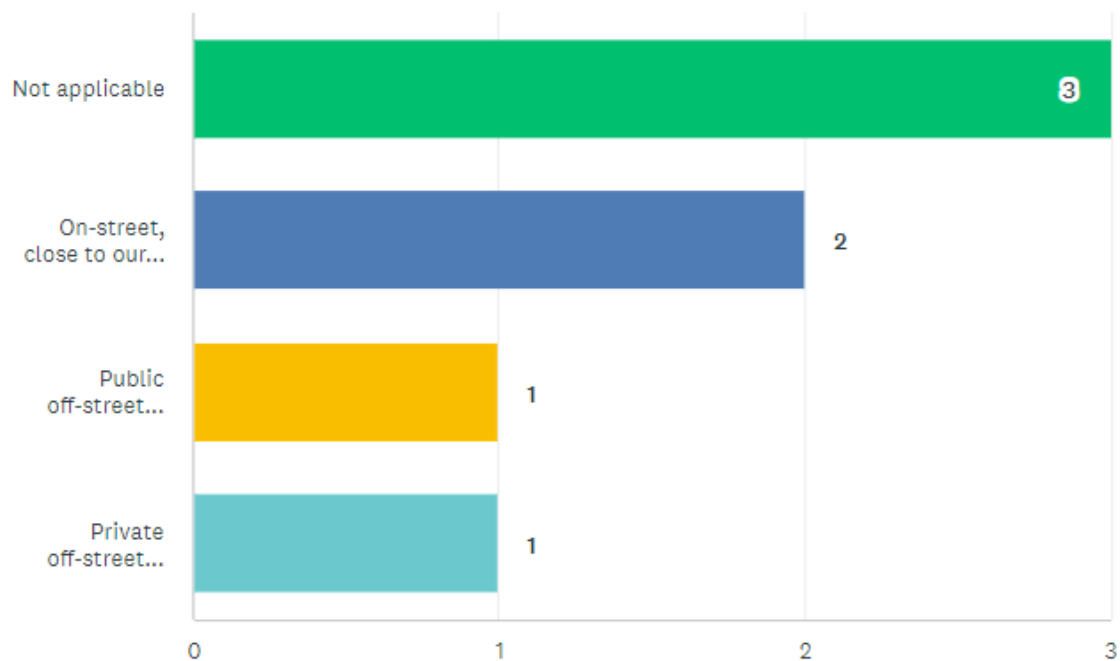
Q21: What do you think is the main thing that attracts customers to Rathdowney Town Centre?



Q22: What are your expectations for trading over the next two years?



Q23: Where do you and your staff park your personal vehicles?



Feedback for Town Centre First Plan

As previously outlined, an online survey was hosted via Survey Monkey and contained 25 questions which comprised of a mixture of both open and closed questions. A total of 14 valid submissions were received via this channel. This section thematically presents the results stemming from the following three open questions:



Are there other important issues or goals that should be given priority in the Rathdowney Town Centre First Plan?



What is your vision for Rathdowney moving forward?



Are there any other important issues or goals that should be given priority in the Rathdowney Town Centre First Plan?

In response to this question, seven respondents highlighted several issues for consideration that were grouped under the following themes:

- Support for small businesses
- Improved transport and parking
- Tackle dereliction

Support for small businesses

Respondents emphasised the need to create better conditions for small businesses to operate in Rathdowney.

“Prioritise the development of Brand Central Building that has already accepted the offer to develop the new Primary care centre on site. Work with us to get the required letter of intent issued from the HSE to get the project moving as the funds are in place. You have very willing landlords who are happy to engage on any public/private partnership. Talk to us. Let us be a significant part of the regeneration of the town. We need each other.”

“Put in support structure for businesses to start and scale. Develop a strategy to get a tourist attraction build that attracts visitors to the town. A significant business that builds high value jobs should be targeted and supported. Encourage and support young people to start and build businesses.”

“Rates are chronic, massive barrier to small business. Comparable rates to Portlaoise with 5% of custom and services.”

“Some features that make Rathdowney attractive from a lowkey leisure point of view - coffee shop, green spaces to spend time with kids, other family attractions.”

Improved transport and parking

The lack of public transport has been emphasised as one of Rathdowney’s major shortcomings.

“Tackle the transport problem. Bringing business and additional housing will require workers, but there’s virtually no transport links, yet there is a Railway station a 4 min drive away that should have a regular shuttle bus services to tie in with train times.”

“Parking for Main Street is a disaster.”

Tackle Dereliction

Vacancy and dereliction has been identified as a massive issue in the town centre.

“Buildings also not painted, buildings not being used. Site beside bank has been tidied up but shame to see it empty in the middle of the square.”

“Tackle the issue of dereliction, and make the completion of the 7 council houses on the main street an immediate priority before that too becomes a ‘derelict site’. Why has worked stopped here, it could be finished in 6 months so focus on that.”

“Buildings need improving and development.”



What is your vision for Rathdowney moving forward?

In response to this question, six respondents highlighted several issues for consideration that could be grouped under the main theme of town regeneration.

Town Regeneration

As part of visions on how Rathdowney town can be transformed, respondents singled out the need to tackle vacancy and dereliction, improve public amenities, and add services and attractions that would transform the town into a tourist destination.

“To become known as a bustling town with excellent parking facilities.”

“Spending considerable funds in the provision of a primary care centre as accepted with the HSE (funding is in place already.) In addition the overall re development of the existing building will significantly benefit the town.”

The main square area of the town we hope will improve once the existing projects as in the completion of the 7 Council houses gets underway. The central square area is full of potential but dereliction is a serious issue and has to be tackled with the objective bringing these properties back into use for either Housing and or Business. If these issues are tackled in a positive, time effective manner, then the vision is absolute and tangible. We would actively encourage your team to speak with us, given we anticipate considerable changes in the very foreseeable future at Brand Central.”

“A town that is attractive to young families to build their lives here. A place with facilities for business, sport, social and recreation. A place to build businesses both small and large. A place that can support young people to achieve their goals locally.”

“Some features that make Rathdowney attractive from a lowkey leisure point of view - coffee shop, green spaces to spend time with kids, other family attractions.”

“To strive to provide services for people who are from outside the town so that Rathdowney is a destination for certain things.”

Business Feedback for Town Centre First Plan



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Business Feedback for Town Centre First Plan



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“To strive to provide services for people who are from outside the town so that Rathdowney is a destination for certain things.”

Drop-in Events

Overview

Two drop-in events were held at the Rathdowney Community Centre on Saturday 26th November for the public to contribute and provide their views and comments. The following summary reflects comments and views aired at these events.

Summary Feedback Themes

The Positives of Rathdowney

- Strong community spirit and sense of place with a welcoming atmosphere, and a number of active clubs and organisations.
- A small town with a peaceful environment, sense of safety and that doesn't suffer from traffic congestion.
- Location and access to M7 and M8, proximity to Dublin and other major Cities, and proximity to Ballybrophy train station.
- Historic character of the town and hinterland, including buildings, features such as the square and mill pond, and social heritage.
- Presence of key services and amenities which towns of a similar size often do not contain.

The Main Issues in the Town

- Scale of vacancy and dereliction in the town centre, and poor condition of many other properties, and its impact on the environment and character of the town.
- Poor maintenance and condition of many streets, footpaths and local infrastructure.
- Lack of amenities or events to attract people into the town centre, and a particular lack of good cafes or eateries.
- Poor public transport and lack of synchronised bus link with Ballybrophy Train Station from the town centre.
- Difficulties for small businesses to survive and thrive given lack of footfall and high commercial rates (comparable to other towns), and discouragement
- Lack of joint up approach community events and initiatives, and a lack of awareness or visibility for many events.

The Actions Needed to Improve Rathdowney

- Capitalise on Town Square to provide events and opportunities and small businesses and community organisations, and improve public realm of the area.

Drop-in Events

Summary Feedback Themes

The Actions Needed to Improve Rathdowney (continued)

- Address vacancy and dereliction through the C.P.O of properties, or raising awareness of grants and funding available to renovate and repurpose vacant properties.
- Examine potential for additional public service within the Town, such as Teagasc or similar which would support the agri-food economy.
- Improve public transport services and links to Ballybrophy station.
- Provide improved facilities for walking and cycling across the town, and potential new green routes.
- Improve the public realm across the centre and rationalise parking arrangements, particularly at Main Street.
- Develop incentives for small businesses and hospitality services to open in the town.
- Capitalise on the Erkina River and green space surrounding the town for leisure and recreational activities.

Youth Workshop

Overview

A workshop was held with transition year students from St. Fergal's College on 23rd November. The following summary reflects the pupils' comments and views.

Summary Feedback Themes

The Positives of Rathdowney

- Friendly, quiet, safe town.
- School close to the town.
- Sport facilities and playground.

