



The Role of Road-Space & Public Realm Allocation in the Socio-Economic Regeneration of Irish Towns

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1. Introduction

The Sustainable Transport and Mobility Research Group at the School of Architecture, Building and Environment at TU Dublin have been appointed by National Town Centre First Office, Local Government Management Agency to carry out this research. A key aim of the study is to engage with the Town Centre First Network to understand the main issues in relation to the allocation of space in our towns and to provide a series of insights and learnings to support the successful implementation of road space allocation and public realm improvement/reclamation schemes. The focus of the study is on the socio-economics of such road-space reallocation, and it is intended that these learnings will inform a knowledge sharing and capacity-building workshop.

The research aligns and contributes to the following Town Centre First Policy (2022) Actions;

- Action 2 - Capacity and capability building for town centres
- Action 6 – Knowledge base for TCF Toolkit
- Action 10 – Developing a data informed evidence base for towns
- Action 15 – Exemplars and models to encourage behavioural change
- Action 24 – Demonstrator/Pathfinder Towns.

This report contains a review of the literature (Irish and international) and a summary of conclusions and key insights for Irish towns. The scope of the literature review has been informed by a workshop held with Town Centre First Officers in November 2024 and in the context of draft government policy on road space reallocation i.e. *Moving Together: A Strategic Approach to the Improved Efficiency of the Transport System in Ireland* (DoT, 2024a); and *Redesigning Ireland's Transport for Net Zero: Towards Systems that Work for People and the Planet* (OECD, 2022). Although not all themes can be discussed in detail as part of this study scope, a summary of the key themes arising from the workshop are:

- Pedestrianisation and walkability
- Active travel and public transport
- Car-parking
- Road hierarchy, through-traffic and car culture
- Communication, media and discourse
- Governance and leadership
- Town centre vitality, maintenance and urban quality
- Evidence based decision making, data availability and evaluation
- Case studies in best practice.

The report is broken into nine sections. First, we discuss the national policy approach to Irish towns, how size and density impact their role and function and the necessity for place-sensitive approaches. Section three discusses the evolving nature of high streets and town centres and the opportunities to address decline. There is an emphasis on the relationship between interventions which promote a diversity of activities, quality of life/liveability, and business-friendly environments and socialisation/social infrastructure with physical road-space reallocation and public realm improvements. Section four considers

the socio-economic value of these interventions more specifically with an emphasis on public realm and road-space (re)allocation viewed through the lens of essential social infrastructure, which contributes to place value with the potential to promote a higher quality of life and liveability, and more attractive business environments. Section five considers car parking, car access and travel behaviour in towns. Section six considers some initial findings regarding communication, engagement and governance/leadership. Sections seven and eight set out learnings from case studies in Blackrock and Dundrum, Co. Dublin and Pontevedra in Spain. Section nine draws conclusions and key insights for Irish towns.

2. National Policy & Function of Towns

As a result of shifting economic and settlement patterns across Ireland, towns and villages have undergone significant change. Some have experienced growth in terms of population and services, while others are experiencing persistent decline, with increasing levels of vacancy and dereliction. The review of the National Planning Framework (2025), Town Centre First Policy, Housing for All (2021), the Rural and Urban Regeneration Funds, the Croí Cónaithe Towns Fund, the THRIVE programme (Town Centre First Heritage Revival Scheme 2021-2027) and the Town Centre Living competition signifies the Government's commitment to tackling the challenges faced by Irish towns. The suite of interventions and approaches developed reflects the scale and complexities of the challenge, which span social, economic, cultural, heritage and spatial considerations. The Heritage Council, since their establishment in 1995, have promoted an understanding of the vital contribution that heritage makes to our well-being and the importance of our town centres. They have researched and identified the challenges faced by same, and the importance of collaborative and community-centred approaches to their protection.

National policy objectives and investment programmes recognise and reflect the link between housing, education, climate, health, transport, social inclusion and urban and rural regeneration. There is an emphasis on 'liveability' and quality of life of urban places; continuous regeneration and development of existing built-up areas (rather than greenfield development); tackling legacies of disadvantaged areas; and linking regeneration and redevelopment initiatives to climate action (GoI, 2025:21). **Quality of life, quality of places and liveability are therefore recognised as key drivers to achieving Ireland's 'national strategic outcomes'**¹, and specifically, in the case of this study, achieving the objectives of 'Compact Growth' and 'Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities'.

National Policy Objectives 14 and 15 of the National Planning Framework (NPF) highlight the need to address the changing function of our towns:

- **National Policy Objective 14:** Regenerate and rejuvenate cities, towns and villages of all types and scale as environmental assets that can accommodate changing roles and functions, increased residential population and employment activity, enhanced levels of amenity and design and placemaking quality, in order to sustainably influence and support their surrounding area to ensure progress toward national achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. (GoI, 2025:50)
- **National Policy Objective 15:** Apply a tailored approach to urban development, linked to the Rural and Urban Regeneration and Development Funds, with a particular focus on reversing the stagnation or decline of many smaller urban centres, by identifying and establishing new roles and functions and enhancement of local infrastructure and amenities (GoI, 2025:52).

¹ The National Strategic Outcomes encompass: 1) Compact Growth; 2) Enhanced Regional Accessibility; 3) Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities; 4) Sustainable Mobility; 5) A strong economy supported by enterprise, innovation and skills; 6) High-Quality international connectivity; 7) Enhanced amenity and heritage; 8) Transition to a low carbon and climate resilient society; 9) Sustainable management of water, waste and other environmental resources; 10) Access to quality childcare, education and health services.

The origins of our town centre decline and change are well understood. The decline /change in agriculture, closure of local agricultural markets and other traditional industries; closure of banks / post offices and other services; improved transport links and increased car-use; increased dispersed rural housing; changing consumer expectations and the demands of retailers for out-of-town centres; and a trend towards (sub)urbanisation has led to the decline of service viability and subsequent availability in smaller towns.

The use of the term 'left behind' to describe places has significantly increased since the 2008 recession. The term lacks an explicit definition but is used across a wide range of actors (economic, political, social) to describe the decline of former industrial areas and rural places negatively affected by changes resulting from austerity, globalisation, economic and technical change. While there is no clear definition, blanket use across places and time is unhelpful. It needs to be considered in the context of reality and perception, and across dimensions e.g. economic, social, environmental, political, institutional and governance, cultural and infrastructure (Pike et al., 2024). While this concept is less well used in the Irish context, Tomaney et al. (2024:1239) discuss the findings from the Pew Research Centre based on focus groups in the US and UK, whereby a sense of being 'left behind' is felt across communities with the decline of high streets and closures of pubs/clubs. It is not just the closure of a factory, or loss of an industry that drives this sense of being left behind, it is related to population ageing and decline, disconnection from services, and the built environment. The idea of 'left-behindness' *"incorporates multiple dimensions including economic processes, demographic conditions and social outcomes relating to living conditions and inclusion"* (Velthuis et al., 2024:4). It is also understood that these factors can influence the 'type' of 'left-behindness' across different regions and different social, economic and demographic variables determine different characteristics of places in the Irish context (ibid). These differences point to the requirement for the **understanding of place and place-sensitive policy responses** and the idea that all places matter has been underscored by the concept that small places have a lot to offer - for many this is a standard of living, maintaining natural and cultural amenities with investment in human capital, boosting innovation (ESPON, 2024).

Places are physical manifestations of local identity and collective memory and decline and dereliction of familiar buildings, street scenes and spaces are detrimental to these. Vacancy and dereliction of individual buildings are very visible across Irish towns and the extent of same has been well documented, but the scale of the problem is difficult to quantify. Oireachtais (2022) reports a level of fragmentation on land governance in Ireland where policy and decision makers do not have access to data to allow for a level of analysis which would quantify the extent of the problem and the key causes in specific places, but general themes are discussed below. These 'structural problems' obviously require policy responses across spatial scales and in the Irish context are more centralised. However, there is opportunity to consider that *"civic feelings and pride in a place may be more amenable to quicker and politically expedient fixes"* (Pike et al, 2024:1175). Interventions to improve the public realm are valuable in this regard but it is also cautioned that they can also be interpreted as superficial treatments for symptoms rather than causes. It is the sum of parts, the 'street scenes' and 'spaces' which are the most relevant for the purpose of this review and the socio-economic advantages of improving the physical environment through road-space reallocation and public realm interventions is discussed further in the sections which follow.

While retail strategies and activities offered a traditional policy response to town centre decline, more recently, the NPF and the Town Centre First policy propose a more comprehensive approach to regeneration with compact growth (and the associated population and services increase) acting as the policy tool. The objective of promoting compact growth in our towns comes with the requirement to reimagine public spaces to ensure a high quality of life in towns of all sizes. The NPF (GoI, 2025:67) details the opportunities which exist to support residential development in rural towns e.g.

‘parking and streetscape improvements, traffic diversions, the provision of small-scale urban amenities such as open spaces or playgrounds, the acquisition of key sites and/or the opening up or amalgamation of ‘backlands’ for residential development.’

There is also the opportunity for smaller settlements (particularly those close to cities or larger towns) to develop enterprise opportunities based on local assets, innovation, quality of life and tourism.

Census 2022 data reveals that the population was 5.184 million in 2022 an increase of 8% since 2016. Comparison to the national annual average growth rate of 1.4% between 2016-2022 demonstrates the regional variation. The Eastern and Midlands region experienced the strongest growth of 1.6%, while the Southern, and the Northern and Western regions experienced lower population growth of 1.3% and 1.2% respectively (ESRI, 2024). Population density measures the number of persons occupying a geographical area in proportion to the size of that area e.g. Electoral Divisions (ED). Ireland has a relatively low population density compared to EU-27 which is 109 people per km² (Eurostat, 2025). However, the population density of the State has been increasing, however. It was recorded as 73 people per km² during Census 2022. This has increased from 70 persons per km² in 2016, 67 persons per km² in 2011 and 62 persons per km² recorded in 2006. In 2016 the population density in urban areas was 2,008 persons per km² compared to 27 persons per km² in rural areas.

Of the 32 Electoral Divisions that had over 10,000 people per km² in 2022, 25 were in Dublin, five were in Cork, one in Waterford and one in Limerick. There were 49 towns in the country with a population of 10,000 people or more and the majority of these (33) were in Leinster. Between 1996-2006 the population within towns of 1,500+ increased by 73%. This reflects the processes of urbanisation to larger cities and towns, and suburbanisation of populations to larger towns specifically along the east coast. Research by Walshe (2023) describes how the regional disparities between household incomes in Ireland have declined but there still remains large differences between the Dublin/East region and the more rural Border and Midland regions. Interestingly, Walshe writes how data from the 2016 electoral divisions (when the cities are excluded) show no statistical relationship between median household incomes and the population size of settlements, it is the location of the settlement relative to a larger centre of employment, and the extent of commuting, that is much more important. Secondly, it shows that while the highest levels of inequality in income can occur in both the cities and in some of the poorest rural counties, the lowest levels are found in counties that experienced the highest levels of population increase over recent decades.

This tracks with the findings of the Western Development Commission report (2024: 32) which illustrates that *“there are significantly more towns of scale in 2022. In 1996, there were 26 towns with a population of over 1,500, while in 2022, there were 45 towns with a population of over 1,500 and **the towns which have experienced the most significant growth between 1996 and 2022 are generally those in commutable distance of large centres of employment**”*. These changes in settlement patterns means that there is also a

loss of population, and an ageing population in some areas. So, considering the diversity of Irish towns, there is a need for place-based policy responses to the role and function of towns, to attract both people and jobs (as per the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies and Our Rural Future), and to improve accessibility between centres. Central to this is improving transport infrastructure and promoting quality of life for people and quality of environment for businesses. Physical improvements as they relate to road-space and public realm allocation are not solely related to traffic, mobility, safety or environmental outcomes. They are intrinsic to improving the quality of places which improves the attractiveness of the town for people to live, work and play. The socio-economic advantages are therefore potentially significant and wide-ranging.

3. The Evolving Nature of Main Streets & Town Centres

Larger towns and cities provide economies of scale and a greater range of services and functions to which consumers are drawn (O'Donoghue et al. 2014; Jordan and Wright, 2023). The growth of larger towns in recent years demonstrates this in the Irish context. However, there are opportunities for new roles and functions for Irish towns of different size and location.

The development of retail strategies has been a dominant tool in the past to address town centre regeneration. This is unsurprising considering the historic market function of our towns, and the fact that poor decision making in the more recent past, related to land use and retail activity, has resulted in the hollowing out of town centres. The *Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Retail Planning* (DoECLG, 2018) understand **'vitality' and 'viability' as the variables for a successful town centre**. Vitality and viability are understood as constituting several qualities; attractions (diversity of activities), accessibility (to and between places, including public transport), amenity (quality of environment, safety, identity) and action (management and improvements). Road-space and public realm is very much related to the vitality and viability of towns.

Vitality and viability are embedded within wider social, economic and environmental processes and so town centres are therefore complex, dynamic and subject to sometimes rapid change, and more often gradual evolution. There is one certainty in this complexity and that is town centres success is dependent upon the footfall generated from other businesses and shared infrastructure (roads, car parks etc.), and the subsequent value of their combined attraction/agglomeration (Powe 2020:238 citing Eppli and Shilling, 1996; and Powe, 2012).

The consistent 'decentralisation' of retail through larger anchor stores and online sales means that retail property-led strategies are less effective. The Institute of Place Management (IPM) (2017) states that 'multiple' retailer occupied floorspace should no longer remain the only proxy for town centre performance. There has also been a loss in services within towns with the closure of banks and post offices. Parker et al., (2017) summarise the key changes in town centres as being driven by the growth of online shopping; **the need for the 'high street' to have a 'USP' (Unique Selling Point) with an emphasis on place branding, urban design and heritage**; the potential to increase local shopping opportunities (due to retailers' interest in local CSR² and for certain populations e.g. ageing population). The importance of local shopping was further highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. New forms of collaboration and management have also evolved in the form of partnership and membership-based associations e.g. business improvement districts. In more recent years, data and digital technologies are now also form part of 'smart' solutions to town centre regeneration and governance.

² CSR refers to Corporate Social Responsibility

These factors, coupled with a consistent dependence on footfall and agglomeration to promote successful towns, necessitates a shift in policy towards people i.e. how we live, work and play. The Institute of Public Management's (IPM) Policy Briefing (Millington and Parker, 2017) provides a useful classification system for towns. As part of the InnovateUK 'Bringing Big Data to Small Users' project, they categorise four types of town based on footfall. Centres can be classified by their closest match.

Table 1 IPM understanding towns by examining their signature type (Millington and Parker, 2017)

Comparison Wide range of retail choice Strong retail anchor Serve large catchment area Accessible by a choice of transport.modes Management and marketing strategies focussed on competing against other comparison centres	Holiday Offer experiences to tourists and day trippers Anchor is often natural (seaside, countryside) Dependant upon visitors Can poorly serve local catchment Management and marketing strategies focussed on attracting visitors
Speciality Offer something unique and special Anchor not retail (e.g. heritage) Attract visitors but also serve a local catchment Have a longer dwell time Management and marketing strategies focussed on protecting and promoting identity and positioning	Multifunctional Offer convenient mix of retail, services, events etc. Ordinary/everyday anchors (work, transport, groceries) Are visited frequently Management and marketing strategies focussed improving access, reliability, connectivity and widening diversity of linked trips

It is argued that these **activity-based classifications promote more place-based approaches to decision making**. The policy recommendations are varied for each category, but all categories have a management and marketing strategy recommendation. This is considered in table four below which sets out what a management and marketing strategy focus might look like in the different categories of towns, and what some potential road space and public realm interventions might be

The importance of activities within town centres is echoed by Taecharungroj and Ntounis (2024) below (see Table 2). They categorise the *“physical condition, layout, ambiance, safety, and social interactions within town centres, can also influence footfall, but urban amenities consistently emerge as key determinants”* (Taecharungroj and Ntounis, 2024:5). They carried out quantitative research on the levels of footfall associated with different amenities, and their conclusions reinforce findings by others that **footfall in urban areas is driven by the diversity of place features, not just one significant generator** e.g a hotel. Living Streets (2024) describes how research by Audit Wales in 2021 found that town centre businesses have 20% greater profit when there is a bank and post office present. This highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to planning which creates attractive and vibrant places while recognising the shift in services and activities which occupy our town centres.