The Main Issues in the Town

- Not much to do. No where really to meet.
- No real place to go for a walk.
- No café.
- No phone/technology shop.
- Difficult to get access to Astro turf pitch. No floodlighting for pitch. This is particularly an issue during winter.
- Litter.
- Smell from the meat factory.
- Cars on footpaths.
- Community Centre needs improving.
- Derelict buildings.

The Actions Needed to Improve Rathdowney

- Tackle dereliction.
- Need for a café.
- More activities to do in the evening.
- Better bus connections with neighbouring towns.
- Easy access to Astro turf pitch and floodlighting.
- Gym at the secondary school. Outdoor gym would also be good to have.

Strategic Conversations

Overview

One to one consultations were held with 10 consultees ranging from county councillors to key stakeholders in statutory organisations, community and voluntary sectors representatives, and local business representatives. Across the interviews conducted, the following eight core themes have been identified that largely mirror the themes presented throughout Section 3.

Summary Feedback Themes

- 1. Local business community:** Rathdowney has a small but strong local business community who have been active in attempting improvements in the town. For example, the Rathdowney Development Group was set up a few years ago, to drive improvement initiatives and start to tackle some of the challenges in the town. There is an impressions that such initiatives have sometimes lacked the support of the wider community or of key stakeholders.
- 2. Housing market:** Low property prices within the town centre should represent major value for those looking for new homes on restricted budgets. There is interest in upgrading properties in the town centre, and in the Croí Conaithe grant, but those interested will look at doing so in other towns where town centre living is currently more attractive, including Durrow or Abbeyleix due to better public realm and amenities.
- 3. Hospitality offering:** The lack of a hospitality offering (such as a town hotel and good local cafés or restaurants) is considered a major weakness in the attractiveness of the town. Restricted opening times of some local businesses further discourage town centre visits.
- 4. Leisure offering:** It is considered that there's a lack of amenities, events or other attractions to draw people into the town centre. There used to be some significant market fairs in the town which drew large numbers, created an atmosphere and supported local businesses. Such opportunities are now mainly restricted to sports events
- 5. Public realm:** It is very difficult to get people interested in investing in the town centre (for living or business purposes) given the scale of vacancy, dereliction, and poor public realm and parking arrangements.

Strategic Conversations

Summary Feedback Themes

- 6. Opportunities for young people:** The library is well used and it acts as a hub for various children’s activities, especially in the summer and term holidays. There are also different events and clubs for adults. Schools are a key asset to the town and they are also one of the few ways that people of different backgrounds in the Town (locals and those who’ve arrived to work in Dawn Meats or the direct provision accommodation) actually mix. That said, the town can struggle to retain young people who leave following secondary school to go to third level. Covid restrictions had the effect of keeping younger people (17 to 22) at home and socialising in the town far more often, whereas previously they would have travelled to other towns with a more vibrant nightlife, or stayed in Dublin for the weekend.
- 7. Community integration:** Consultees have raised concerns over the potential difficulties that the concentration of lower income workers and immigrants/refugees in the town centre might pose to appropriate community integration. Specifically, the concentration of households on low incomes in the centre of the town, with those on higher incomes outside the town centre, does not lead to a truly mixed community. It also makes it more difficult to attract young couples or families to buy properties in the town centre.
- 8. Opportunities for future developments:** Rathdowney is a hub for a wide hinterland of smaller towns and villages, including Templemore, Durrrow and Borris-in-Ossory. Some of these towns and villages actually seem more vibrant with more smaller businesses than Rathdowney, but do not have the supermarkets, banks, and social welfare office that Rathdowney has. With these key anchors in place, there is significant potential to incentivise the development of smaller businesses and services in the town.
- 9. Brand Central Hub:** The Brand Central Hub represents a major opportunity for the town. The site is zoned for mixed use, and has the potential for a variety of further development proposals, including a potential new HSE primary care facility. It will be important to ensure that uses at the site complement regeneration of the town centre. Improved walking and cycling links between the site and town centre should be an essential part of this.

A photograph of a street scene in a town. The street is paved and has several cars parked along the right side. The buildings are multi-story, with some having satellite dishes and antennas on their roofs. A blue gradient box is overlaid on the upper half of the image, containing the title text in white. The bottom of the image has a decorative blue and purple gradient border.

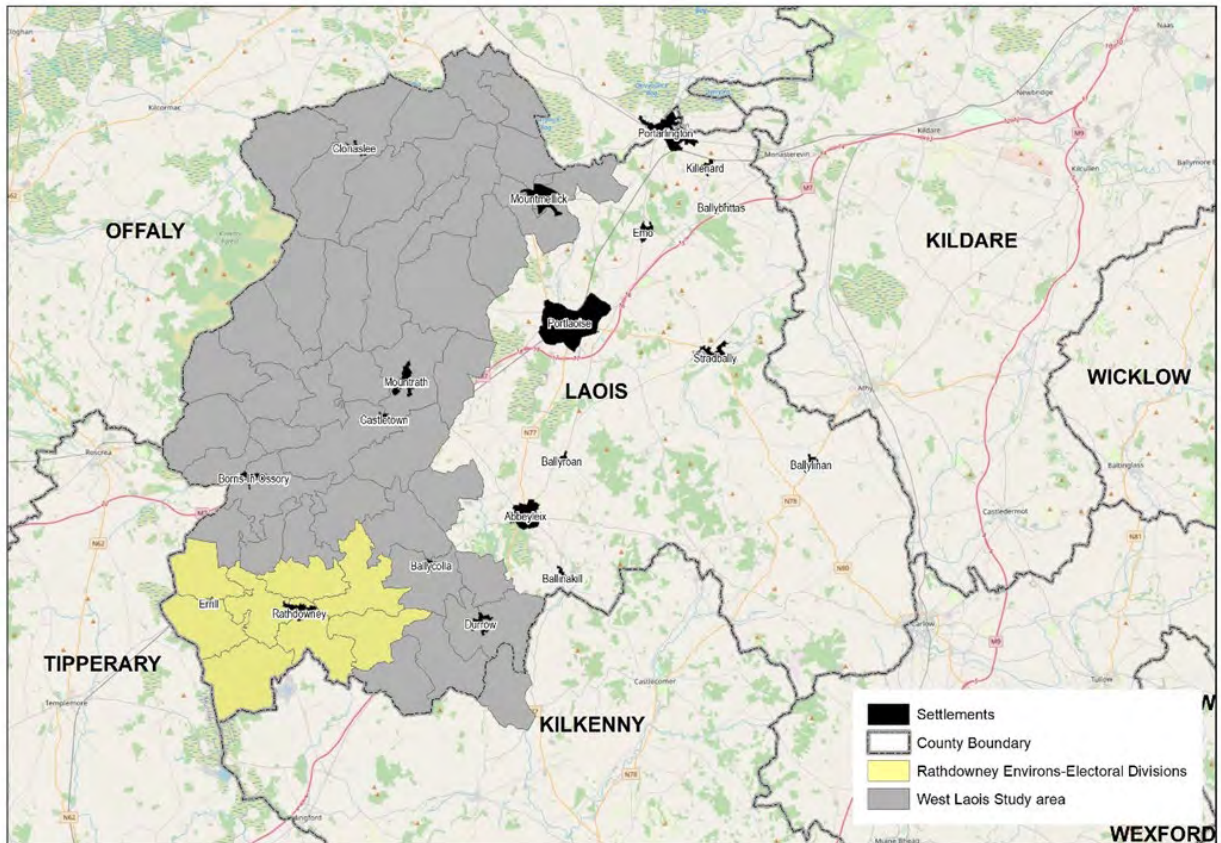
Appendix 3: Socio Economic Assessment

Demographic and Socio-Economic Profile

Within this section Rathdowney is compared to the West Laois Electoral Area and County Laois as a whole. Rathdowney is defined by the settlement boundaries within the 2016 Census results. The West Laois area includes Rathdowney and its environs, the settlements of Durrow, Ballycolla, Borris-in-Ossory, Castletown, Mountrath, Mountmelick, and Clonaslee and their environs. While the assessment focuses primarily on the settlement of Rathdowney, Rathdowney and its environs has formed the basis of assessment where data is not available specifically at settlement level. Figure 2.3 indicates the boundaries of Rathdowney, West Laois, and County Laois.

While limited elements of the Census 2022 are available (i.e. overall population figures at Local Electoral Area level), detailed dissemination of the 2022 data has not yet been made available at the time of this assessment. Locally, notable changes have been observed in the demographic profile of the town since 2016, while the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to have had a significant influence on town demographics.

Figure 3.1 – West Laois Electoral Area and wider Co. Laois



Demographics

The vast majority (92%) of Rathdowney’s population identify as Irish nationals. There are small pockets of UK nationals, Polish nationals, and other EU nationals at 2% each (Figure 2.4). This is broadly similar to the West Laois population, and reflects a slightly higher proportion of Irish nationals than the national average from 2016 at 88%.