Taecharungroj and Ntounis (2024:4 citing Oner, 2017) also describe how the multifunctionality of town centres as places to live, shop, work, play and commute means we have to consider context and promote place-based approaches to maintaining *“consumer, historical, cultural, natural, and social assets that are*

publicly available and easily accessible, hence providing individuals with opportunities for social interaction.” This is discussed further in section 4.2.1.

Table 2 Various types of amenities which drive activity based on Taecharungroj and Ntounis (2024)

Retail	Malls, markets, chain stores, and independent shops.
Leisure	Entertainment and tourism; restaurants, cafes, cinemas, parks, public spaces, tourist attractions, and hotels.
Accessibility	Transport infrastructure; public transport stations, bus stops, car parks, and amenities that enhance walkability/cycleability.
Service	Banks, post offices, and healthcare facilities.
Work	Amenities that support daily work and study, including offices and educational institutions.

The UK Economic and Social Research Council funded research (HSUK2020) undertook a systematic literature review of existing academic knowledge relating to retail and high street change and considered how to apply it to UK High Streets to improve local decision-making and ultimately the vitality and viability of high streets. The research is presented by Parker et. al. (2017) and identifies 25 priority factors that influence vitality and viability of town centres (see Table 3). The priorities cover a range of areas, including a number relating specifically to the public realm and space allocation, including (but not limited to):

- Appearance – e.g. what is the quality of the public realm?
- Necessities – e.g. is there appropriate car-parking?
- Walking – the walkability of the town centre.
- Accessible – ease of reach.
- Recreational space – e.g. extent and quality of public space, including spaces which are free to use.

Parker et. al. (2017) set out the ‘4-Rs’ for policy responses; **repositioning, reinventing, rebranding and restructuring** which apply across stakeholders from local government to retailers. The priorities which specifically relate to public realm and use of space align with the reinventing of centres e.g. *“the role of flexible and adaptable space in town centres, such as market places, that could be ‘reinvented’ on different days of the week or at different times of the day”* and restructuring which can include large physical improvements of the town centre (ibid). The four ‘R’s are discussed further in section six.

Table 3 25 Priority factors identified Parker et. al. (2017: 9-10) for improving vitality and viability in town centres.

Priority	Considerations
1. Activity hours	Ensuring the centre is open when the catchment needs it. What are the shopping hours? Is there an evening economy? Do the activity hours of the centre match the needs of the catchment?
2. Appearance	Improving the quality of the visual appearance and aesthetics. How clean is the centre? What is the quality of the public realm?
3. Retailers	Offering the right type and quantity of retailers. What retailers are represented (this includes retailers of products and services)?
4. Vision and strategy	Having a common vision and some leadership. Do the High Street stakeholders collaborate? Is the vision incorporated in local plans? Is the vision adopted in stakeholders plans?
5. Experience	Considering the quality of the experience. Measuring levels of service quality and visitor satisfaction. What is the overall image or offer of the centre?
6. Management	Building capacity to get things done. Is there effective management of the shopping centre (s) and town centre?
7. Merchandise	Meeting the needs of the catchment. What is the range and quality of goods on offer?
8. Necessities	Ensuring basic facilities are present and maintained. Is there appropriate car-parking; amenities; general facilities, like places to sit down and toilets?
9. Anchors	The presence of an anchor which drives footfall. This could be retail (like a department store) or could be a busy transport interchange or large employer
10. Networks and partnerships with council	Presence of strong networks and effective formal or informal partnerships. Do stakeholders communicate and trust each other? Can the council facilitate action (not just lead it)?
11. Diversity	A multi-functional centre. What attractions are there, apart from retail? What is the tenant mix and tenant variety?
12. Walking	The "walkability" of the centre. Are linked trips between areas possible – or are the distances too great? Are there other obstacles that stop people walking?
13. Entertainment and leisure	An entertainment and leisure offer. What is it? Is it attractive to various segments of the catchment?
14. Attractiveness	The "pulling power" of a centre. Can it attract people from a distance?
15. Place assurance	Getting the basics right. Does the centre offer a basic level of customer service; is this consistent? Or do some operators, or parts of the offer, let this down?
16. Accessible	Ease of reach. How convenient is the centre to access? Is it accessible by a number of different means, e.g. car, public transport, cycling?
17. Place marketing	Communicating the offer. How does the centre market and promote itself? Do enough stakeholders communicate in a way that builds a coherent message? How well does the centre orientate visitors and encourage flow – with signage and guides
18. Comparison/convenience	The amount of comparison shopping opportunities compared to convenience (usually in percentage terms). Is this sustainable?
19. Recreational space	The amount and quality of recreational areas and public space/open space. Are there places that are uncommodified? Where people can enjoy spending time without spending money?
20. Barriers to entry	Refers to obstacles that make it difficult for interested retailers to enter the local market. What is the location doing to make it easier for new businesses to come onto the High Street?
21. Chain vs Independent	Number of multiples stores and independent stores in the retail mix of a centre/High Street. Is this suitably balanced?
22. Safety/crime	A centre KPI measuring perceptions or actual crime including shoplifting. Perceptions of crime are usually higher than actual crime rates. Does the centre monitor these and how does it communicate results to stakeholders?
23. Liveable	The resident population or potential for residential in the centre. Does the centre offer the services/environment that residents need? Doctors, schools, playgrounds, etc.
24. Adaptability	The flexibility of the space/property in a centre. Are there inflexible and outdated units that are unlikely to be re-let or re-purposed?
25. Store development	The willingness for retailers/property owners to develop their stores. Are they willing to coordinate/cooperate in updating activities? Or do they act independently (or not at all)?

Table 4 below is a useful way of thinking about difference in towns in terms of their category/function and the potential types of road space reallocation which may be beneficial in accordance with the key characteristics of the town. It is not conclusive as interventions are of course context specific, and as the research has shown, should be designed in conjunction with stakeholders.

Table 4 Considering difference in towns based upon IPM understanding towns by examining their signature type (adapted from Millington and Parker, 2017)

Category	Characteristic	Management and Marketing Strategy Focus	Potential Public Realm Opportunities
Comparison	Located in the larger town and city centres with a footfall peak in December.	Competing against other comparison centres.	Accessibility and Car-Parking reorganisation and rationalisation. Improving connections (Town Centre to out of centre multiples) for pedestrians and cyclists. Integrating public transport, increasing visibility and attractiveness.
Holiday	Busier in the summer months and footfall drops right down in the winter.	Attracting visitors.	Accessibility (links to greenways/blueways/cycle infrastructure). Improve public realm and availability of event spaces and spaces for socialisation. Managing seasonal increases in parking demand e.g. park and stride.
Speciality	“Hybrid” type of comparison and holiday, with (less pronounced than comparison/holiday) peaks in the summer and in December.	Protecting and promoting identity and positioning.	Accessibility and Car-Parking reorganisation and rationalisation. Improving pedestrian priority and connections. Accessibility (link to greenways/blueways/cycle infrastructure). Improve public realm and availability of event spaces and spaces for socialisation. Integrating public transport, increasing visibility and attractiveness.
Multifunctional	Have more of a flat profile throughout all the months of the year and can be city centres anchoring a regional economy or small, just serving a local community/ convenience catchment.	Improving access, reliability, connectivity and widening diversity of linked trips.	Pedestrianisation of high footfall areas. Integrating public transport, increasing visibility and attractiveness.

4. The Socio-Economic Value of Investment in Public Realm and Road-Space (Re)allocation

4.1 Understanding of Road-Space and Public Realm

The Roads Act (1993) provides several statutory definitions to differentiate between various aspects of public space which we understand simply as roads and footpaths. “Public road” means a road over which a public right of way exists and the responsibility for the maintenance of which lies on a road authority. “Road” has a wider definition which includes streets, footpaths, lanes, squares, bridges, pavements and footways, while the definition of “Roadway” is narrower and applies to that portion of a road which is provided primarily for the use of vehicles. Similarly, “footpath” means a road over which there is a public right of way for pedestrians only, whereas “footway” means that portion of any road associated with a roadway which is provided primarily for use by pedestrians. “Cycleways” are defined as a public road or proposed public road reserved for the exclusive use of— (a) pedal cyclists, or (b) a combination of pedal cyclists and either or both people driving powered personal transporters and pedestrians.

Living Streets (2024:11), citing Fleckney and Bentley (2021), define the public realm as:

“urban outdoor space that is not home, school, work or private property. This includes streets, laneways, public spaces, parks and footpaths. It also encompasses the physical characteristics of place, such as walkability, land use, built form, neighbourhood quality, and services and facilities”.

The term ‘High Street’ (or ‘Main Street’ within an Irish context) is used collectively to refer to mixed-use and shopping streets in centres of all sizes from villages to city centres. Improvements to the public realm are categorised as ‘hardware’ which apply to the built environment e.g. repaving, pedestrianisation, new or improved open space and ‘software’ which apply to the user experience e.g. events, new services, marketing, policy changes.

This shows that the definition of “road” even in legislation, applies to all aspects of the public realm and is not presumed to be primarily for the use of vehicles, and it is this wider definition and understanding that this research is based on.

Figure 1 below illustrates the relationship between road space as defined in the legislation on the one hand, and through the more normative policy outcomes we seek to achieve as they relate to climate, quality of life and liveability etc. on the other. The piece which intersects the two represents the day-to-day realities of making this work, of balancing the demands on space by different needs in different contexts, the importance of promoting and maintaining a culture of respect in public spaces where the most vulnerable are protected and safe, in order to **maximise the potential value of the public realm as social infrastructure. It is this wider definition and understanding of value that this research discusses further in the sections which follow.**

Figure 1



4.2 Socio-Economic Value and Measurement of Road-Space Reallocation

Planning seeks to improve the quality of places, and the lives of those that live in them. Planning, local economic and community development and climate action are integrated. Local Government Reform (2014) provides that local authorities now have a statutory responsibility for local economic development, the preparation of a local economic and community plan in addition to the city/county development plan. Under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, each local authority is also required to prepare a climate action plan for its respective administration area.

The socio-economic value of road-space reallocation is therefore understood in the following sections through the lens of social infrastructure, place value and policy integration across areas of climate, health, quality of life and liveability, the perception of place and quality of business environment.

4.2.1 Streets and Public Realm as Social Infrastructure

Latham and Layton (2022) describe the usefulness of the concept of 'infrastructure' in understanding urban space. If we apply the concept to understanding the value of public realm and road-space reallocation it can be understood as both a material asset (a noun) i.e. the physical space, and also the function (a verb) i.e. transporting, servicing, supporting. We can understand the importance in both the physical object and the potential for shaping wider social and urban processes. The presence /absence of infrastructure may also convey aspects of politics and culture.

The literature describes roads as both 'physical' and 'social' infrastructure. Prytherch (2022:691) describes how the roadway is a quintessential example of infrastructure for:

"providing permanent substructure for circulation. But it is also a public space whose uses – even among the mobile – are diverse and extend beyond transportation. It is not simply a public utility for flow (e.g. sewer) nor public place for gathering (e.g. plaza), but a hybrid."

To realise the potential for streets as social infrastructure, debates must move away from the limited understanding as streets for vehicle movement and storage, to engaging about the wider potential for streets (ibid).

Social infrastructure is defined by Tomaney et al (2024) (citing Klinenberg, 2019:5) as *“the physical places and organisations that shape the way people interact”*. Tomaney describes Klinenberg’s definition as being expansive which includes libraries, schools, playgrounds, parks, athletics field and swimming pools, as well as sidewalks, courtyards, community gardens, and other green spaces.

Beyond the necessity for social infrastructure to nurture public life, Latham and Layton (2019:2) also describe the value of social infrastructure in addressing contemporary urban challenges like *“countering social isolation, negotiating difference, and creating places for all—regardless of age, race, gender, sexuality, or income”*. They describe how Klinenberg (2019) *“has reported that neighbourhood sidewalks matter as much as residential density, commercial activity, and other well maintained public spaces to social interactions and perceived social support”* (ibid:8).

Streets and public spaces can be considered social infrastructure across aspects of public institutions, commerce and mobility and are a particularly valuable resource for the economically or socially marginalised (ibid). The quality of social infrastructure can be considered in terms of abundance and diversity i.e. *“When social infrastructures are difficult to find or only convey a sense of functionality and nothing more, it does not convey a social surplus”* (ibid:8). **Therefore, when road space is viewed through the lens of social infrastructure, an abundance of car-dominated road-space obviously falls short on delivering the social potential for people, commerce, public life and mobility functions. This is highlighted further in section 5.3 which discusses public realm/road space ratio. The infrastructure is underperforming in value.** Streets designed to reduce traffic volumes and speed, which incorporate seating and greenery, a variety of shops and services will support higher levels of social interaction and sense of community.

4.2.2 Place Value

Linked to the concept of streets as social infrastructure is place value. Carmona (2018) describes ‘place value’ as reflecting the inter-related benefits of interventions in the built environment for residents, investors, developers, business owners, local authorities etc. and the potential to contribute to different public policy goals. Place value can be defined as *“the diverse forms of value generated as a consequence of how places are shaped”* (ibid:3). The DoT (2024b:5) describes how reallocating public space to sustainable transport modes and other shared public spaces yields a range of co-benefits *“fostering a healthier, safer, and more vibrant urban environment”* which includes economic benefits through local business support and job creation.

A systematic literature review by Carmona (2018) found that **there are strong private and public benefits from improving place quality**. While some outcomes may not be considered desirable (like increasing property values in certain contexts), the benefits include property uplift in the retail sector, and reduced vacancy which increases viability. There is also evidence of property uplift and reduced vacancy in the office sector which is influenced by walkability, external appearance, design innovation and street connectivity. This is relevant to Irish towns in the context of attracting new employment and creating an

entrepreneurial environment where there is the potential to attract people on the basis of quality of life and liveability, and thus the potential to attract new businesses activities which can operate outside of cities, subject to digital connectivity.

As place quality improves there is the potential for attracting increased investment, regeneration and strengthening community support for development. This aspect of place value has been researched at the city scale where certain sectors/skills are drawn to certain urban environments for reasons related to alignment with cultural values, quality of life, opportunities for socialisation, networking and innovation. There is potential to understand this more at the town scale considering the potential for remote working (in some sectors) and patterns of migration from cities to towns during Covid-19.

The ex-post evaluation of the Smarter Travel Towns (DTTaS, 2018:24) provides details on the value of the active travel interventions and public realm improvements across a number of variables in the smarter travel areas (STA) (Dungarvan, Limerick and Westport). The objectives of the programme were to transform areas through modal shift and to improve quality of life. While the rate of change for modal shift was higher than the national level, it was reported as “*reasonably low*” in that evaluation. However, quality of life within the towns was found to be improved “*mainly as a result of the improved amenity presented by infrastructure investment*”. The household travel survey carried out as part of the evaluation found that the programme had a very positive impact on the quality of life of the participating communities and that the participated towns were considered more accessible by non-motorised modes, more pleasant to walk and cycle in and safer for pedestrians and cyclists. This change in attitude contributed to higher rates of walking and cycling which in turn promoted more physical activity with the associated health benefits. The reported additional physical activity across the STAs was calculated as an economic benefit of €1.4m in nominal terms in 2016. There was also an environmental benefit calculated because of reduced emissions (associated with ‘other’ trips, commuter journey remained largely consistent).

Concerns regarding the impact of the programme on economic activity proved to be unfounded as evidence from footfall and on-street surveys, and interviews with local businesses showed that “there was little or no negative impact on the local economies”. This is consistent with research from Living Streets. Living Streets is a charity in the UK whose goal is to promote pedestrian safety. They have conducted research which finds that those who walk/wheel to do their shopping spend more money, and pedestrianised high streets see bigger sales. The latest research (Living Streets, 2024) contributes to the evidence base for improved walking environments and the benefits include “happier and healthier people, stronger communities and a more resilient environment”. The research is presented with a caveat that return on investment in the public realm is often not evaluated. With that being said, there is evidence that **investment in attractive, walkable places can deliver quantifiable commercial returns for businesses** and the most recent research on the *Pedestrian Pound* published in 2024 seeks to answer the question ‘what recent evidence is there that public realm improvements retain the commercial, civic and cultural importance of local centres and result in a more productive economy?’

The research refers to various studies which support findings that **pedestrian activity and dwell time increase in tandem with public realm interventions, relative to streets/areas without intervention**. The importance of space and dwell time was reinforced during Covid-19 and a study in Aachen, Germany found that on-street parking reduces space for promoting dwell time (e.g. outdoor dining, seating and greening),

and subsequently retail rents, and they recommend that on-street parking should be reduced and concentrated in multi-storey car parks within a reasonable walking distance (100-500m).

As expected, walking increases where roads are closed to cars, but the number of walking journeys also increases, so it is not just a shift in mode share from car to foot, there is also an increase in activity. Walking activity is also driven by the perception of the quantity and quality of amenities, the quality of the environment (streetlighting, greenery, seating, wide pavements) and the availability of public transport. **Where walking increases there is an increase in footfall which has “quantifiable benefits for the local economy, such as better business performance and survival, consumer spending, business start-up rates, employment and productivity of an area”** (Living Streets, 2024:33).

The findings of the Pedestrian Pound research generally relate to towns and cities of significant scale by comparison to those which are the purpose of this study, so there are obviously limitations in terms of the validity of applying, for example % increases in retail spend because of interventions, to the Irish towns' context, this might be more applicable at the smaller city scale. However, there are several areas where the question of scale is arguably not so significant, such as **perception of place and amenities, business and consumer satisfaction and quality of business environment**. Scale can also matter for the type of road-space reallocation intervention chosen. This is discussed further in Section 5.1.

The town of Nairn³ in Scotland with a population of just under 10,000 people (comparable to Ireland's larger towns e.g. Longford), is one case study. Living Streets (2024) reports that the Business Improvement District (BID) have focused on 'soft improvements' i.e. events, shop-local initiatives and physical (hard) improvements to the public realm to create a more vibrant town centre. The events have attracted thousands of (many first-time) visitors and for one event the majority (over 80%) of people surveyed said they would return to the town, even without a special event. The 'hard' improvements include a more pleasant streetscape; increased signage; installing and maintaining planters and hanging baskets; deep cleaning pavements; fixing gates and painting passageways and shopfronts. The initiative has prompted a further multi-stakeholder approach to securing funding for improved seating and pedestrian access.

When considering the quantified economic benefits of the programme for the Irish Smarter Travel Areas, a Benefit/Cost Ratio of 1.31 was calculated. The evaluation carried out in 2018 found that an integrated package of both infrastructure and behavioural change measures is most likely to achieve modal shift. More recent research (as discussed in section 5.4) shows that interventions that focus on infrastructural and environmental improvements in particular increase active travel. As discussed in that section road-space reallocation (with funding for maintenance and promotion, as well as links to safe and reliable public transport) is vital to achieving these increases and that there is a need for research to consider how to develop public and political support for such measures. This is important in the context of a stated key observation of the STA evaluation which concluded that:

³ Population of Nairn town is given as just under 10,000 (Wiki). The wider Nairnshire pop is 13,500 (https://highlandcpp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Area_Profile_NAIRNSHIRE.pdf)

“Greater impact may also be achieved through a greater commitment to smarter travel interventions at a local level. Across all three STAs, committed schemes which were perceived as inconveniencing drivers, such as reallocation of road space, removal of parking spaces and reduction of speed limits were not delivered as part of the programme. With strong local authority commitment, future programmes may have more conviction to implement measures which may prove unpopular with drivers, but which will benefit users of sustainable modes” (DTTaS, 2018: 24).

It is interesting that Westport, which was one of the Sustainable Transport Towns is now ranked number 1 on the Western Development Commission’s recently published Sustainable Mobility Index⁴ (2025) which suggests that these initial, and perhaps foundational interventions have acted as a catalyst for continuous improvement over time and the value of incremental change.

4.2.3 Addressing Transport Disadvantage

The Rural Transport Programme Local Link launched in 2007 and since then it has promoted services in response to transport demand *“of those experiencing rural social exclusion and isolation or cases of ‘market failure’”* (Carroll et al., 2021:48). The *Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan* has led to substantial improvements to rural transport over recent years. However, it is evident that there are large concentrations of people in Ireland living at risk of transport disadvantage and in ‘forced-car ownership’.

It is acknowledged that poor access to public transport remains in many locations and there must be tailored solutions developed with community support (Carroll et al., 2021⁵ citing McDonagh 2006). The provision of increased and improved public transport services to towns (which may include demand-responsive, micro-mobility and vehicle sharing schemes) will necessitate the provision of infrastructure for stops and stations which will require space within the public realm. The Western Development Commission’s Sustainable Mobility Index (2025) provides a helpful resource for understanding mobility and accessibility issues for different places and the potential for place-specific responses to mobility and as they relate to economic, quality of life purpose, or readiness for the low carbon transition.

The Department of Transport’s (DoT, 2024a) Draft Demand Management Strategy *Moving Together* aims to increase the efficiency of transport systems by reducing travel demand; distributing demand over a variety of modes, including active travel; and over time to ease demand for services. The use of public space is acknowledged as a critical component of any demand management strategy as space must be deliberately allocated to different modes of transport and to different users with diverse needs. This is in the context of addressing the various challenges posed by places across different spatial scales, with varying density and place functions (cities, towns, villages) as discussed above.

⁴ For more information, see [Sustainable Mobility Index 2024 - Western Development Commission](#)

⁵ This paper seeks to offer a novel method of identifying areas of the country that are currently not being serviced by the Rural Transport Programme and that are exhibiting signs of transport disadvantage risk and deprivation.

Notwithstanding these challenges there are stated socio-economic benefits to allocating public space to promote more sustainable transport modes which include; fostering a healthier, safer, and more vibrant urban environments and safer public spaces by encouraging physical activity, reducing air pollution and preventing accidents.

4.2.4 Measuring Value

The understanding of the baseline/existing conditions and the perception of the impact of these schemes is vital in terms of quantifying costs and benefits. In terms of a baseline, studies show that business owners frequently underestimate the number of customers which travel by a means of active travel or public transport (this is discussed in further detail in section 5.4). This reinforces a path dependency of car-centricity in policy and decision-making.

Similarly, an emphasis on ‘value for money’ on investment in a scheme where the benefits and costs are understood in narrow financial terms can of course demonstrate good value for specific groups i.e. businesses and real estate interests, but it can also **underrepresent the benefits to wider society in the increased health outcomes which result from increased active travel.**

In the UK, projects which included a benefit cost ratio (BCR) which considered an estimated value for the active travel and health benefits scored higher in terms of value. An analysis of data in the UK on the ‘Sustrans Connect2’ programme found that overall schemes represented high value for money and that those with a higher baseline of users, lower costs and proximity to a public transport interchange (0.5 miles score the highest (Hopkinson et al., 2024: 47 citing Le Gouais et al., 2021).

Another systematic review of walking and cycling investments found positive BCR scores reported by 26 of the 32 studies included (Hopkinson et al., 2024 citing Brown et al., 2016). However, it has also been noted as part of that review that the evaluations are highly context specific and so generalisation to other schemes is difficult. Notwithstanding this, while there may be variances in evaluations (and it is cautioned that cost benefit analysis as a tool does not fully reflect the complexity of active travel scheme benefits (e.g. amenity value) and should not be used in isolation) generally, there is a positive return on investment (Hopkinson et al., 2024 citing Bland et al., 2024) with the health benefits accounting for the majority of total benefits.

Providing walkable places increases physical activity for public health gains across a range of indicators and also, importantly, it addresses issues of ‘community severance’ where people, particularly older and younger people are discouraged from walking as there are separated from goods or services by busy roads or transport infrastructure. This negatively impacts peoples’ sociability, and one large UK survey found that people who had the highest levels of perceived community severance had a higher chance of reporting poor health, after controlling for confounding factors (Hopkinson et al., 2024: 52, citing Higgsmith et al., 2022).

Scott et. Al. (2019) describe a ‘centralising of health’ in the National Planning Framework. There is an emphasis on policy integration (climate, health, community and transport) to promote communities and physical environments which support healthier lifestyles and ageing in place. Notwithstanding the systemic

'Health-in-all-Policies' approach they advise that *“while the NPF provides a much-improved alignment with public health policy, greater attention must also be given to institutional arrangements, toolkits (e.g. greater integration of Health Impact Assessment (HIA) with planning policy)”* (Scott et. Al, 2019:120).

A systematic review of Health Impact Assessments of walkability in Germany shows that HIAs document beneficial impacts of improving walkability on a variety of health outcomes, including reductions of mortality and non-communicable diseases (Westenhöfer et. Al., 2023). A HIA carried out in Spain quantified mental health cost savings because of greening one-third of the streets in Barcelona. It was estimated to be 45 million euros a year (Hopkinson et al., 2024: 61 citing Vidal Yañez et al., 2023), and another HIA estimated that by increasing green spaces and reducing heat, noise and air pollution through the 'Superblocks' scheme life expectancy amongst the adult population would be increased by 200 days and that there would be an annual economic benefit of 1.7 billion euros (Hopkinson et al., 2024 citing Mueller et al., 2020).

According to EU Loneliness Survey conducted in 2022, **loneliness is most prevalent in Ireland with over 20% of respondents reporting feeling lonely**. Loneliness is described as impacting health through physiological and psychological pathways (McHugh Power and Swader, 2025). In the Irish context, rural geography and the absence of public transport can perpetuate loneliness, this has long been acknowledged and there are existing policies in place which seek to address this aspect of the problem. There is also the potential for “designing out” of loneliness through a policy-oriented approach which prioritises the consolidation of social infrastructure which prioritises social connection (Ibid: 4, citing Fried et al., 2020), including public spaces and the investment in events and programmes⁶. Health Impact Assessments offer a way of understanding the holistic value of mobility interventions.

Interestingly, in a study across London Boroughs it was the *“degree of change rather than the absolute level of street quality”* (Hopkinson et. al., 2024:45) and that seemed more important in terms of people's positive perceptions. In a US study conducted during COVID-19, businesses closest to pedestrian streets were found to be most supportive of changes (Hopkinson et. al., 2024 citing Andersen et. al. 2023).

⁶ For more information, see [Community Guidelines for Social Connection / Social Connection Guidelines](#)

5. Cars Access, Car-Parking & Travel Behaviour

5.1 Introduction

Car-accessibility and car-parking have long been highly debated issues in town and city planning and regeneration. Two key factors that influence how motorised traffic impacts on a town (economically, socially and environmentally) are the extent and nature of -traffic, especially through-traffic, and the provision and nature of car-parking. High levels of through-traffic tends to negatively impact a town centre. Traffic that does not stop adds nothing to a town but can cause many negative impacts such as: increased congestion; reductions in road safety through high traffic volumes, vehicle mix and speeds; a barrier effect reducing pedestrian accessibility between two sides of a Main Street, reductions in quality of life and air quality; increase in traffic noise etc.

The provision of car-parking is also a highly important consideration in a town. Providing for off-street parking, for example, drives up constructions costs and is expensive. It impacts on how people interact with their town centres. The provision of and access arrangements to public (on-street or off-street) and private car-parking will directly impact the feasibility for road-space reallocation and public space reclamation. Car-parking is also seen as necessary for the economic survival of towns by many businesses (see Section 5.4 below for more information). It is also a very land/space intensive and inefficient activity⁷ with a high visual impact, thus **there is usually considerable potential in Irish towns (as well as internationally) to consider the re-organisation, re-location and rationalisation of car-parking within town centres** to free up space for increased public space, additional trading space, urban activity and events, tourism etc. As demonstrated in the case of Pontevedra, Galicia (see Section 8), comprehensively addressing these two issues of through-traffic and car-parking have the ability to regenerate and transform a town for the better.

The rise of motorisation is only a relatively recent phenomenon. Our towns were largely shaped and developed long before the advent of the private car and were originally designed around a different set of uses, but have been repurposed to address the car and car-based travel. **The current 'system of automobility' is a powerful influence shaping our current discussions and decisions** (including policy formation) around the car and towns and cities. Urry (2004) presents this system as including:

- The car as the major item of individual consumption (after housing) which provides status to its owner/user;
- The powerful interlinkages with other industries, road building, suburban house building, retailing, urban design and planning etc.;

⁷ The average car in the UK spends about 80% of the time parked at home; is parked elsewhere for about 16% of the time, and is only actually in use (i.e. moving) for the remaining 3-4% of the time (RAC, 2012 in Marsden, 2014).

- The car as the predominant global form of ‘quasi-private’ mobility that subordinates other mobilities (walking, cycling, rail etc) and shapes our way of living and quality of life;
- The dominant culture that sustains major discourses of what constitutes ‘the good life’; and
- The car as the single most important cause of environmental resource-use.

Added to this is the **concept of ‘motonormativity’**, where motorised mobility is seen as both ‘normal’ and ‘proper’, effectively making it a self-reinforcing shared bias impacting people and institutions’ ability to assess proposed changes to the motorised transport system objectively (Walker and te Brömmelstroet, 2025; Walker et al., 2023). People *‘sometimes apply different standards to judgements about motoring than judgements about other topics’* (Walker and te Brömmelstroet, 2025:6). This can be seen, for example, with proposed or actual changes to existing car-access or car-parking arrangements in any given neighbourhood or town centre tending to be particularly emotive, reactionary and difficult to achieve. As one researcher in the area of car-parking noted, *‘Parking may be essentially empty and usually unnoticed, but it seems people and planning systems have an intense moral and political commitment to maintaining or preferably increasing its supply’* (Taylor, 2019: 449). This is an international issue, not just an Irish one⁸. Car-parking, and the use of the public realm for it, has become so engrained in how we design and layout our villages, towns and cities, that people see it as an individual ‘right’ and a ‘public good’, and often actively resist it’s monetisation or marketisation (for example, car-parking fees) (Taylor, 2019).

Taylor (2019) also argues that even small-scale localised proposals in Australia and America to change car-parking within the public realm are often used to galvanise support for resistance to other transport related projects such as new bike lanes and bus lanes and can be seen by traders as detrimental to their commercial viability. Taylor contends that broader society appears to accept that *‘the parking needs of a few can be just as important as calls for a greater good’* (2019: 452). This is also seen regularly within an Irish context, with examples including resistance to Bus Connects in Dublin⁹ and Cork¹⁰, the Deansgrange cycle route¹¹ in Dublin; and to the removal of car-parking on Carrick-on-Suir Main Street in Tipperary¹².

Recent research by Walker and te Brömmelstroet, 2025 also provides further useful insights into this concept of ‘motonormativity’. In their study of people’s views in the UK, the USA, and the Netherlands, they found that people’s social, physical and cultural environments influence their views, including whether they lived in a rural area or not (whereby they are more likely to view non-car transport negatively if they live in a rural area). People also assumed other people’s support for non-car transport was less than their own support for it. The researchers argue that this lack of awareness of what other citizens think about non-car mobility may help explain public resistance to change. The researchers suggest that it is possible that public support for changes can be somewhat ‘hidden’ as people think their views are in the

⁸ For example, Taylor (2014) illustrated the feared loss of free on-street car-parking was the main issue cited in the majority of planning appeals in Melbourne, Australia.

⁹ For example, see [Ireland is “Kafkaesque” for removal of 14 parking spaces for bus stops, claims Cllr – IrishCycle.com](#)

¹⁰ For example, see [Business owners and residents in Cork suburb have ‘immense concerns’ over BusConnects proposals](#)

¹¹ For example, [Removing residents’ parking for cycle lane on Deansgrange Road will ‘destroy our community’ | Irish Independent](#)

¹² For example, see [Heated debate at council meeting over Carrick-on-Suir Main Street parking dispute - Tipperary Live](#)

minority, thus there may need to be particular attention given to ways to make the views of hidden voices more publicly known. They also suggest ‘honest experimentation’ as a specific strategy that might help overcome societal resistance or fear of change. The importance of infrastructural enablers to support change in behaviour and attitudes are also discussed – i.e. making sure people’s built environment surroundings support the behaviours that are asked of them.