The Rathdowney population is majority Catholic at 85.6%, with a 8.9% other stated religion which encompasses all other faiths, and 4% of residents identify as having no religion at all (Figure 2.5). This is in line with in the wider West Laois religion profile.

The 2016 Census data on national identify and religious affiliation should be considered alongside developments in the town in the interim, including the establishment of a direct provision centre in the town, and an increased number of non-Irish nationals working and residing locally. This is likely to have a noticeable impact on population demographics when the full 2022 Census data is published.

Figure 3.2 – Rathdowney Population Nationality (2016)

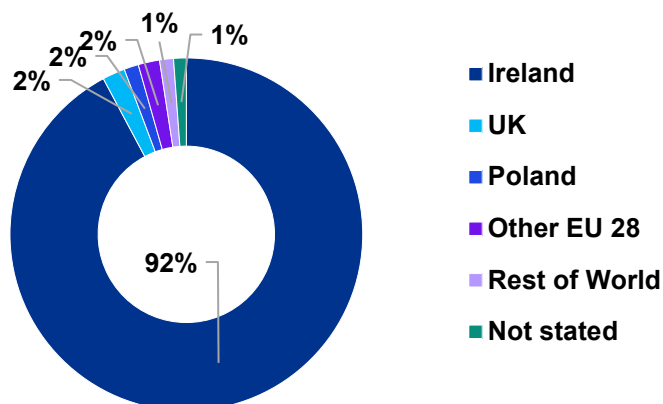
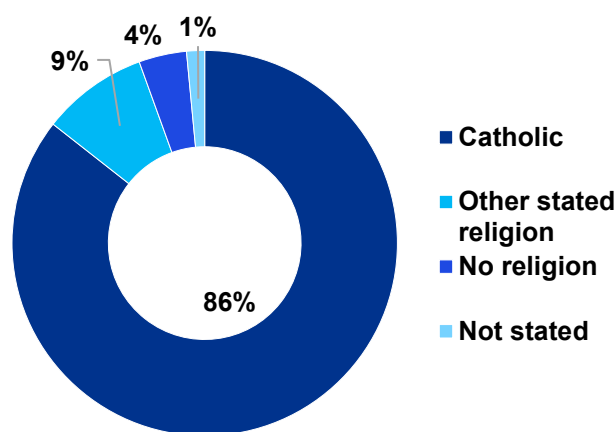


Figure 3.3 – Religion in Rathdowney (2016)

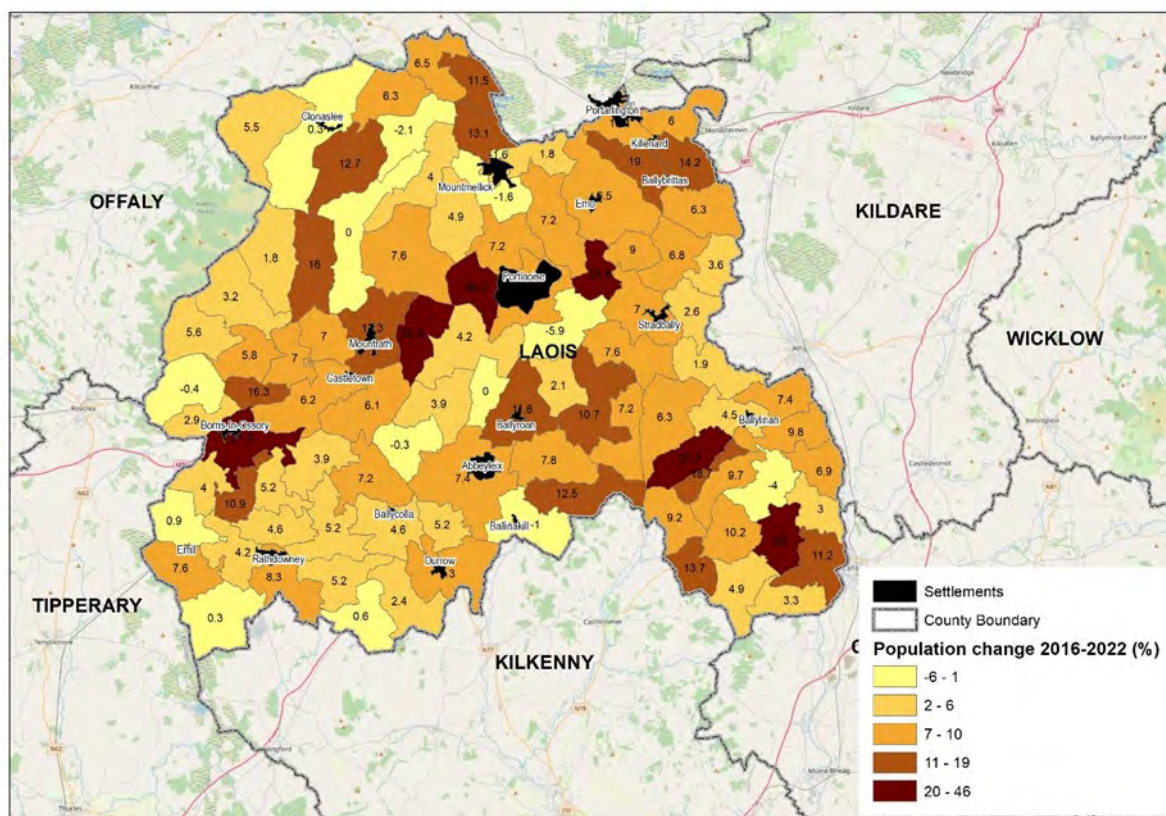


Population Change

Between 2016 and 2022, Co Laois recorded a 7.33% population growth that primarily occurred within and around towns and urban areas including Portlaoise, Stradbally, Mountrath, Mountmellick, Borris-in-Ossory, and Abbeyleix (as shown in Figure 2.6). The highest population growth in the county occurred in Portlaoise with 1,200 new residents, followed by the settlements of Portarlington (718), Mountrath (293), Ballybrittas (244), and Abbeyleix (207). There were notable spikes in population in rural areas including Clondarrig (867) and Graigue (537), but most were concentrated in urban areas and their environs (Clondarrig is in the environs of Portlaoise).

Rathdowney has experienced 8.3% population growth across the most recent census period (2016-2022) or about 100 people in real terms. This is marginally lower than other urban areas in the county which have experienced on average 9% population growth over the period. Population growth in the county has been especially strong in Borris-in-Ossory (21.3%), Ballybrittas (19%) and Mountrath (12.3%).

Figure 3.4 – Population Change in Co Laois (2016-2022)



Age and Family Cycle

Rathdowney’s population pyramid (shown in Figure 2.7 with additional detail in Table 2.1) displays both stationary and constrictive features. Its rectangular shape, tapering off in both gender cohorts from the 70-74 age group as expected but also including tapers in the 0-4 and 20-29 age groups, suggesting that the population is not growing. Moreover, constrictive features, such as smaller percentages of people in the younger age cohorts, suggests that the population of the town is ageing. Overall, Rathdowney’s population trends indicate that more of the population are in the older age cohorts than the wider Laois population pyramid, which also suffers from loss of population in “prime” economic years.

Both populations have evidence of economic- and education-driven migration with a tapering of the population in the late teens and early 20s as young people move for third level education and employment opportunities. In both cases, there is a recovery in the population starting with the early 30s cohort. As indicated by the population pyramid, there is a sizable older population within Rathdowney, with a third of residents over the age of 50, and 17% of residential aged over 65 (compared to 13% nationally). Just over a quarter of the population is under the age of 19 with the remaining two fifths aged between 20 and 49.

Figure 3.5 – Population Distribution

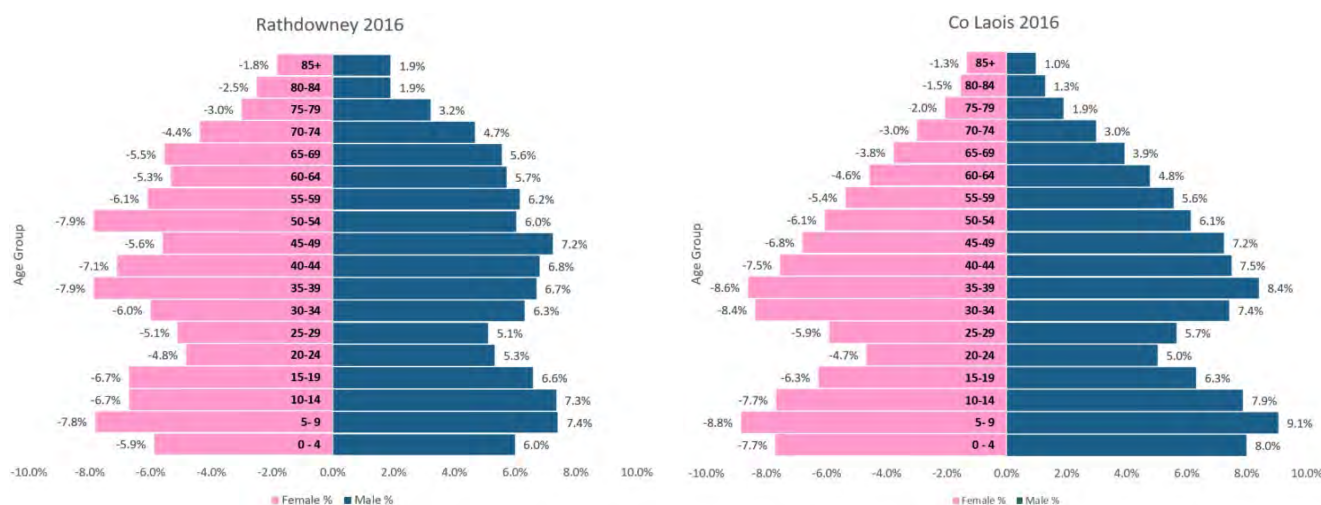


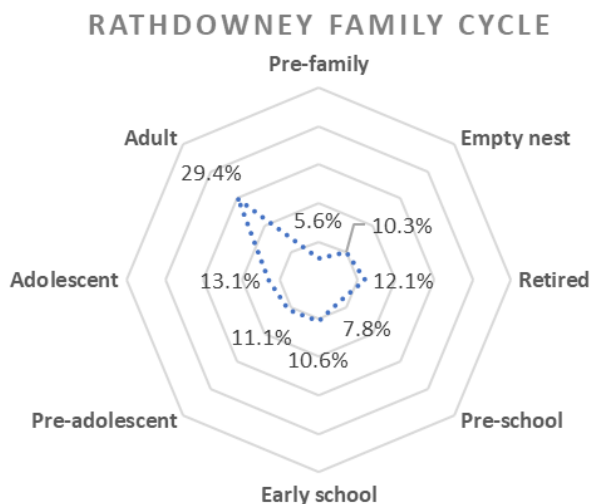
Table 3.1 – Rathdowney Population (2016)

Age Cohort	Men	Women	Total
0 - 19	502	489	991
20 - 34	308	287	595
35 - 49	381	371	752
50 - 64	329	348	677
65 - 79	247	233	480
80+	70	78	148
Total	1,837	1,806	3,643

In terms of Family Cycle, 29.4% of families in Rathdowney are at the adult stage and having yet to reach the pre-family stage. 42.6% of families are in phases ahead of adult phase (pre-school, early school, pre-adolescent, and adolescent). One in ten households are empty nesters (10.3%) while one in twenty are pre-family (5.6%). There is also a sizable population of retired persons who make up 1 in 8 households in Rathdowney (12.1%).

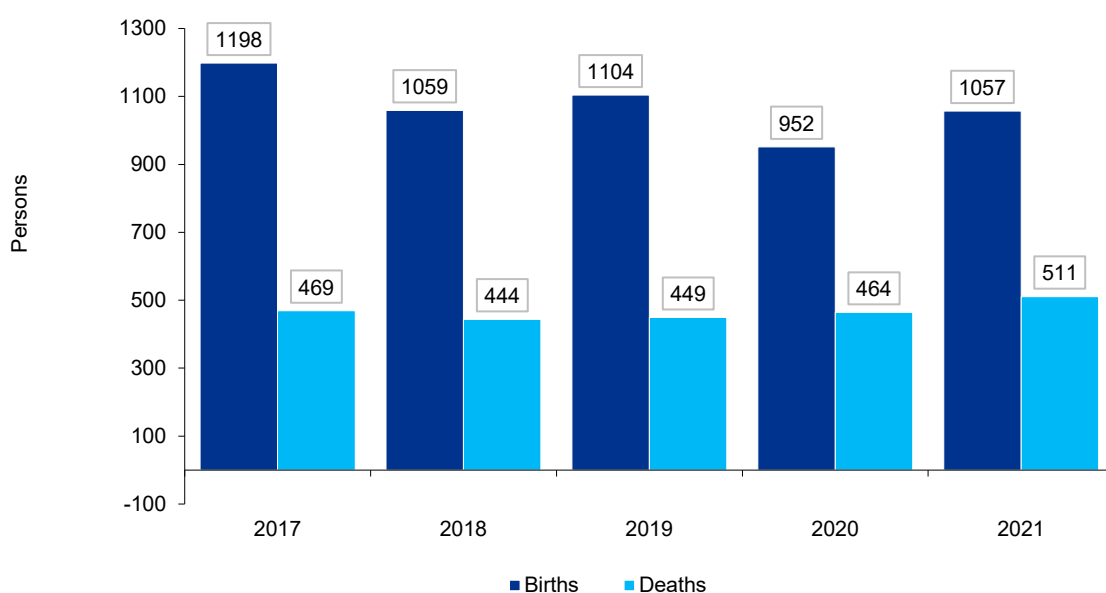
Family dynamics are reflected in the wider population distribution. Compared to West Laois, **Rathdowney has a higher degree of people in the middle to late stages of their lives** (57.4% compared to 53.7% in West Laois). Rathdowney has higher levels of adults and retired families than West Laois and fewer families at the pre-school, early school, pre-adolescent, adolescent, pre-family, and empty nest stages of family life. This distribution indicates that **Rathdowney has fewer younger families and people in the “prime” economic stages of life than West Laois.**

Figure 3.6– Rathdowney Family Circle



While specific births and deaths data for Rathdowney is not available, the county level data shows us that Laois has seen a decline in births over the last five years from almost 1,200 in 2017 to approximately 1,050 in 2021 (Figure 2.10). Meanwhile, deaths have risen from 469 to 511 in the same time period. Both trends reflect the older age profile of the county generally.

Figure 3.7 – Births and Deaths, Co. Laois



Housing Occupancy

Across Rathdowney and its environs there are approximately 1,586 dwellings. The Rathdowney area has a full occupancy rate of just over 86%, which is 1% and 2% lower than that of West Laois and the wider county respectively. Similarly, as shown in Table 2.2, its vacancy rate is only slightly above that of West Laois and the wider county.

Table 3.2 – Occupancy Status of Permanent Dwellings

	No. of Dwellings			% Total Dwellings		
	Rathdowney	West Laois	Co. Laois	Rathdowney	West Laois	Co Laois
Occupied	1,366	8,790	29,075	86.1%	87.3%	88.7%
Temporarily absent	24	129	559	1.5%	1.3%	1.7%
Unoccupied family homes	12	68	153	0.8%	0.7%	0.5%
Vacant	184	1,081	3,007	11.6%	10.7%	9.2%
Total	1,586	10,068	32,794	100%	100%	100%

Housing Stock

The housing stock in Rathdowney and its environs is slightly older than that of West Laois and the wider county. Specifically, the average year of stock in Rathdowney is 1971 compared to 1975 and 1982 in West Laois and Co Laois respectively. These differences reflect the lower proportion of new builds completed in the area over the last 30 years. Only 36.4% of Rathdowney’s residential properties were built in this timeframe compared to 42.3% built in West Laois.

Housing stock in Rathdowney and its environs is dominated by single family homes, with apartments or other types of accommodation making up only 3.1% of units. This is broadly consistent with the wider West Laois area, where apartments make up a marginally larger share of housing at 2.1% compared to 0.9% in Rathdowney. This accommodation pattern is to be expected given the low-density and rural character of the region.

Homeownership

Owner occupancy is the most common form of occupancy in Rathdowney and West Laois. Rathdowney has a similar level of owner occupancy at 76.2% to the rest of West Laois at 76.9%, but a lower level of social housing at 7.8% compared to 9.5% in West Laois and a corresponding higher rate of private rented accommodation with 10.2% and 9.0% respectively (Table 2.3).