Research by the ESRI demonstrates how ‘status quo bias’ (SQB) presents a ‘*strong psychological obstacle*’ in societal acceptance of town design/layout that encourages walking and cycling over driving. When evaluating a plan for changes to an environment, people tend to search for negatives (*‘What could go wrong here?’*) where as with the existing layout, people were more inclined to look for both positives as well negatives (2025: 31). The research suggests potential ways to mitigate such bias, including combining the concept of *‘nostalgia with an articulation of what had been lost and needed to be restored can reduce SQB’* and that there may be a benefit to government putting an emphasis on how it communities the benefits of change (2025:32).

The concept of town and city scale is important to realising successful innovations in mobility and public space. The URBACT Walk ‘n’ Roll Guidebook (2022) provides a helpful guide of the relevance of interventions relative to spatial scale, including what they define as ‘Small Cities’ or urban areas without a real network of public transport and with a population below c. 50,000 inhabitants. Here, particular **emphasis is recommended on ‘pedestrian priority’ areas and 30km/hr speed limits¹³**, followed by applying car-parking management, a cycling strategy, protecting school areas from motorised traffic¹⁴, and ‘creating a shopping street’ (i.e. regenerating the ‘Main Street’). Reducing the impacts of car-traffic is particularly noted as important to pedestrian priority areas, and regenerating a Main Street. Some key aspects of this are discussed below and via the Case Studies (see Section 7 and 8).

¹³ In Ireland, the default speed limits within towns is due to reduce from 50km/hr to 30km/hr from the middle of 2025.

¹⁴ In Ireland, currently there is an active programme addressing this issue, run by An Taisce and the National Transport Authority on [‘Green Schools’](#) and the [‘Safe Routes to School’](#) program.

Figure 2 Extract from the URBACT 'Walk 'n' Roll Cities Guidebook' (2022) showing relevance of visions and mobility and public realm interventions to different urban city/town scales (p.13).

	Small	Medium	Large	Metro
Visions				
4.1 The 15-minute city	+	++	++	++
4.2 Pedestrian priority: liberating city streets from cars	++	++	++	+
4.3 City-wide network of calmed down places	0	+	++	++
4.4 City agglomerational concept for mobility and public space	0	0/+	+	++
Interventions				
5.1 Reducing car access to city centers	0	+	++	+
5.2 Introducing Tempo 30 in the city	++	++	++	++
5.3 Applying parking management	+	++	++	++
5.4 Applying a cycling strategy	+	++	++	+
5.5 Transforming highways to urban boulevards	0	+	++	++
5.6 Creating mobility hubs: integrating public transport with micromobility	0	+	++	++
5.7 Superblock: radical transformation of public space in the neighbourhood	0	+	++	0
5.8 Protecting school areas from motorized traffic	+	++	++	0
5.9 Creating shopping street	+	+	++	0

The following classification matrix shows with the signs 0, +, ++ the typical relevance of the visions and interventions on the level of the main city size categories.

5.2 Traffic & Town Centres

Through-traffic refers to vehicular traffic that passes through an area, with a destination beyond the area it is passing through. High levels of through-traffic negatively impacts a town centre through, for example: increased congestion; reductions in road safety through high traffic volumes, vehicle mix and speeds; a barrier effect reducing pedestrian accessibility and potential economic and sociability opportunities between two sides of a Main Street, reductions in quality of life and air quality; and increase in traffic noise (Schiller & Kenworthy, 2017; Newman & Kenworthy, 2015).

Through-traffic has long been a controversial topic in transport planning, especially within residential areas, particularly due to quality of life impacts. For example, Colin Buchanan's introduced the concept of 'environmental capacity' as far back as 1963 which characterises the amount of traffic a street can 'hold' without unduly affecting residents' quality of life. This work was also furthered by Donald Appleyard's study in 1981 which states that people and cars can co-exist in residential streets up to 2,000-3,000 vehicles a day, with later studies suggesting a further reduction in this to 1,500-2,000 vehicles a day (e.g. Chesterman et al., 2012).

In town centre areas, there has been a move towards town by-passes to mitigate the negative impacts of heavy through-traffic while still allowing for car access, although this is not without some debate too as some argue that through-traffic can also bring a degree of passing trade (although the disbenefits tend to be larger than the benefits). Transport Infrastructure Ireland have commenced baseline data collection and evaluation studies of 5-6 by-passes in Irish Towns, which should yield valuable insights into the impact of by-passes in Irish Towns in the coming months and years, especially as town centre road-space reallocation and public realm improvements also come on stream¹⁵.

A variation of the by-pass model is that of a 'Traffic Circulation Plan' coupled with high levels of pedestrianisation/pedestrian priority zones (such as used in Pontevedra City, Spain). The Pontevedra Model is described further in the Section 8. This model places a high level of emphasis on people and quality of place and has led to substantial traffic reduction, and an increase in opportunities for travel by other modes, road-space reallocation and public space reclamation.

How much vehicle traffic is too much in town centre and mixed-use environments is an important question (linked in with other factors impacting place quality and experience). Lucy Saunders' 'Healthy Streets'¹⁶ approach provides some helpful guidance in this regards. The Healthy Streets approach takes a more holistic, place-based and multidisciplinary approach to street design. Saunders provides four categories of traffic volumes based on peak hour flows in both directions (to capture the peak impact of traffic dominance) for English streets (version September 2021), with category 1 being the 'healthiest' and category 4 being the 'least healthy':

- Category 1: There are 199 or fewer vehicles in the peak hour (both directions)
- Category 2: There are 200-499 vehicles in the peak hour (both directions)
- Category 3: There are 500-999 vehicles in the peak hour (both directions)
- Category 4: There are more than 1,000 vehicles in the peak hour (both directions).

For a New Zealand context, the 'Healthy Streets' approach used (version September 2023) vehicles per day (AADT – Annual Average Daily Traffic), with:

- Category 1: There are less than 1,000 vehicles per day
- Category 2: There are between 1,000-3,000 vehicles per day.
- Category 3: There are between 3,000-10,000 vehicles per day.
- Category 4: There are more than 10,000 vehicles per day.

Being able to cross the street easily to frequent businesses on either side of a Main Street can be a helpful indication of the health of a street for shoppers (or opportunities for socialising), for example. 180 passing vehicles per hour, would mean approximately 3 cars passing per minute (or approximately one every 20 seconds). This would likely be manageable by most pedestrians. However, 600 passing vehicles per hour

¹⁵ For more information, see https://www.tii.ie/media/bpko2u03/tii-bypass-impact-evaluations_macroroom_july-2024_final.pdf

¹⁶ For more information, see [What is Healthy Streets? — Healthy Streets](#)

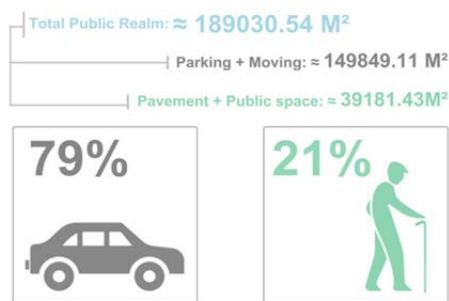
would mean a car every 6 seconds approximately (and if they are passing into two directions) the ability to cross with comfort and safety becomes very compromised without traffic management interventions. Not all towns can practically be by-passed or introduce circulation plans, thus other traffic reduction measures and mitigation measures may also need to be introduced (such as traffic calming, active travel infrastructure etc.). High traffic levels are often raised as a significant negative issue in many Irish Towns¹⁷. The type/mix and intensity of traffic carried through the town is also an important issue to be considered as well as the layout of the town itself. Towns that carry heavy goods vehicles or significant farm machinery can be particularly badly impacted.

5.3 Public Realm: Road Space Ratio

The public domain of Irish Towns have been significantly altered since the advent of mass motorisation, including the mass transfer of previously public space, such as market squares, streets and lane-ways, to car-parking areas and the space for the servicing of vehicles. However, there is a marked lack of scholarly research in Ireland documenting the quantitative and qualitative extent and impacts of this transfer, the volumes and types of car-parking in town centres, and the current nature of car dominance. This issue of a lack of research into car-parking is also an international issue with one of the key scholars in parking policy noting that retail parking in particular remains an under-researched area (Marsden, 2014).

Figure 3 Extract from Roscrea Town Centre First Plan (p.38)

Top: Analysis of current public realm provision
Bottom: Image of space allocation in Rosemary Square



Many of the recent Town Centre First Plans in Ireland, such as the Roscrea Town Centre First Plan (2023) illustrate the extent of the issue at an individual town level, with 79% of the space of the town given over to the parking and servicing of vehicles. Vehicles are space hungry and what is clearly noticeable in most towns is the large amounts of prime town space given over to car-parking. As discussed in Section 3, there are 25 priorities for a vibrant and viable town centre (Parker et al., 2017). Car-parking is only listed in one of these, and in the case of many (and perhaps most) Irish towns, the quantum, visual impact and location of car-parking is leaving insufficient space and reducing the potential of other key factors that are key to viability and vitality including:

- Appearance – e.g. What is the quality of the public realm?
- Walking – The walkability of the centre.

¹⁷ For example, in Tipperary Town, 'too much traffic' was the largest issue that visitors disliked about the town in the Town Centre Health Check Consumer Survey. For more information, see [Tipperary-Town-Consumer-Survey.pdf](#)

- Accessibility – how easy is the town centre to reach by different means including walking, cycling, public transport as well as the car.
- Recreational space – the amount and quality of recreational areas and public space/open space. Where people can enjoy spending time without spending money.

The 79% utilisation of the public realm for one type of use (in the case of Roscrea Town Centre) is illustrating a clear unbalance. This imbalance was also illustrated in Blackrock and Dundrum (Co. Dublin), and the rebalancing of the space and public space gains were the most popular outcome of the 'Covid Mobility' works in both locations (see Section 7 for further information on Dundrum & Blackrock). For example, a 25.9% increase in public realm was achieved in Dundrum through the reallocation of road-space (pre-works there was a 39.7%: 60.3% public space: road-space ratio, and post-works, this rebalanced to 50%:50% public space: road-space)

Getting the balance right is not an exact science and will depend on many contextual factors. Even the simple exercise of calculating the existing quantum of public space versus road-space (inc. car-parking areas) can provide a quick assessment of the extent of the current balance or unbalance. It is also recognised that car-parking is generally highly valued by many businesses (see further below). However, **if car related infrastructure is overly dominant, the town cannot thrive as the other factors for vitality and viability cannot reach their potential**, thus change has to be highly managed, and should not be underestimated. Without good management and communication, there is a considerable risk of failure due to the prevailing conditions of motonormativity and a continuation of the status quo. A key principle with car-parking is also the importance of car-parking management. This is also further discussed further below.

5.4 Mobility Behaviour & Customers

It is well known that car-parking is considered important to many businesses, and this can lead to resistance when changes are proposed to the status quo, which can often involve high and unbalanced levels of car dominance. One of the key reasons for this comes from the assumption that customers prefer to travel by car, and loss of car-parking will mean lower flows of passing customers and that customers may go to other districts that retain their car-parking (Whitehead et al, 2005 cited in Yen et al., 2020). However, there is much research that shows that **shopkeepers consistently overestimate the share of customers coming by car and underestimate the amount of customers arriving on foot, by bike or by public transport** (see Figure 4 and Figure 5) (Sustrans 2006, O'Connor et al., 2011, Hopkinson et al., 2024). They also **underestimated the amount of locally based customers as well as the amount of money spent by people who access the centre by other means than a car** (see Figure 4 and Figure 6). The amount of local based customers is also interesting because of the modal change potential for some current car drivers, especially for those within walking distance.

Figure 4 Extract from Sustrans study of travel behaviour v's business perceptions of customers' travel behaviour in Bristol City Centre, 2006 (126 retailers and 840 customers surveyed. Source: [Shoppers info sheet - LN02](#))

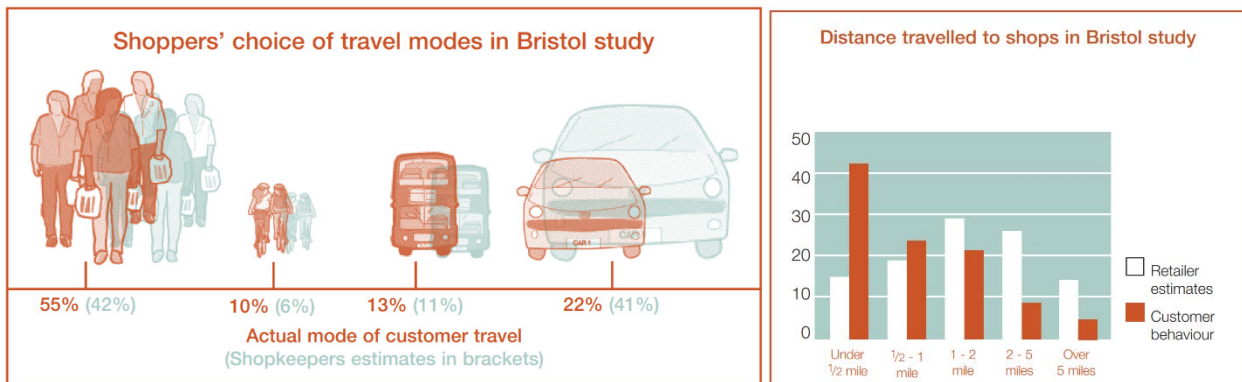


Figure 5 Extract from 2003 Sustrans study of shopper travel behaviour v's business perception of customers' behaviour in Graz, Austria (Source: [Shoppers info sheet - LN02](#))

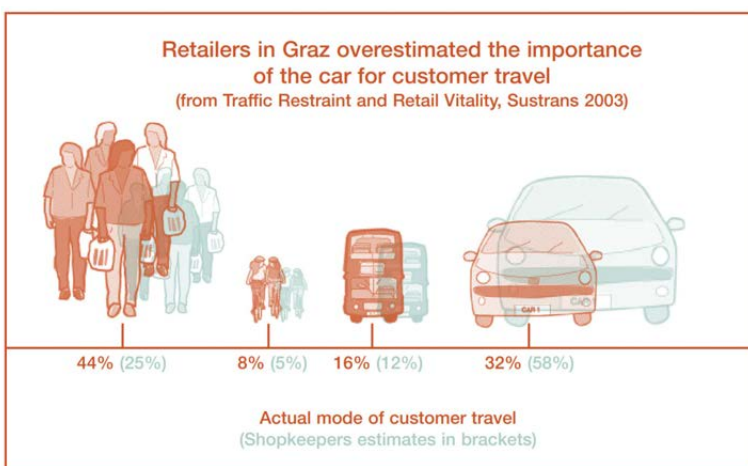


Figure 6 Sustrans 2006 Bristol study showing number of businesses visited by mode of travel (Source: [Shoppers info sheet - LN02](#))



In the Sustrans Bristol study, shoppers were also asked the how many shops they visited/will visit. **The high importance of pedestrians are particularly highlighted here**, when combined with their overall modal share. In Dublin, a study by O'Connor *et al.* (2011) into the travel behaviour of over 1000 weekday shoppers in the key retail streets of Grafton Street and Henry Street showed that traders significantly over-estimated the spending by shoppers travelling by car and tram, while significantly under-valuing the spend by bus passengers and pedestrians. Overall the bus passengers were shown to be the most valuable. In

addition, the share of people travelling to the shopping streets by sustainable transport means was underestimated (particularly walkers), while those driving were overestimated (see further below for information on a 2022 study on shopper travel behaviour on the same streets, also covering weekends).