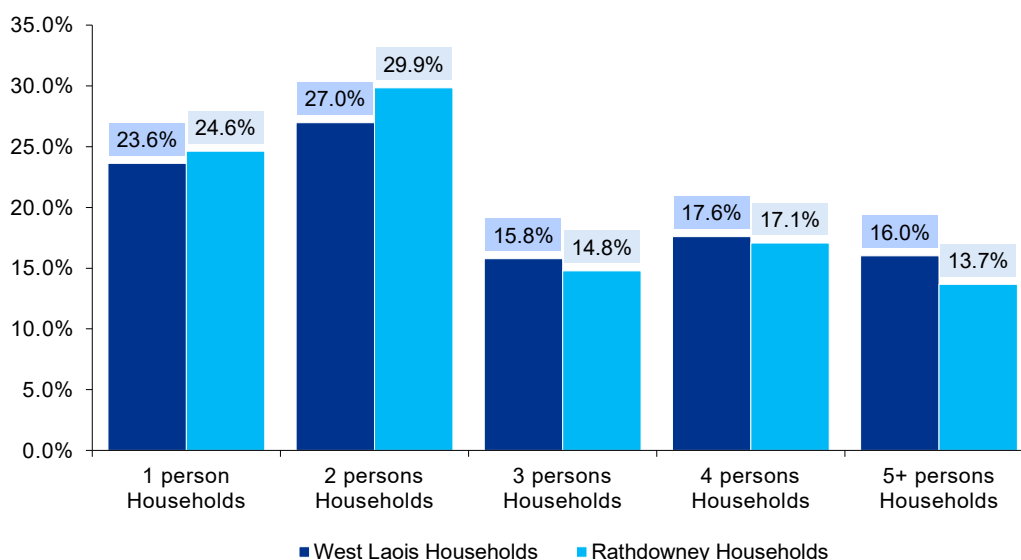
Table 3.3 – Housing Tenure

	West Laois		Rathdowney	
	Households	%	Households	%
Owner Occupied (w/o mortgage)	6,738	76.9	1,033	76.2
Rented (Privately)	793	9.0	138	10.2
Rented (Local Authority, AHB)	833	9.5	106	7.8
Total	8,765	100	1,356	100

Household Size

One and two person households make up 55% of households in Rathdowney, reflecting the older age and life stage profile of the town. Similarly, in West Laois, 50.6% of households are one or two persons in size, most likely reflecting the higher proportion of families living in rural one-off housing (Figure 2.12). In terms of actual housing unit size, there is an average of 5.7 rooms per house and 2.6 bedrooms in Rathdowney. **These patterns indicate that occupancy trends, rather than housing type, represent the key influence on household types.**

Figure 3.8 – Household Size



Housing Market

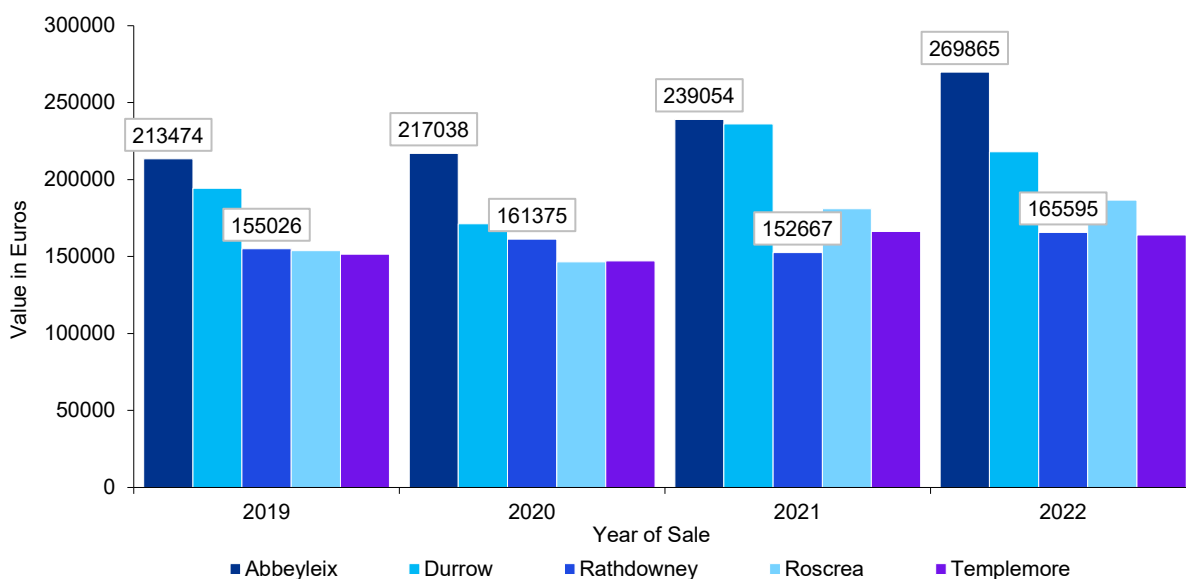
Laois and Rathdowney have both seen increased house prices and declining affordability over the last number of years. However, compared to the nearby housing markets in Abbeyleix, Durrow and Roscrea, the cost of housing has generally been lower in Rathdowney (Figure 2.13). Data from the Property Price Register indicates that the average price of a second-hand house in Rathdowney in 2022 (Q1-Q3) was €165,595 compared to €269,865 in Abbeyleix.

Generally, the housing market in County Laois is dominated by second-hand properties. Based on the Property Price Register records, only fifteen new builds were sold in Abbeyleix over the 2019-2022 (Q1-Q3) period. Two new properties were sold in Roscrea over the same period and none in Rathdowney, Durrow, or Templemore.

Abbeyleix has seen prices increasing by 26.4% since 2019, driven by a 108.9% increase in the cost of new build housing in the area. The price of second-hand properties also increased by 20.7%.

Rathdowney has seen a more modest **6.8% increase in average sale price**, which places the town at the bottom in comparison to the other settlements discussed. Templemore has seen 8.3% growth, while house prices in Roscrea and Durrow have increased by 21.3% and 12.20% respectively.

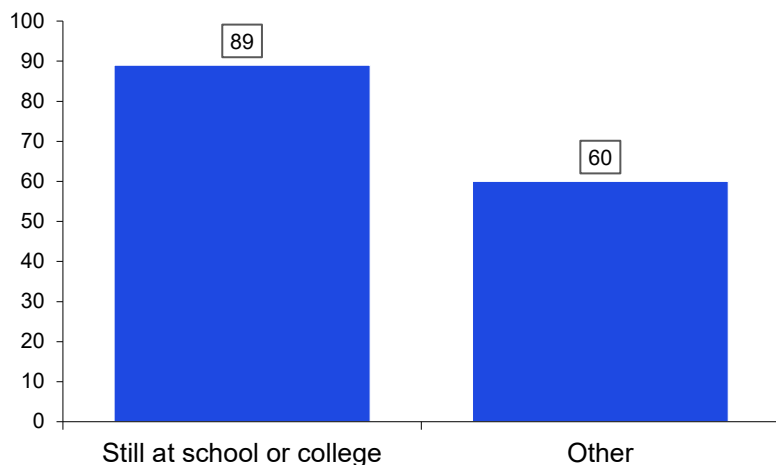
Figure 3.9 – Average Sale Price of New and Second-Hand Property



Education and Skills

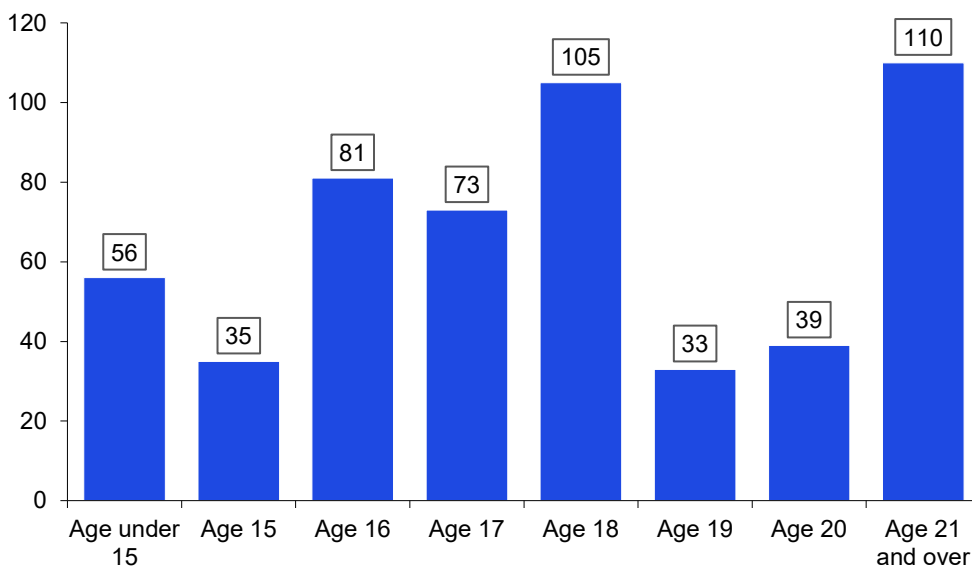
There is a strong level of enrolment in the town with 89 persons aged 15 and over in college and education and another 60 people engaged in other forms of education (Figure 2.14). This split is reflected in the economic life of the town, with relevant skills and training provided outside of school or college.

Figure 3.10 – Population aged above 15 years whose education has not ceased



Among school leavers, there are notable peaks at the age of 18 and 21 and over (Figure 2.15). This would reflect the completion of the Leaving Certificate followed by enrolment in further education at university or college. The data indicates that some individuals left school after the Junior Certificate at the age of 15, 16 and 17. However, it is unclear if this is a legacy of school attendance being optional or if it is a more recent phenomenon of school dropout. In total, 245 individuals left education before the age of 18, 105 left at the age of 18, and another 182 completed their education after the age of 18.