A study of the restaurant trade specifically in Brisbane, Australia showed that customers arriving on foot, by bike or by public transport all contribute significantly more to the restaurant trade than the business owners and managers thought. The restaurant trade is particularly interesting to study as it is important for the development of the local night-time and weekend economy.

Another interesting study from Berlin of 145 traders and 2019 shoppers on two shopping streets (von Schneidmesser et al., 2021) tested the following six hypothesis, all of which were confirmed:

1. Most shoppers travel to the shopping street without a car.
2. Traders overestimate the proportion of customers that travel to the shopping street by car, and underestimate other modes.
3. The distance that shoppers travel to the main shopping street is lower than the distance traders estimate their shoppers travel (i.e. shopping is local).
4. Traders own travel behaviour correlate with their perceptions of customer travel behaviour
5. Shoppers who travel by car spend more per visit than those travelling by active and public transport.
6. Shoppers who use active (and public transport) modes visit more frequently (ie spend over time is greater for active modes of transport rather than car transport).

Figure 7 shows the level of underestimation by traders regarding their customer's sustainable travel modes, and a considerable overestimation of the number of customers travelling by car. A particularly interesting finding is that *'traders who drive to their business estimated much higher customer car use (28.6%) than traders using other modes, who estimated between 10% and 19%. This tendency is consistently identified across modes, with the exception of traders using transit, who slightly underestimated shopper use of that mode.'*

Figure 7 Extract from Berlin study showing shopper travel behaviour v's business perception of customers' behaviour
(Source: <https://findingspress.org/article/24497-local-business-perception-vs-mobility-behavior-of-shoppers-a-survey-from-berlin>)

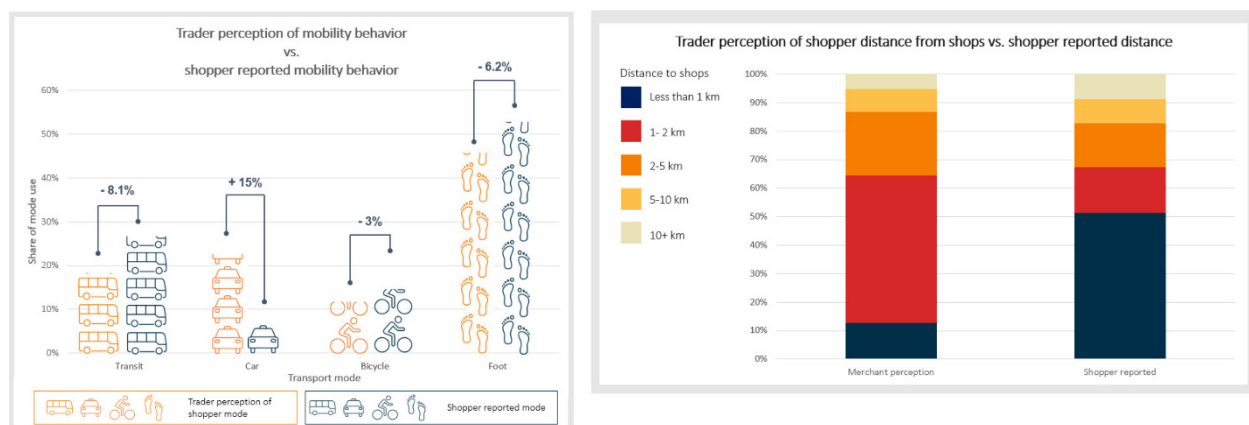


Figure 8 Extract from Berlin study showing estimate spend per travel mode (Source: <https://findingspress.org/article/24497-local-business-perception-vs-mobility-behavior-of-shoppers-a-survey-from-berlin>)

	Modal share	Average number of visits per week	Average spend per visit	Estimated average spend per week (based on frequency of visit)	Estimated total weekly spend according to mode	Proportion of total weekly spend according to transport mode
Transit	26.06%	2.86	10.87 €	31.11 €	16,426 €	16.5%
Car	6.58%	2.80	23.45 €	65.60 €	8,659 €	8.7%
Bicycle	14.64%	3.78	11.98 €	45.35 €	13,379 €	13.5%
Foot	52.08%	4.97	11.63 €	57.82 €	60,652 €	61.0%
Other	0.59%	3.35	8.33 €	27.95 €	335 €	0.3%

The shoppers were asked how much they can spend up until that point of being interviewed (thus real spending may be higher). This data combined with the travel mode and frequency of travel data was used to estimate overall spend per travel mode – as both an average per visit and an average per week (see Figure 8). The average per visit shows that those travelling by car spend the most, followed by those on bicycle and on foot, however the average spend per week based on the frequency per visit clearly shows that **pedestrians are the most ‘valuable’ to the street in terms of estimated spend, followed by public transport users, then cyclists, and lastly drivers** (excluding ‘other’).

A 2022 study by the National Transport Authority and Behaviour & Attitudes into shopper travel behaviour (people age 16 years and over) in Grafton Street and Henry Street in Dublin found that the highest average spend per person was by the car-drivers, however **the highest value spender was actually the public transport user representing 58% of the spend share**, followed by those driving (24%) and those walking/cycling (16%) (see Figure 9). Unlike the Berlin study above, this survey does not present findings for the estimated average spend per week, based on the frequency of visit.

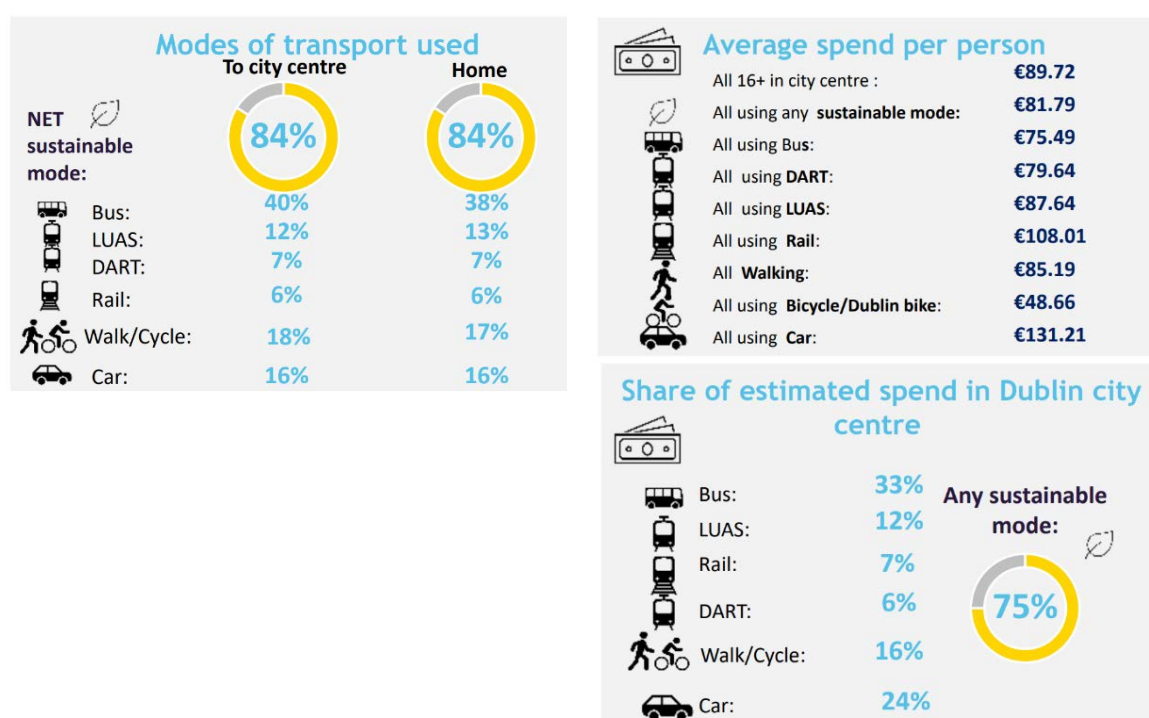
Most of the research published is in a city context (whether small, medium or large) however, where public transport levels would generally be better than in smaller towns. In some smaller towns there may be more people living locally and within walking distance. **Repeating this research over a series of different town scales and typologies in Ireland would be useful as a comparison and a baseline.** There is some helpful data available in Town Centre Health Checks for example on consumer travel behaviour¹⁸, however it may be also be beneficial to get a greater understanding of representative comparative and frequency of travel behaviour; number of shops visited and other activities undertaken; traders’ own travel behaviour; associated spending over a range of difference town types and populations densities; and distance travelled by users. It is also important to note that many consumer surveys do not account for young people under 16/18 years old, who are also likely to have a significant contribution to the local economy, and who are more likely to travel by non-car means, and that travel and customer behaviour can change through infrastructural improvements and other initiatives to encourage people into and to spend time in a town. For example, a recent systematic literature review by Roaf et al. (2024) into what interventions

¹⁸ For more information, see [Collaborative Town Centre Health Check Programme | The Heritage Council](#)

increase active travel shows that interventions that focus on infrastructural and environmental improvements in particular increase active travel. This research also notes the importance of road-space reallocation (with funding for maintenance and promotion, as well as links to safe and reliable public transport) to achieving these increases; and recommends that *‘future research should focus on how to develop public and political support for such interventions’* (2024: 135).

Car-parking policy has long been used as a demand management tool (as parking availability, price and mode choice have a demonstratable link in research). Given the wider highly ingrained motonormative context (despite the wider climate crisis, public health and well-being issues etc), the process of change here is likely to be slow and involve some compromise (e.g. Rye et al., 2009).

Figure 9 Extract from NTA study into shopper travel behaviour in Grafton Street and Henry Street, 2022
(source: <https://www.nationaltransport.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Dublin-City-Shopper-Survey-2022.pdf>)



5.5 Car-Parking, Reducing Congestion & Improving Local Trading Conditions

Although there are limited studies on the economics of car-parking within transport and urban planning and science, there are a number of studies in the area of ‘cruising’ for parking (Inci, 2015). One of the most eminent scholars in car-parking research, Professor Donal Shoup, reviewing previous studies on cruising in US urban centres, noted on average 30% (albeit with a wide variance between 8% and 74%) of all cars in traffic are cruising or searching for car-parking, contributing to congestion, traffic incidents, air pollution, wasted fuel, degradation of the pedestrian environment etc. (Shoup, 2006).

In the case study of Pontevedra City, Spain (see Section 8) cruising or locally known as **‘agitated traffic’** was **seen as a source of congestion**. Traffic congestion might not be a issue in every Irish town, however, there

are a considerable number where congestion is a significant concern for both businesses and visitors (for example, Tipperary Town¹⁹ and Thurles²⁰). **Congestion has many negative impacts on the local economy, as well as the attractiveness of towns, air quality, road safety etc.** Reducing traffic congestion to improve conditions for trading and the local economy is a planned objective in Pontevedra, and considerable reductions have been demonstrated as part of their road-space reallocation and public space reclamation projects. Given the impact of congestion on the local economy, this was utilised as a way of gaining support from the business community.

Cruising tends to be a particular issue when on-street parking is free or underpriced, and alternative parking areas, such as off-street parking areas, are more expensive. Research shows that cruising can be substantially reduced or eliminated by charging the market price for on-street spaces at least equal to the price of adjacent off-street spaces and by encouraging and directing access to larger more managed car-parking areas, such as Park 'n' Stride locations. The **'Park 'n' Stride'** or 'Park and then Walk' model is central to the concepts used in the Pontevedra region – both city centre, and rural towns and villages. **This model has allowed for the complete reorganisation, relocation and rationalisation of car-parking, freeing up space for other higher value uses such as outdoor trading space or public spaces,** while at the same time introducing an 'urban model' that has a clear brand with clear benefits for the place and is easy for the public to understand (and thus helping with public acceptance) (see case study in Section 8 for more details).

Research by Kobus et al. (2013) finds that demand for on-street parking is price elastic²¹, particularly for longer parking durations, and argue for an on-street price premium compared with parking garage prices (for example a multi-storey car-park, or back-land parking areas). They argue that this is welfare improving (a positive contribution to society) as it helps offset some of the spatial differences associated with less adjacent parking garages as drivers with longer parking duration needs (an hour or more) are encouraged to use further away parking locations and thereby reducing total/overall walking time²². On-street parking time limits are also useful in this regard. These conditions are more implementable when the local authority can control the price of both the on-street and off-street parking arrangements in an area, which may not be the case in some urban areas. In addition, to be effective, on-street parking requires active management including enforcement through, for example, parking fines.

¹⁹ For example, see [Tipperary-Town-Business-Survey.pdf](#)

²⁰ For example, see [Action urgently needed to address traffic congestion in this Tipperary town - Tipperary Live](#)

²¹ Price elasticity measures the responsiveness of change in usage of price changes. If a good or service is price elastic, it is more responsive to change.

²² As the turnaround time is greater for the closer on-street parking, thereby benefiting more people with a more proximate land-use need.

5.6 Key Lessons & Insights

- The system is currently inherently biased – that requires a conscious recognition of the bias that exists in policy, decision making, views and perceptions.
- People often think they are more supportive of change than their fellow citizens, and underestimate fellow citizens' support for change, thus it may be worthwhile trying to bring out the hidden voices, and using honest experimentation in order to show a different possible future for their town.
- High levels of through-traffic and town regeneration, particularly on Main Street type environments are not generally compatible. Addressing this sufficiently may require big and brave decisions.
- There are many factors that are key for a vibrant and thriving town centre – car access and car parking is only one of many. If the focus is put on this, and not the other elements, regeneration is unlikely to succeed. If car-access and car-parking are too dominant, they will impact on the viability of other key priorities including appearance and quality of the public realm, walkability etc.
- In cases where car related infrastructure is maintained on a Main Street or similar, an assessment of the public realm: road-space ratio will help indicate if the balance is tipped in the wrong direction.
- Research shows in cities, there is often an overestimation of the overall value spend share of those travelling by car, and an underestimation of those travelling on foot or by public transport.
- There is a significant research gap in Ireland in travel behaviour in smaller towns, including travel and shopping behaviour. International research has tended to focus on larger scale settlements, although the overall findings are largely consistent.
- There is also a significant research gap in Ireland in the area of car access, car-parking and driver behaviour - all of which will require investment in research if we are to understand the most effective interventions in different types of towns and contexts.

6. Governance, Communication & Engagement

Introduction

Governance is a system that facilitates the organisation and control of operations in a state or organisation and which regulates their key actions and objectives. In Ireland, we have devised a highly centralised means of governance with the central government holding most power and control. The local government system has limited powers and has, despite the enactment of the 2014 Local Government Reform Act 2014, continued to be limited in its power and actions. While some rearrangement of governance procedures and powers took place in the 2014 Act, the role of road space and public realm reallocation has many interested parties, some with the role of planning and implementation and others with using the space. All are parties to the deliverance of good and effective governance.

The state has transferred many of its governance and implementation actions through statutory power to a multitude of state bodies, many of whom have a level of responsibility for the use of road and public space and all of whom must and should engage with citizens on changes they wish to make with public space as part of any level of governance. The citizen is a key player and active engagement with the public, including businesses, are consistently shown as being very important to public buy-in and longer-term success.

While this research addresses some aspects of governance, communications and engagement, it is complex, and there is scope for further research within the area of road and public space allocation within towns.

The Wider Context

Road space reallocation and public realm improvements have been discussed in the context of wider town centre management and regeneration. The value of road space (re)allocation and investment in the public realm is understood across policy areas. Planning, town centre regeneration, local economic and community development and climate action are integrated. Local Government Reform (2014) provides that local authorities have a statutory responsibility for local economic development, the preparation of a local economic and community plan in addition to the city/county development plan. Under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, each local authority is also required to prepare a climate action plan for its respective administrative area.

Parker et al. (2017) has described the need for towns to reposition, reinvent, rebrand and restructure as per Figure 10 over-leaf. Underpinning these strategies is an understanding of the potential of different places and developing place-based strategies to promote their viability and diversity. 'Restructuring' is particularly relevant for road-space reallocation as it includes the physical improvements of a town centre. Parker et al. (2017), citing Pal and Byrom (2003) describe how the *'best spaces created from restructuring can enliven the high street and also shape a better image of the place which can enhance retail operations'* (p.322). The scholars also recommend that *'active involvement of local stakeholders in the earlier stages of restructuring can contribute to their definition, acceptance, and consequently, the success of a regeneration project'* (Coca-Stefaniak and Bagaeen, 2013 in Parker et. al, 2017: 322). The research acknowledges that

within local authorities there can be a “*plethora of existing development plans, public realm strategies, action plans, visions and strategies*” and this can confuse or even alienate people and “*at best, each document appears to stand alone, and at worst, the documents contradict each other*” (ibid:324). They conclude that “*given the diversity of people that need to collaborate in the collective goal of high street success more thought needs to be given to how actions and strategies are communicated*”.

Figure 10 The ‘4 Rs of Regeneration’ (Parker et al., 2017)



Previous sections have described that the simple objective is to attract people to and keep them in towns, and policies which promote quality of life and liveability, increase place value and promote place brand, are valuable tools in achieving this objective. Investment in the ‘social infrastructure’, which includes our streets and public realm, has significant potential in this regard. However, it is also important to recognise the diversity of towns in terms of the functions and populations that they serve and that any mobility intervention in towns recognises the needs of various different users accessing different services.

In the case of the Ágora programme in Pontevedra, we see an effective approach to communicating the socio-economic value of the interventions across towns and incorporating the diverse needs of people. The ten principles are easily understood, they promote mobility, quality of life, equity and environmental outcomes and, like the ten strategic outcomes in the Irish *National Planning Framework*, they can be understood and applied across spatial scales.

There are several key learnings from the research which are relevant to the aspect of governance, communication and engagement. The first is that schemes which may be perceived to inconvenience drivers such as reallocation of road-space, removal of car-parking spaces and reduction of speed limits are difficult to implement. There is a need to consider how political and public support for these schemes can be garnered and maintained, and for strong leadership.

The Smarter Travel Towns evaluation (DDTaS, 2018) made some recommendations which apply specifically to future mobility interventions. These include ensuring the continuity of delivery teams in the interest of maintaining relationships; and ensuring that measures are well scoped out so that there is a clear understanding and messaging of the potential benefits. A separate study of the south-eastern Smarter Travel Towns by Lambe et al. (2017) also concluded that communication and engagement are specialised but critical skills for the successful implementation of town sustainable transport initiatives, as well as community empowerment and creating positive partnerships with the local media. They also recommended identifying local champions and ensuring that there are financial resources allocated to help local authorities' to *'move beyond infrastructural provision and deliver a more comprehensive and multi-strategic suite of measures. Making the business case to traders and going beyond statutory consultation are likely to be necessary tasks for successful projects'* (2017: 213).

The delivery of road-space and public realm reallocation differs from state to state and indeed from differing local governance structures. The model of governance utilised is connected to cultural and ideological approaches. There are lessons from differing jurisdictions, some of which may be applicable to Ireland and others, which may not. However, there is much to learn from differing approaches, even with a restricted and centralised governance structure.

7. Case Study 1: Blackrock & Dundrum, Co. Dublin²³

7.1 Introduction to Covid Mobility in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown Co. Council

The Covid-19 pandemic kick started some of the most significant and rapidly implemented road-space reallocation projects across Ireland seen to-date, including major road-space reallocation in Blackrock Main Street (and adjacent streets) in Blackrock, Co. Dublin, and Dundrum Main Street (and adjacent streets) in Dundrum, Co. Dublin. During 2020 and 2021 in particular, there was a series of ‘lockdowns’ and orders issued by the State including the closure of all but ‘essential’ retail and services; takeaway or outdoor only dining orders; and ‘stay-at-home’/‘work-from-home when possible’ orders. These had a profound impact on society and the economy, and the impacts are still being felt today. As part of a response by government, a number of Local Authorities tried to support the operating conditions for traders in centres, whilst also adhering to social distancing requirements associated with the pandemic situation. Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council (DLR) was one of the first Local Authorities in Ireland to introduce significant mobility and public realm measures in response to some of the challenges associated with Covid-19.

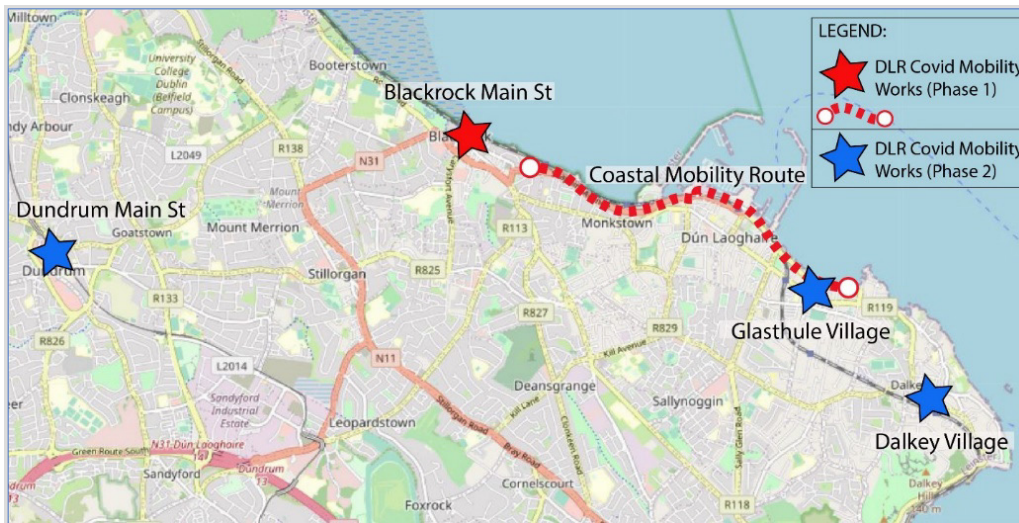
DLR’s ‘Covid-19 Mobility and Public Realm works’ (or simply ‘Covid Mobility’ works) included the reconfiguration and redesign of Blackrock Village Main Street, the introduction of the Coastal Mobility Route (CMR) cycle-way along the coast road from Seapoint to Sandycove, followed by road-space reallocation works in Glasthule Village, Dundrum Village and Dalkey Village (see Figure 11).

DLR’s key objectives of the ‘Covid Mobility’ works were to:

- Increase outdoor social distancing space for pedestrians in villages;
- Increase cycling and pedestrian comfort and safety;
- Reduce pressure on public transport capacity by providing a sustainable mobility alternative;
- Decrease reliance on private vehicles for short journeys, while increasing the use of walking and cycling as transport modes for a wide range of users; and
- Support economic development in villages/urban centres.

²³ The contents of the case study below are based on research undertaken by TU Dublin (DLR Covid-19 Mobility Review), funded by Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council and the National Transport Authority. See Ph1; Ph1b; Ph2a; Ph2b & Ph3.

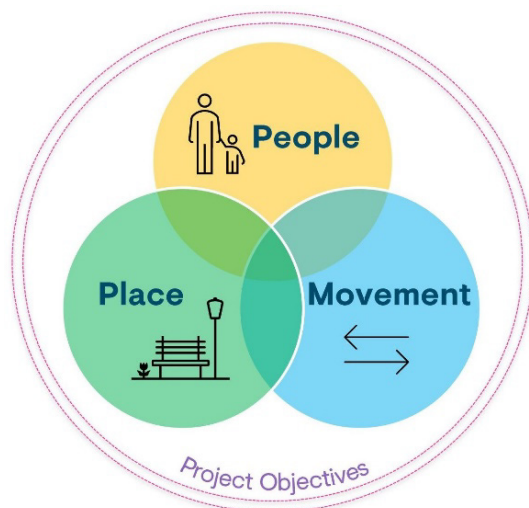
Figure 11 Showing DLR's key Covid-19 Mobility and Public Realm Projects (source map from Openstreetmap.org, adapted by TU Dublin)



Evaluative Research

DLR through the National Transport Authority funded TU Dublin to undertake socio-economic and mobility evaluative research into the impacts of the Covid Mobility programme, focusing on Blackrock, the Coastal Mobility Route, and Dundrum. The material in this case study is derived from this multi-phase study. The research was explorative in nature due to the unprecedented nature of the situation and the governments' response, and was largely based on a mixed-method 'People-Place-Movement' triangulation approach.

Figure 12 People-Place-Movement Evaluation Methodology (source: Rock & Flavin, 2025; TU Dublin)



The TU Dublin study was undertaken in a number of phases, the outcomes of which can be seen in detail in the associated phasing reports:

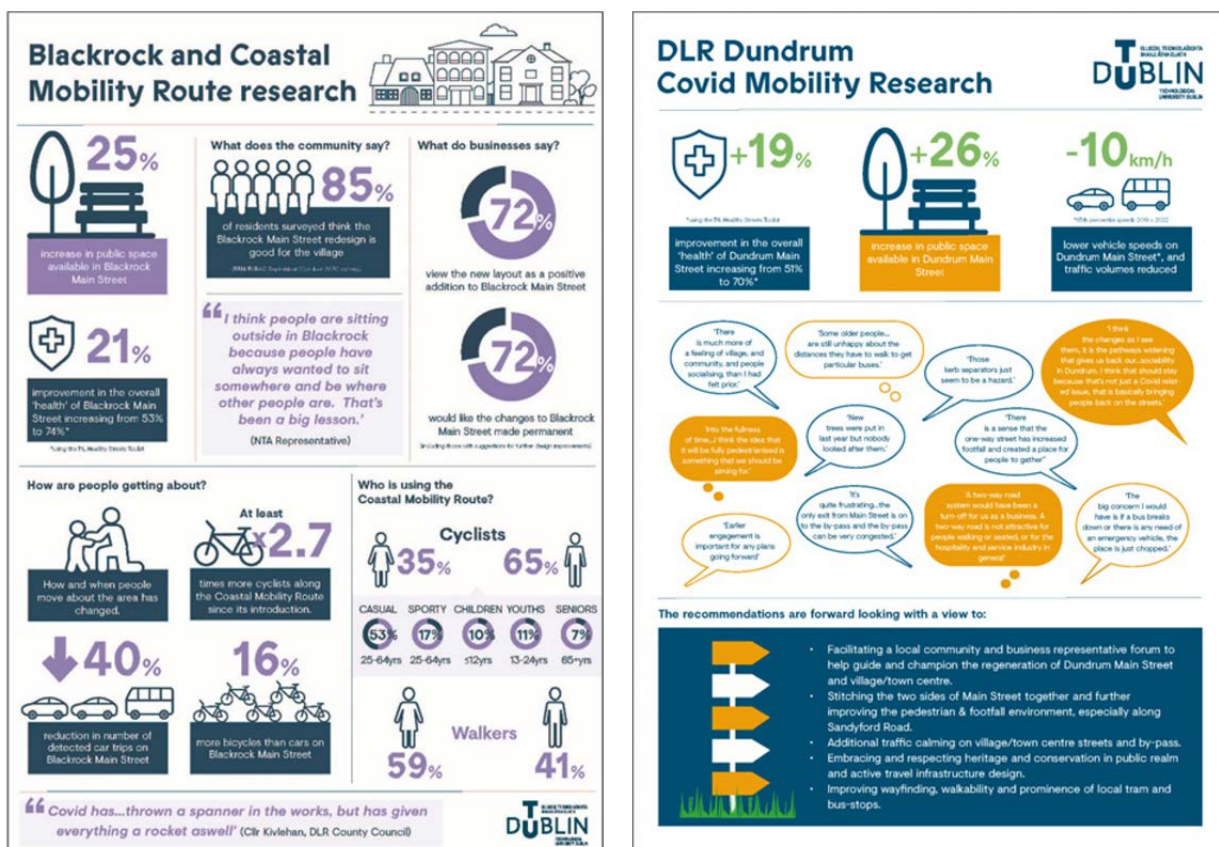
- Phase 1 DLR Covid-19 Mobility Review (June 2021) explores the short-term (approx. 6 months-1 year) social-economic and mobility impacts of the public realm and mobility works in Blackrock Main Street, and the short-term mobility impacts of the Coastal Mobility Route (CMR). It involved

developing and piloting evaluation and audit methodologies to assess the Covid-19 mobility and public realm works in Blackrock Village and on the Coastal Mobility Route (CMR).

- Phase 1-b CMR Mobility Update (July 2022) followed a recommendation from the Phase 1 review for ongoing monitoring. It focused on the Coastal Mobility Route with monitoring and evaluation of the changing mobility patterns throughout 2021 and 2022, as continued responses to the Covid - 19 pandemic changed and evolved.
- Phase 2-a CMR Economic Development & Community Business Feedback (February 2023) explores feedback from the business community along the Coastal Mobility Route.
- Phase 2-b DLR Covid-19 Mobility Review - Dundrum Village (December 2024) explores the socio-economic and mobility impacts of the Covid Mobility works in Dundrum Village/Main Street.
- Phase 3 Blackrock Main Street 4-year Covid Mobility Follow-On: Economic Development & Business Feedback Study (2025) is a medium term 4-year economic development and business feedback follow-on study on the impact of the Covid Mobility works in Blackrock Main Street, and surrounding streets.

Although this research was undertaken after the Covid Mobility works were implemented, it highlights the importance of monitoring and evaluation for significant road-space reallocation projects. Road-space (re)allocation is a significantly under-researched area in Ireland, resulting in a limited evidence base from which to learn from and build upon. It is also important in the communication of the impacts of the projects to both the industry, businesses and the public.

Figure 13 Infographics from the Blackrock (left – Phase 1) and Dundrum (right – Phase 2b) evaluative research studies (source: TU Dublin).



7.2 DLR Covid Mobility Works in Blackrock & Dundrum

The Covid Mobility works in Blackrock were the first to be implemented and were introduced over two stages – the ‘engineering’ or road-space reallocation stage in June 2020, and the ‘placemaking’ stage in July 2020 (see Figure 14). This allowed for some flexibility to ensure that adjustments could be made to the street alignments as needed to facilitate bus turning movements etc. The Dundrum works took place in September 2020, after the Coastal Mobility Route was largely completed and the Dalkey works were underway. The Dundrum works took a less temporary approach to the design of the expanded footpath infrastructure than Blackrock in that the public space gains were made at the same grade/level as the existing footpaths.

Both approaches were in line with the above noted objectives, broadly to facilitate safe physical distancing, businesses reopening post the initial lockdown and options for more active mobility²⁴. DLR’s Covid Mobility infrastructural focus in Blackrock and Dundrum was in widening footpaths, providing areas for outdoor seating and dining, and creating safer cycle facilities. The generalised cross-sections for both Blackrock and Dundrum as illustrated by DLR are shown in Figure 16 to Figure 19 below). Some key information and statistics on the works in Blackrock and Dundrum are outlined in Table 5 and Table 6 below.

DLR secured a funding commitment to convert the temporary Covid Mobility works to a permanent scheme in Blackrock and went out to public consultation on the permanent scheme proposals in May/June 2023 (called ‘Living Streets Blackrock’ – see Figure 20). The latter received a high level of public support and ‘Living Streets Blackrock’ was approved by the Elected Members in July 2023, and construction is imminent (at the time of writing). It is largely based on the Covid Mobility street configurations (i.e. the one-way street; a contraflow bicycle lane, and extended footpaths and public realm), with some changes. These include the use of permanent, rather than temporary materials; an expansion of the cycle-network connecting the Newtown Avenue cycle lane (and by extension, the Coastal Mobility Route) with the Main Street cycle lane; a substantial increase in bicycle parking; a change to the bicycle-lane design to be more aligned with the National Transport Authority’s Cycle Design Manual (2023); a removal of traffic-lights at some junctions; additional/new bus layover areas; and relocation of some car-parking spaces from Newtown Avenue to the adjacent Temple Road²⁵.

²⁴ The initial lockdown in Ireland began on March 12, 2020. Restrictions were gradually lifted in phases, and the country moved through different levels of lockdown measures. Pubs serving food were allowed to reopen in late June and "wet" pubs, or pubs that do not serve food did not reopen until September 2020.