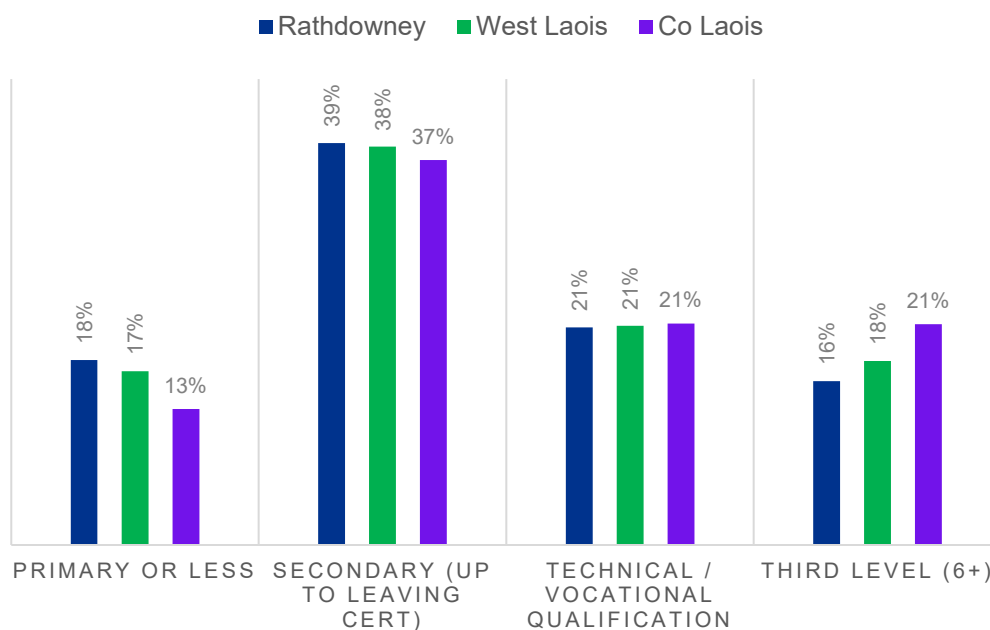
Figure 3.11 – Population aged >15 by age education ceased



Appendix 3 – Socio Economic Assessment

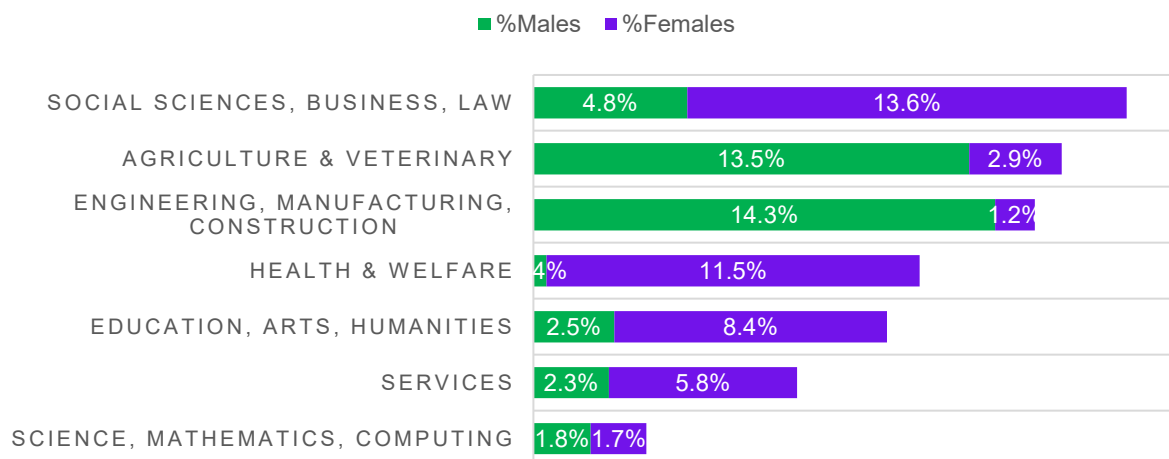
In terms of educational attainment, Rathdowney is comparable to West Laois and the wider county as far as primary and secondary education are concerned, but underperforms at third level education (Figure 2.16). Around 18% of people aged 15 years and over in Rathdowney have only a primary school education or no formal education compared to 13% in Co Laois as a whole. Secondary education levels (39%) and technical or vocational qualifications (21%) are largely similar at settlement and county level. In terms of third level education, Rathdowney (16%) underperforms both West Laois (18%) and County Laois (21%). For reference, the national average is 48.1%.

Figure 3.12 – Educational Attainment



1,042 people declared their field of study in Rathdowney. The three most prominent areas of study include Social Sciences, Agriculture and Veterinary (202), Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (192) and Health and Welfare (146). As shown in Figure 2.17, there is a pronounced gender difference in some subjects. Engineering and Agricultural studies are overwhelmingly male dominated, while social sciences, health, and education are generally female dominated. There is a noticeably low level of Rathdowney residents with a background in science, mathematics, and computing.

Figure 3.13 – Subjects Studied by Rathdowney Residents



Deprivation Levels

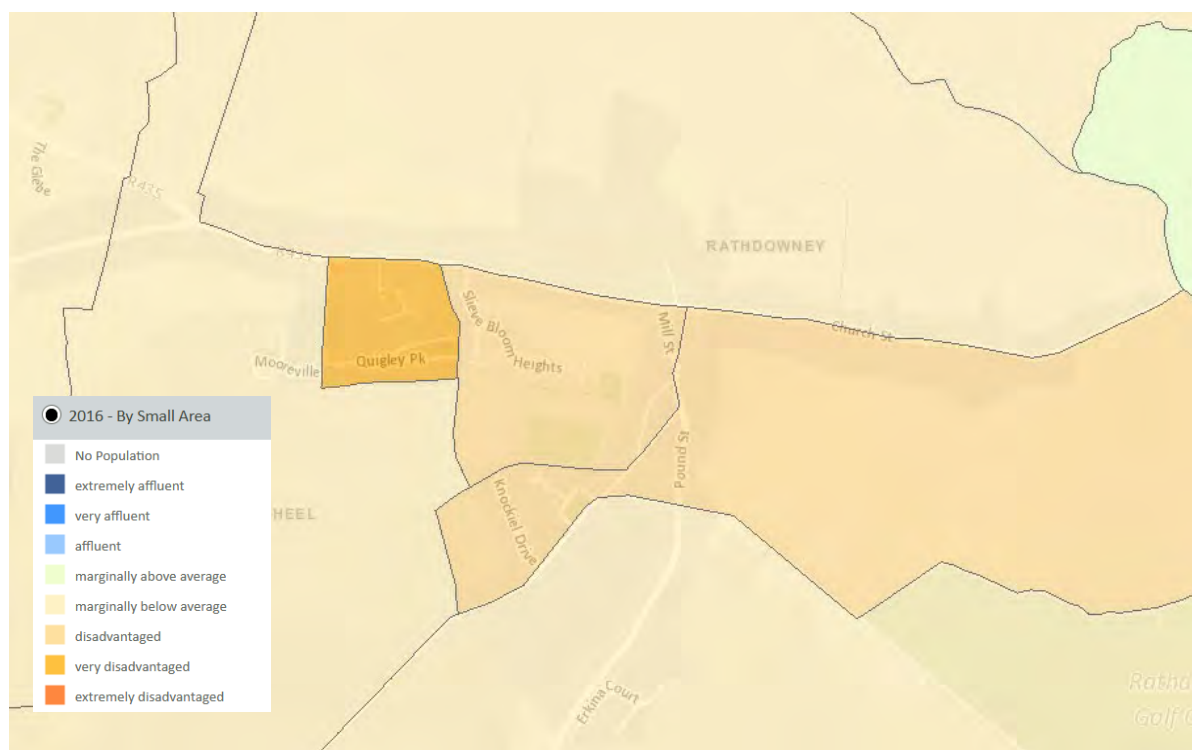
To measure the deprivation levels the population are experiencing across the country, Pobal, an intermediary body working on behalf of the Government in support of social and economic development, have developed a Deprivation Index (DI) to allow for analysis of relative rates of deprivation and affluence.

Figure 2.18 presents the DI levels recorded within Rathdowney by ‘Small Areas’, the lowest level of enumeration area provided by the CSO. The study area comprises six separate designations, which as of 2016 were mostly classified as ‘marginally below average’ (receiving scores of 0 to -10), ‘disadvantaged’ (scores of -10 to -20), and ‘very disadvantaged’ (scores of -20 to -30).