²⁵ Regarding car-parking spaces, there is an overall reduction of 5 car-parking spaces from the Covid Mobility projects, and the number of loading bays remain the same.

Figure 14 First stage road-space reallocation in Blackrock Main Street, June 2020 (top photos); Second stage 'Placemaking' phase (bottom photos) (images by S. Rock)

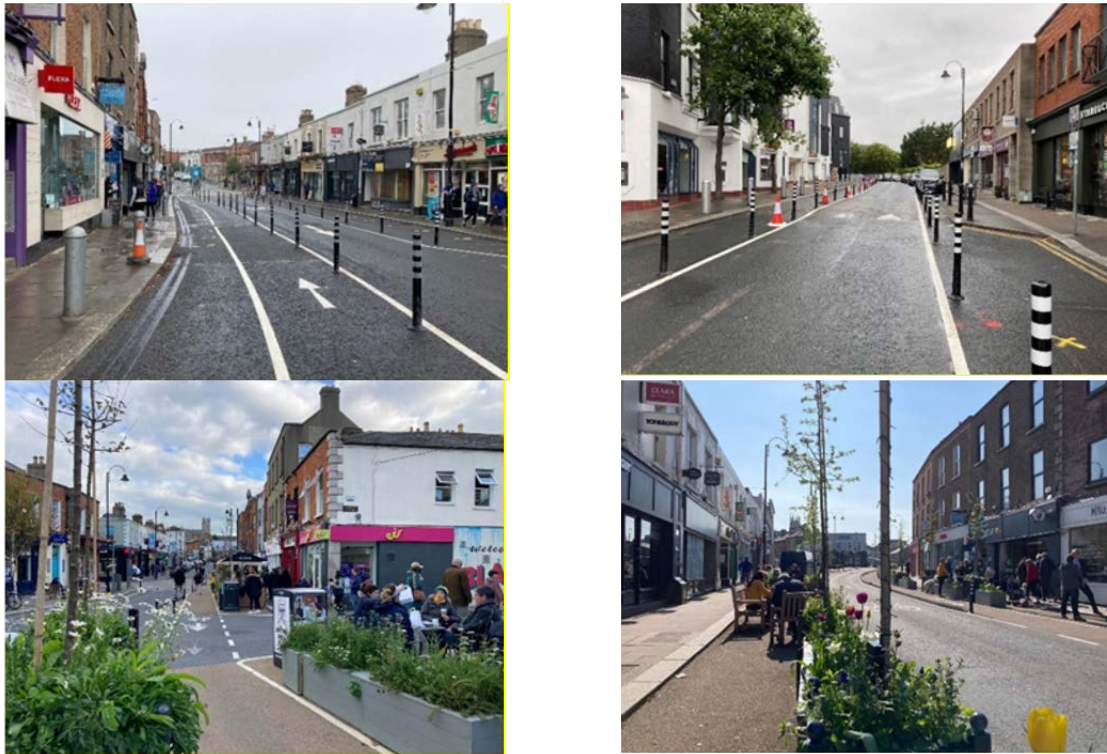


Figure 15 Images showing the road-space reallocation underway in Dundrum Main Street (September 2020 - top), and the works when completed, bottom (images by S. Rock)

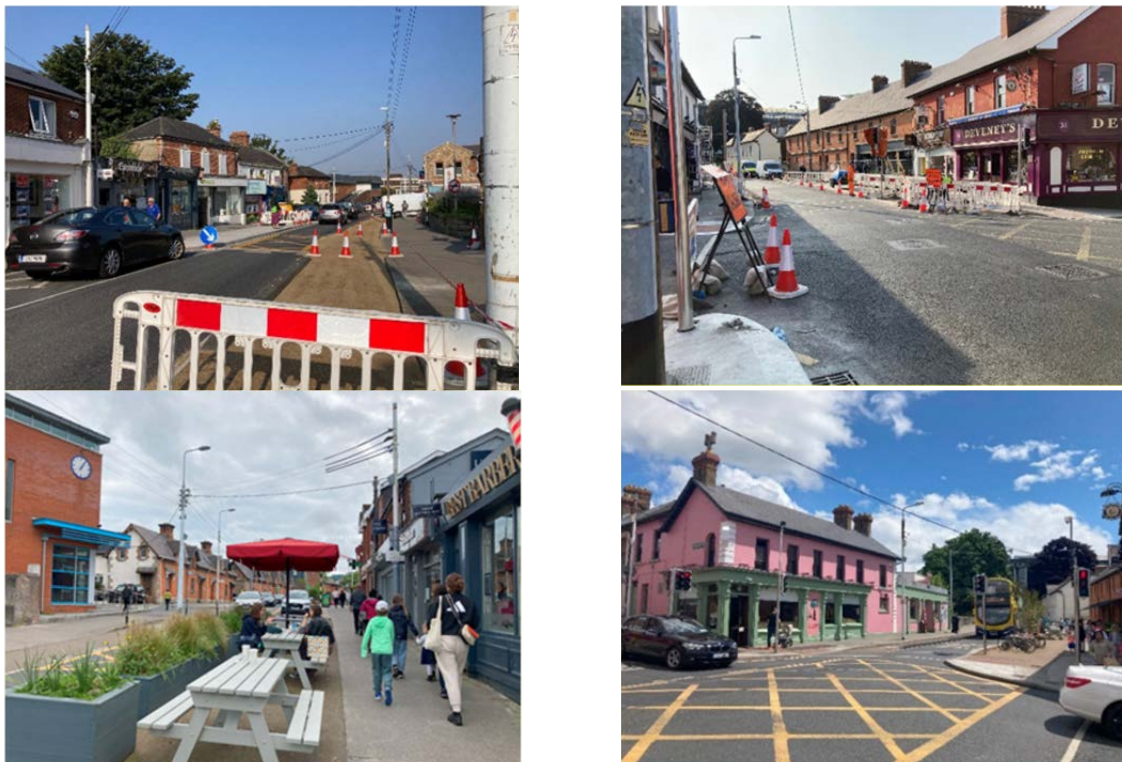


Figure 16 Existing and Proposed Stage 1 (Engineering/Road Space Reallocation Phase), Blackrock Main Street
(source: DLR & Barry Transportation)

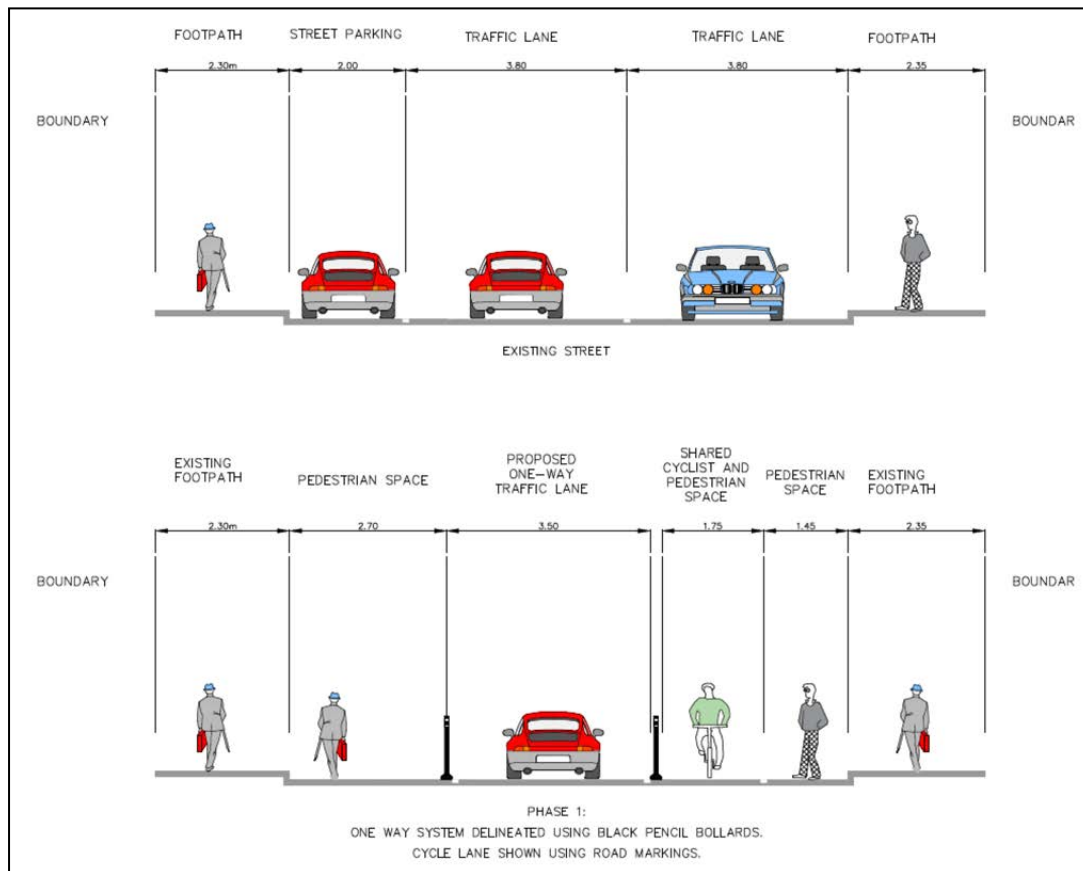


Figure 17 Proposed 'Placemaking' Stage 2 works, Blackrock Main Street (source: DLR & Barry Transportation)

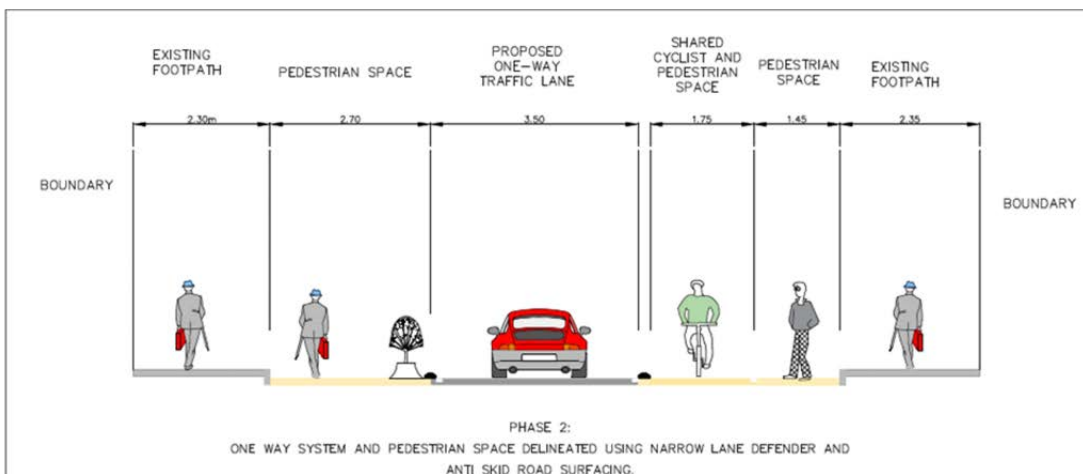


Figure 18 Indicative Dundrum Covid Mobility Main St cross-section (at location outside the Church) showing road space reallocation (source: Barry Transportation & DLR)

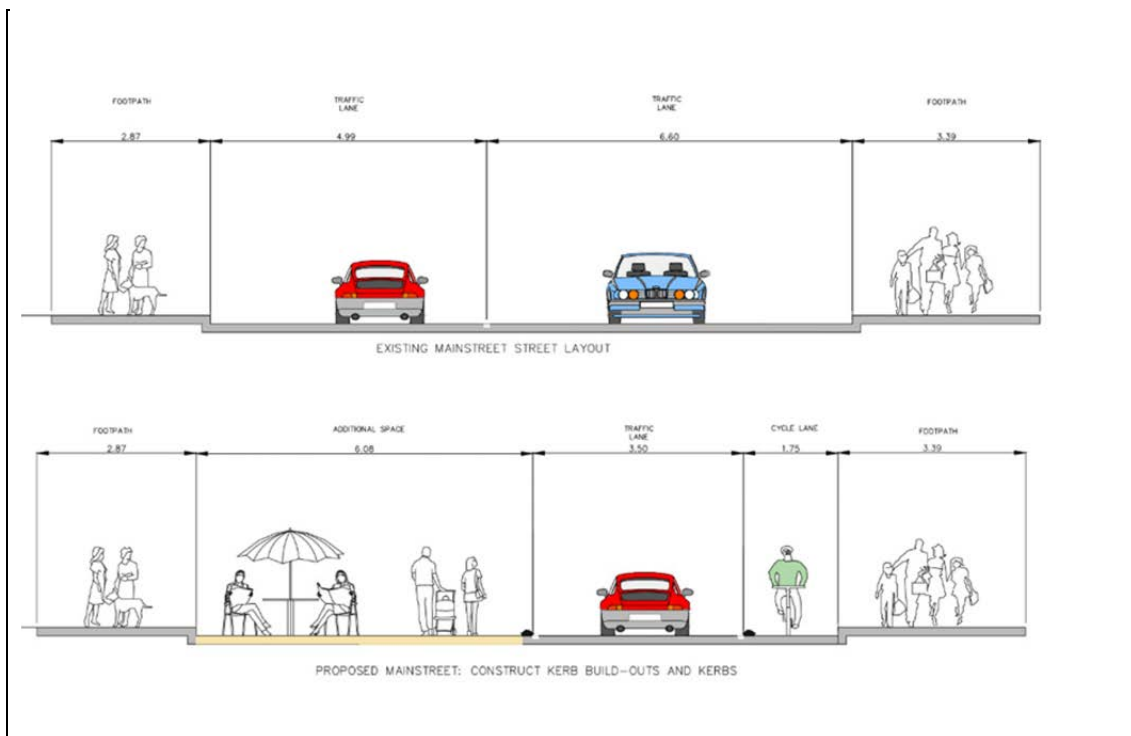


Figure 19 Indicative Dundrum Covid Mobility Main St cross-section showing general road-space reallocation (source: Barry Transportation & DLR)

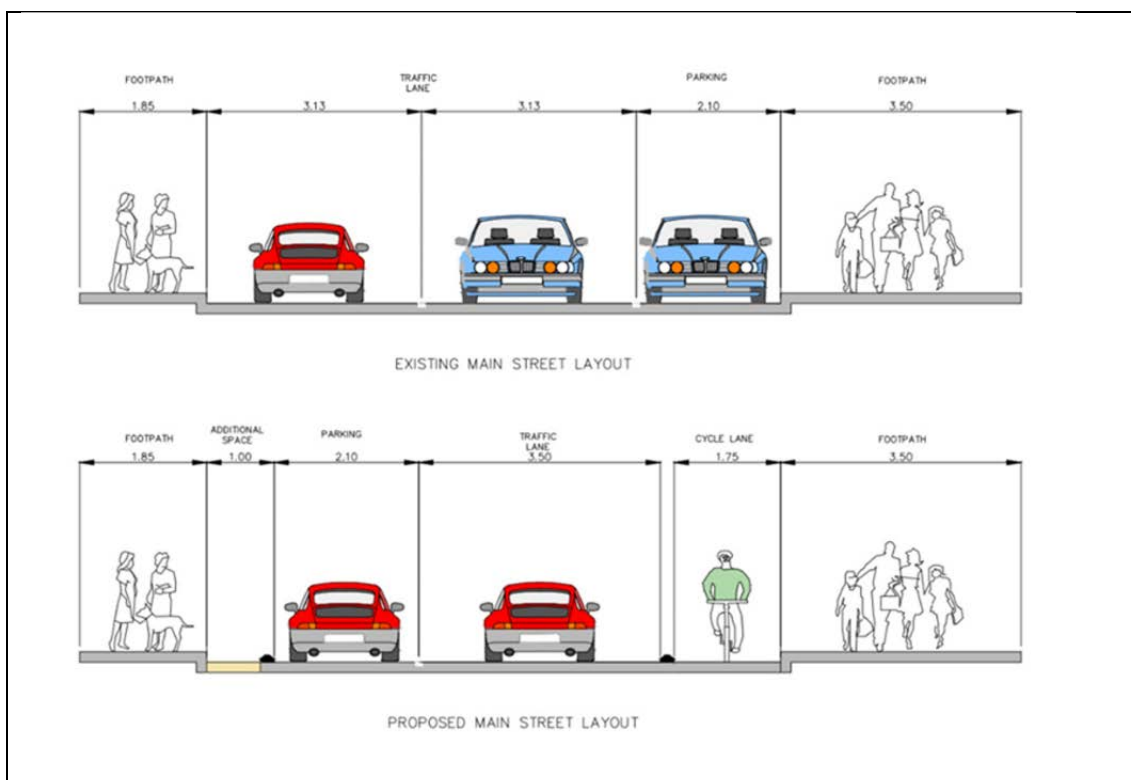


Figure 20 Images of the approved permanent plans for ‘Living Streets, Blackrock’. The permanent plans are largely based on the temporary Covid Mobility works street configuration, and include a further expansion of the cycle-network (images source: DLR Living Streets Blackrock Village - Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council - Citizen Space)



Table 5 Key project information on Blackrock and Dundrum ‘Covid Mobility’ works.