Specifically, a portion of the town – Quigley Park – was classified as being ‘very disadvantaged’ and the largest portion comprising the town south side from the Main Street classified as being ‘disadvantaged’. In comparison, areas situated north side from the Main Street were evaluated as ‘marginally below average’.

Overall, the DI scores recorded in Rathdowney are significantly lower than the county average (-2.53) and state average (-1.74). At the Electoral Division level, the Rathdowney ED was classified as being ‘disadvantaged’ with a score of -10.71, a slight decline compared to the 2011 ‘marginally below average’ score of -9.43.

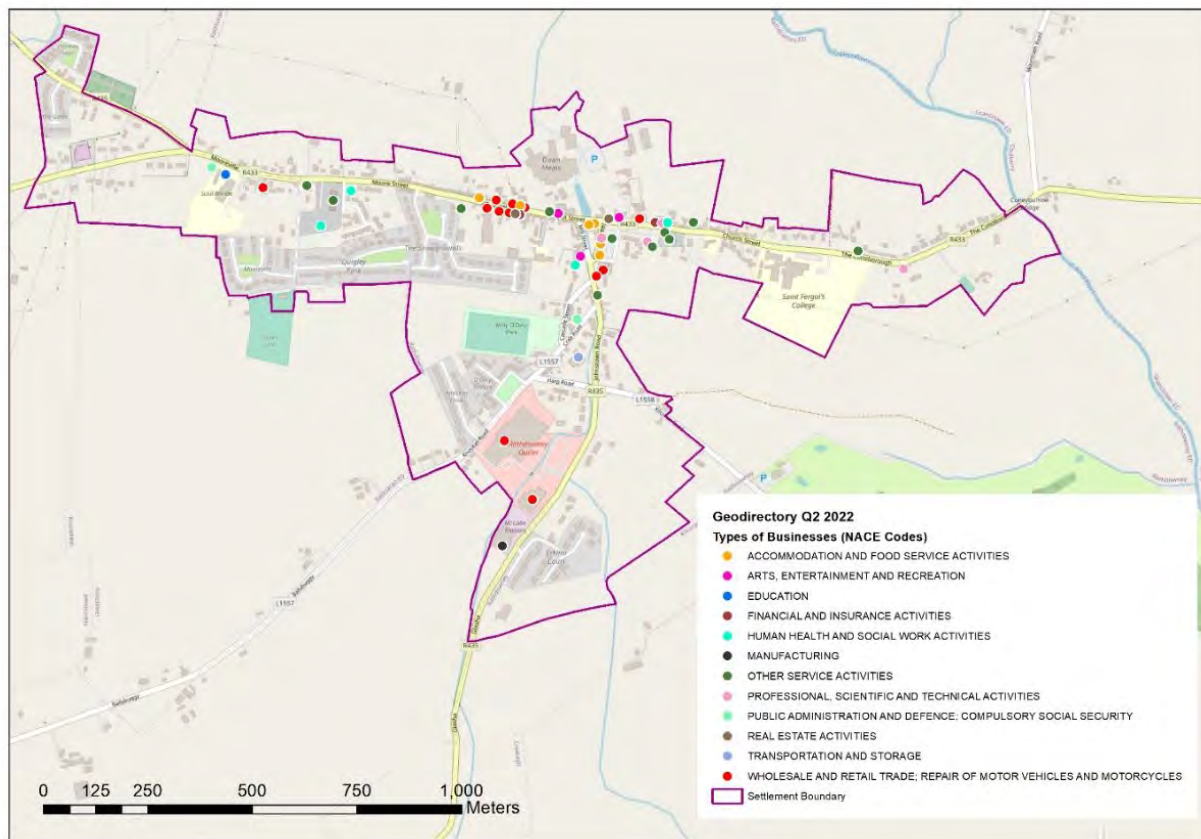
Figure 3.14 – Deprivation Levels in Rathdowney, 2016



Economy and Employment

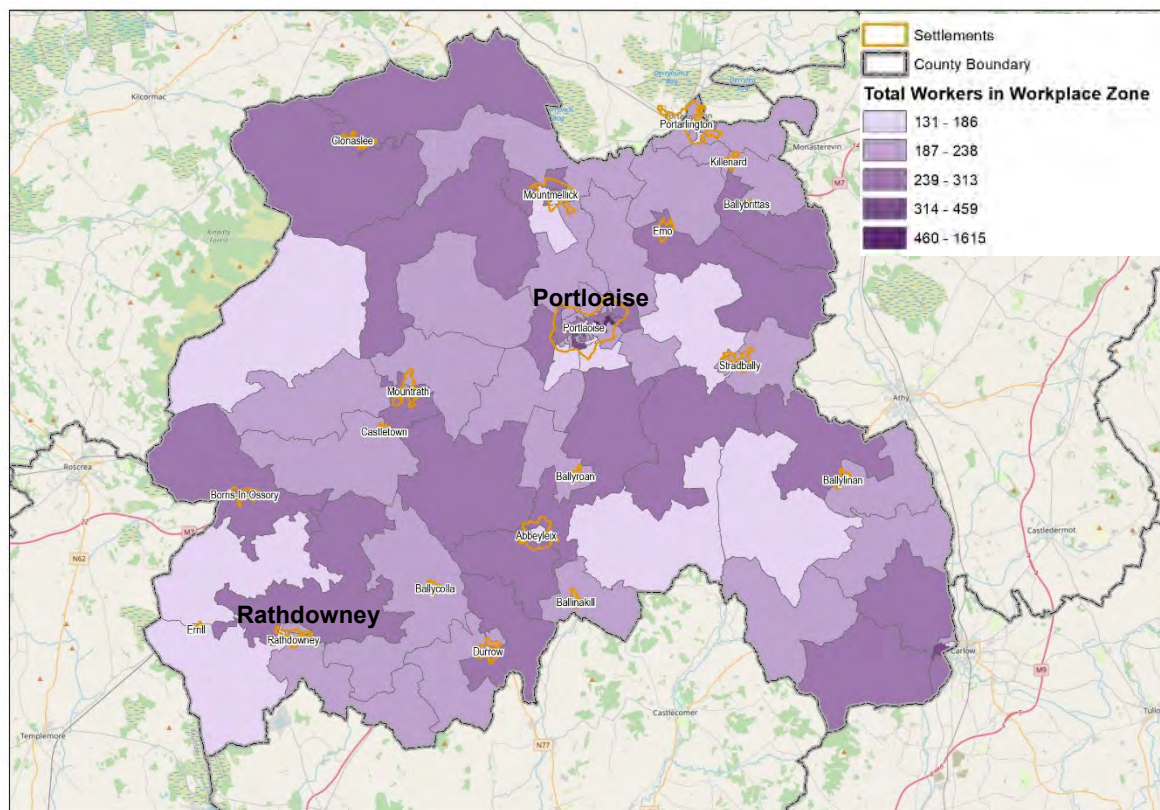
The economy of Rathdowney is clustered around the central junction in the town of the R433/R435. There industries active in the town as coded on the GeoDirectory Q2 2022 Map are shown in Figure 2.19. As typical for a smaller town, the majority of businesses in operation are involved in hospitality (i.e. pubs and takeaways) and the retail trade. There are a number of services and professional skills businesses in the town, including health and wellbeing.

Figure 3.15 – Businesses operating in Rathdowney



In the context of County Laois, Rathdowney is considered a medium intensity area for work. As Figure 2.20 shows, the town has between 239 and 313 workers and the surrounding areas are similarly dense with the north of the town having between 314 – 459 workers. West of the town is low density with less than 186 workers. These figures indicate that Rathdowney is a secondary economic hub for the County by providing a particularly key role for South-West region.

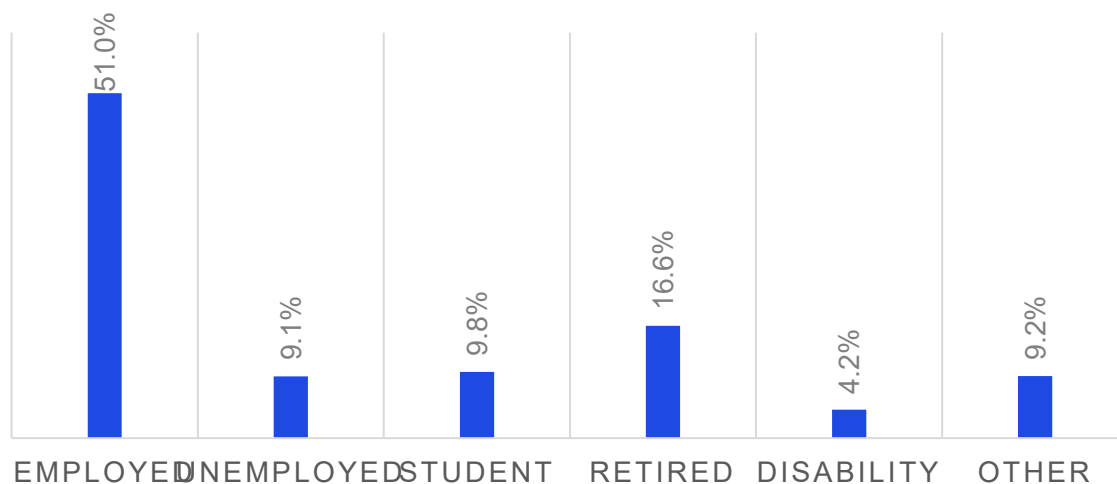
Figure 3.16 – Employment Map, Co Laois (2016)



As per 2016 data, Rathdowney’s level of employment at 51% was in line with both West Laois and the wider county. The unemployment rate within Rathdowney was 9.1%, similar to the regional figure of 9.0% for West Laois but slightly higher than the then national average of 8.4% at the date of Census 2016. National unemployment levels have fallen significantly since 2016, to 4.6% in February 2023, and it can be assumed that similar fall has been witnessed in Rathdowney.

4.2% of the population were recorded as having a disability, the retired community formed 16.6% of the population, while students made up 9.8% (Figure 2.21).

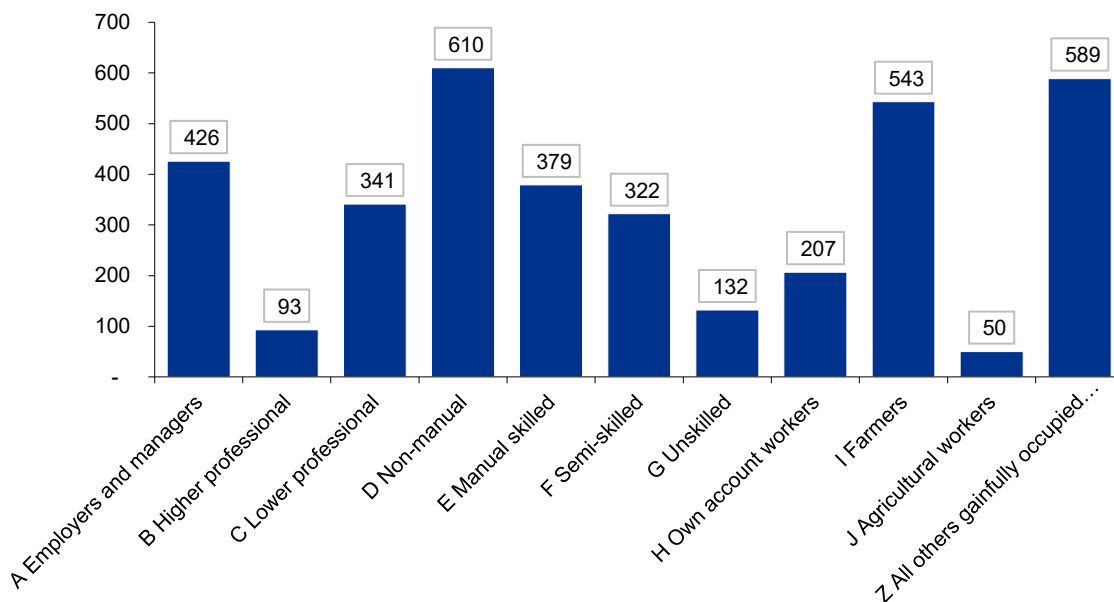
Figure 3.17 – Principal Economic Status, Rathdowney (2016)



Skills and Occupations

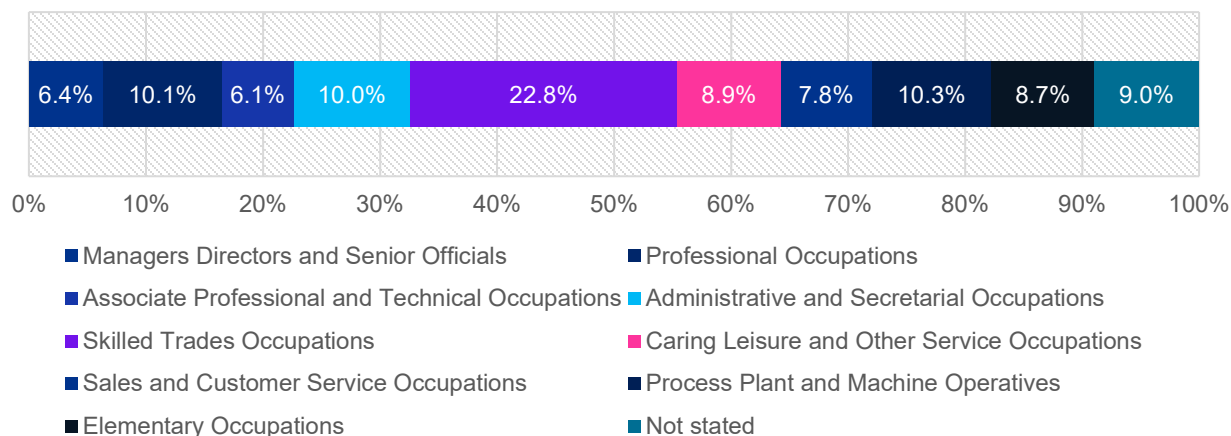
The skills distribution for Rathdowney and environs reflects a mixture of professional, administrative and manual skills and expertise (Figure 2.22). As a smaller town in a rural heartland, farming and skilled and unskilled manual labour are prominent local skillsets, while managerial and professional skills make up 23% of the available workforce.

Figure 3.18 – Skills Distribution in Rathdowney



Occupancy profiles within Rathdowney and its environs are broadly similar to West Laois. Skilled trades represent the largest category at 23%, which is generally reflective of the rural nature of the local economy. Significant portions of the workforce are also engaged across a range of professional, administrative and other non-manual occupations (see Figure 2.23).

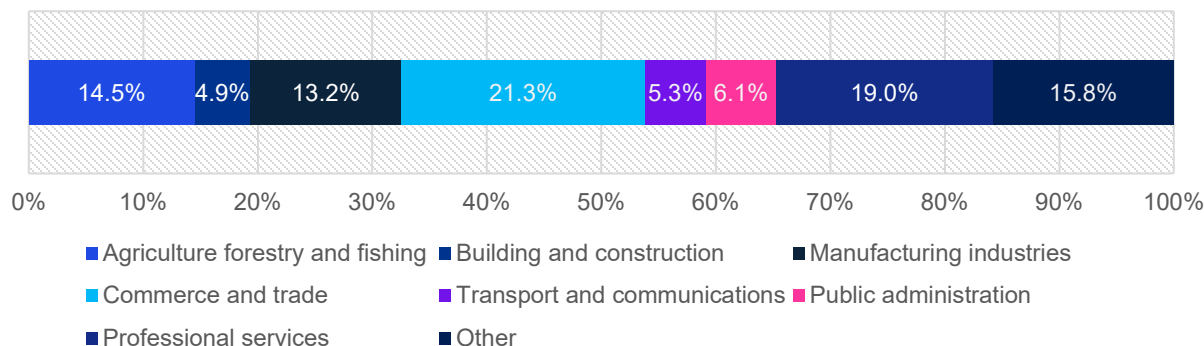
Figure 3.19 – Rathdowney and Environs Occupations



Economic Activity

Commerce and Trade (22%), Professional Services (19%) and Agriculture and Forestry (15%) account the highest employment categories within the Town, again largely in line with the West Laois area and reflective of smaller towns and rural economies (Figure 2.24). Manufacturing accounts for 13% of employment, likely driven primarily by the local Dawn Meats Factory.

Figure 3.20 – Rathdowney and Environs Industry



Summary

Generally, the socio-economic indicators of Rathdowney are broadly in line with the wider West Laois study area, indicating **that macro trends, rather than localised issues, are the key influence on the town.** However, the profile of West Laois does differ from that of the Eastern part of the county, which is under significantly more economic influence from the greater Dublin area, and is better positioned to capture the benefits of this proximity.

As is common with similar rural communities under less urban influence, there are **challenges in retaining younger generations** within the community due to migration for third level education, graduate opportunities, and employment opportunities more generally. As a result, the town demographics display an older age profile. Rathdowney is also characterised by a slightly higher than average level of unemployment.

Similar trends are also clearly reflected in the housing market, where **Rathdowney has seen significantly lower rises in prices than comparable towns.** While this has benefits in terms of affordability of housing, it can impact on the attractiveness and viability of the area for investment in new residential development.

Despite these issues, and indications of stagnation in the towns population and economic growth, there are no clear trends of decline in any key socio-economic indicators, beyond that of a generally ageing population which is a broader national characteristic. **Both Rathdowney and the wider environs are well positioned for sustainable growth with the correct strategies and investment.**



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