	Blackrock Village Centre & Main St	Dundrum Village/Town Centre & Main St
Town Status	District Centre, coastal location, limited population catchment.	County Town, inland location, large population catchment.
Retail Status (pre & post Covid Mobility works)	• Little ground floor vacancy on Main Street. Adjacent to two established and recently re-developed shopping centres, still with a number of units for lease. • Mixed ownership of units on Main Street.	• Considerable number of vacant units on ground floor on Main Street. Adjacent to two shopping centres at either end of Main St – one more recent regional scale mall, and one old shopping centre with high levels of vacancy. • Mixed ownership of units on Main St, with much within the same ownership as the regional scale mall.
Key drivers of Road-space Reallocation	Largely driven and desired by the Blackrock Business Network in association with a small local community group (BVRAG) and Elected Representatives, and supported by active Local Authority.	Largely driven by the Local Authority with the support of a local community group (Imagine Dundrum) & Elected Representatives.
Road-space reallocation description	Main Street: Two-way road converted to one-way road, one-way contraflow cycle lane and expanded footpaths and public realm. Expanded footpaths maintained at carriageway grade, resulting in level differences. Contraflow cycle-lane segregated from roadway by black rubber upstand ‘defender kerbs’. George’s Ave: Two-way converted to one-way, space gains transferred to wider footpath & contraflow-cycle lane.	Main Street: Two-way road converted to one way road, one-way contraflow cycle lane and expanded footpaths and public realm. Expanded footpaths infilled so that they are at grade with the existing footpaths. Contraflow cycle-lane segregated from roadway by black rubber upstand ‘defender kerbs’. By-pass: new on-road cycle lanes (painted). Kilmacud Rd Upper: new contraflow cycle-lane in part, & partial conversion to one-way vehicular traffic.

Direction of traffic	One-way southbound for vehicles, and one-way northbound for cyclists. SCHEMATIC OF PROPOSED ONE WAY SYSTEM THROUGH BLACKROCK VILLAGE:  Image source: DLR (on openstreetmap.org basemap)	One-way northbound for vehicles, and one-way southbound for cyclists.  Image source: DLR
Surrounding road network	- Supported by the adjacent by-pass (Frascati Road) which effectively acts similar to a one-way in parts due to right-turn limits and median in roadway. - One-way also in existence on Newtown Avenue (& south Main Street) - George's Avenue also converted to one-way with contraflow bike lane. - Carysfort Avenue remains as a two-way. - Temple Road remains as a two-way.	- Supported by the adjacent two-way by-pass, however this is grade separated in parts and no access to by-pass available from Ballinteer Road. - Ballinteer Road is a two-way. - Kilmacud Road Upper converted to a one-way for vehicles and a contraflow cycle lane. - Sandyford Road lower remains a two-way. - Surrounding road network is largely car-focused and hostile in parts for pedestrians and cyclists.
Public Transport	- Good public transport network consisting of regular train and buses. BusConnects programme has resulted in more buses services and more frequency in recent times. - Limited impact of one-way on bus services.	- Good public transport network consisting of regular tram and buses. BusConnects programme has resulted in more buses services and more frequency in recent times. - One-way resulted in considerable change to bus routes, with relocation of southbound services to the by-pass.
Cycle-lane design on Main Street	Northbound contraflow cycle lane c.1.75m wide introduced. Segregated from on-coming traffic by black rubber 'defender kerbs' and planters in some locations. Buff coloured surface. Some dedicated cycle lights.	Linear southbound contraflow cycle lane c.1.75m wide introduced. Segregated from on-coming traffic by black rubber 'defender kerbs' on Main St and grey concrete upstands on Sandyford Rd. Buff coloured surface.
Surrounding cycle network	Adjacent to high quality cycle network in Blackrock Park and the Coastal Mobility Route from Seapoint to Sandycove (although linking-up issues exist for both); & adjacent commuter style cycle network on Frascati Road.	Limited cycle facilities and little cycle network on adjacent streets. Often hostile cycle environment, especially for more vulnerable cyclists.

	 <i>Adjacent Coastal Mobility Route</i>	 <i>Painted cycle-lanes on the by-pass</i>
Car-parking areas & management	Fee for on-street parking (and off-street parking). 3-hr time limit. Free after 7pm & Sundays. Loss of small number of overall on-street parking spaces (however, a number have a shared status as loading bays until 4pm Mon-Sat). Relocation of some central Main Street spaces to Rock Hill. Introduction of one new blue-badge parking space on Main St. Number of centralised car-parking areas in surrounding streets both public and private, incl. all-day parking (DART parking area; Carysfort Ave parking area; two shopping centres parking area).	Fee for on-street parking (and off-street parking). 3-hr time limit. Free after 7pm & Sundays. Change in distribution of on-street parking and increase in number of blue badge spaces from 1 to 2 spaces. Loss of c.6 on-street spaces (and addition of 2 new loading areas). Number of centralised car-parking areas with direct access off Main St including public Dom Marmion Car-park, and private car-parks associated with two shopping centres.
Deliveries & Loading	Pre Covid – wider 2-way road system and double-yellow lines allowed for informal deliveries throughout the town. No dedicated loading bays on Main St previously. Post Works – greater formalisation of loading/deliveries which double-up as car-parking spaces after 4pm and on Sundays): • 1 x large loading bay in southern end of Main Street (c. 2-3 vans) • 1 x medium loading bay in northern end of Main St (c. 2 vans) • Conversion of car-parking to new medium loading bay (c. 2 vans) in George's Avenue. • Other loading bays on other side streets. 	Pre Covid – wider 2-way road system and double-yellow lines allowed for informal deliveries throughout the town. Only 1 small dedicated loading bay on Main St previously. Post Works – greater formalisation of loading/deliveries (however these bays have no time restrictions so do not doubleup as car-parking after a certain time/day): • 1 x medium loading bay at northern end of Main Street (c. 2 vans) • 1 x small loading bay in mid Main St (c. 1 van) • 1 x large loading bay at Sandyford Rd (c. 3 vans). 

Table 6 Sample evaluation metrics and outcomes

	Blackrock Village Centre & Main St	Dundrum Village/Town Centre & Main St
Traffic Volumes & Through-Traffic	Reliable pre Covid traffic data not available, however traffic volumes & through-traffic substantially reduced.	Reliable pre Covid traffic data not available, however traffic volumes reduced overall. Through-traffic still remains high (estimated at 69%) as Main St still attractive as a 'rat-run'.
Mobility Counts	Pre Covid Mobility: data not available Post Covid Mobility: Avr. daily counts (Jan-Aug 2023) • Pedestrians: 7611 • Cyclists: 526 • Buses: 141 • Cars: 2151 • Motorbikes: 100 • Goods vehicles: 186	Pre Covid Mobility: data not available Post Covid Mobility: Avr. daily counts (Jan-Aug 2023) • Pedestrians: 7927 • Cyclists: 471 • Buses: 166 • Cars: 2801 • Motorbikes: 117 • Goods vehicles: 237
Traffic Speeds	Main St speed limit put in place post works: 30km/hr Pre Works Speeds (Jan/Feb 2019): 26km/hr (24hr, 7 day avr. 85th percentile – southern stretch); 32km/hr (Rock Hill stretch) Post Works Speeds (Jan/Feb 2022): 23km/hr (24hr, 7 day avr. 85th percentile – southern stretch); 29km/hr (Rock Hill stretch)	Main St speed limit put in place post works: 30km/hr Pre Works Speeds: 43 km/hr avr. (24hr 7 day avr. 85th percentiles) Post Works Speeds: 33km/hr avr. (24hr 7 day avr. 85th percentiles) Significant 10km/hr reduction, however still over 30km/hr. Kilmacud Road Upp: speeds increased across all time ranges between 5-7km/hr (probable unintended consequence of introduction of one-way road system downhill).
Public Realm: Road Space Allocation (ratio)	Pre Covid Mobility - 46% : 54% Post Covid Mobility - 58% : 42%	Pre Covid Mobility - 40% : 60% Post Covid Mobility - 50% : 50%
Healthy Streets Check (TfL version)	21% increase – from 53% to 74%.	19% increase – from 51% to 70%.
Pedestrian Crossings	No new crossings provided. Existing crossings include one mid-block 'courtesy' crossing, and signalised all-phase crossings at junctions.	2 new raised 'courtesy' crossings on Main St & 1 at-grade zebra crossing on Sandyford Rd.
Footpath Widths	Pre Covid Mobility: Footpaths generally between 2.2-2.5m (substandard for a Main Street) Post Covid Mobility: Existing footpaths remained the same width, plus additional c.1.45-2.7m width provided at the level of the roadway.	Pre Covid Mobility: Substandard footpaths of c.1.5-1.9m in width, with pinch points of 1.2m. Post Covid Mobility: vast majority of footpaths 3m or greater on Main St, however much of Sandyford Road part of street falls below 3m.

7.3 Key Lessons & Insights²⁶

1. **Business Representation & Champions:** The businesses of Blackrock had a local active business representative group in place at the time of the pandemic, however Dundrum did not. Given the communication limits at the early stages of the pandemic, this proved to be a barrier to forming an effective working relationship between the Council and the businesses. In addition, the Blackrock Business Network²⁷ (supported by local community group BVRAG and Elected Representatives) actively sought additional public realm space to support outdoor trading and dining and worked in close collaboration with the Council to implement the works, whereas the road-space reallocation was more led by the Council in the case of Dundrum. A critical point that contributed to the success of Blackrock is the highly engaged leadership role taken by the Chair of the Business Network (as well as others) who communicates positively and actively with the businesses (and wider community) of Blackrock, and works in close collaboration with the Council.
2. **Expanded Public Realm & Additional Outdoor Trading Areas:** This is very popular with both the community and businesses, especially when done well and incorporating comfortable and varied seating, planting and greenery. There can be difficulty for some businesses in accepting the trade-off in road-space to allow for the additional public realm, but in general it is the most popular outcome of both Covid Mobility projects. There are more hospitality businesses in operation in Blackrock to directly benefit from the additional outdoor trading areas, however the majority of businesses in Blackrock see the benefit for a wide range of business types to the increased vitality and business exposure opportunities.
3. **The Pedestrian Experience:** The pedestrian and associated footfall experience on Main Streets are critical to vitality and viability of a Main Street. Pedestrians are the biggest users of a Main Street and the design of the street environment must reflect this primacy. Being able to cross a Main Street easily, regularly and safely is important for the economic opportunity of both sides of a Main Street, and for sociability. The one-way systems make it much easier for a pedestrian to cross, so long as the traffic volumes and speeds are kept low. This has been particularly the experience in Blackrock where traffic volumes (including through-traffic) has been substantially reduced. The bike lane 'defender kerbs' resulted in a trip hazard for some pedestrians, particularly older people. Regular barrier-free, step-free and priority crossings (such as zebra crossings) are particularly important on Main Streets.
4. **One-Way Main Street:** The road-space reallocation in Blackrock and Dundrum was facilitated by a change in the street configuration from two-way vehicular traffic to one-way vehicular traffic (and a contraflow bike lane). This allowed for a greater sense of balance from a previous car dominated environment with high traffic levels to one where all users (as well as increased public realm) are catered for in a calmer and more pleasant environment. The one-way system in both areas also

²⁶ Derived from wider TU Dublin DLR Covid-19 Mobility Review study including Ph 3 Findings (2025).

²⁷ Now called 'Blackrock Business Association'.

have other one-way and limited access roads in the immediate vicinity. This limited access system particularly means that loading/deliveries and car-parking access must be well thought through to reduce agitated traffic and frustration. It is also recommended that a strategy for emergency service access in case of breakdowns etc., is also considered.

5. **Deliveries & Loading:** Loading and deliveries are essential for businesses to operate and must be carefully managed. Converting a two-lane roadway to a one-way roadway results in less space for informal (and sometimes illegal and unsafe) loading/deliveries. The informal arrangement may not always be safe, but it may be viewed as 'easy' by the traders, thus an acceptable as well as safer alternative will be required. As is the case in Blackrock and Dundrum, this resulted in the need for more dedicated space and more regular loading bays than was the case in the previous street configuration. This is especially important in a one-way system where-by it can be frustrating if one loading bay is full and a full loop of the block is needed again to try and locate a loading space. Loading bays can convert to general car-parking after a certain time of day/week, of which is best decided upon in consultation with the adjacent businesses for a greater understanding of their operational needs. Loading bays will usually require enforcement to ensure they are used as intended.
6. **Car-Parking & Blue-Badge Parking:** Car-access and car-parking for customers is generally viewed as important by businesses as they perceive many of their customers come by car (even if this is often over-estimated in reality), and can make or break a proposed road-space reallocation project, or lead to longer term trust issues between the Local Authority and the traders²⁸. A strategy needs to be thought through for on-street parking, blue-badge parking, and peripheral communal car-parking areas, with the latter being particularly important including 'park 'n' stride' legibility and walkability to/from a Main Street. In terms of priority, space should generally go to deliveries/loading and blue-badge parking first, once minimum footpath widths are attained (3m min. in a Main Street context, and more in certain circumstances²⁹). Any on-street spaces will need to be short-term only to discourage all day parking and will require management and enforcement. On-street parking is an inefficient use of land and should not take-away from other uses that increase the overall economic and social activity potential of the street (for example outdoor trading and sunny seating areas), while recognising that a balance or a 'step-by-step' approach may need to be considered in order to gain sufficient public/business support for a project to go ahead.
7. **Cycling Infrastructure:** The role of segregated cycle-infrastructure on a Main Street is a nuanced and contextual one, and vehicular traffic volumes and traffic speeds are important factors here (the higher the traffic volumes/speed, the greater the need there is for segregation). It is

²⁸ The approach here in other towns will be context specific, and will depend on the function of the town (e.g. service function, holiday town etc) and extent of the existing or proposed active and public transport network.

²⁹ For more information on minimum footpath widths in areas of moderate and high pedestrian activity (what most Main Streets should be aiming for), see DMURS Section 4.3.1 Footpaths, Verges and Strips under Section 4.3 Pedestrian and Cyclist Environment.

particularly clear that Blackrock has benefited from cycling and cyclists as part of its' regeneration story as it is linked in with a high quality and high amenity strategic coastal cycle network (similar to a greenway) that brings economic as well as social benefits to Blackrock Village. The contraflow bike lane allows for a balance here. The pedestrian has primacy on a Main Street, so cycling, like driving, must be done in a way that respects this and keeps speeds for all those travelling low. Thoughtful urban design has an important role in this.

8. **Dignity for Funerals & Key Life Events:** The expanded public realm space and associated planting outside of the church in Dundrum Main Street provides a much welcomed space for the reception of funerals in particular, as well as an attractive and safe gathering space for communions, confirmations, weddings etc.
9. **Economic Benefit & Regeneration:** A clear conclusion can be drawn in the case of Blackrock that the road-space reallocation and public realm works in Blackrock Main Street spurred on the regeneration of Blackrock and there has been an economic benefit for a wide range of businesses types (not just hospitality). In Dundrum, it is less clearly conclusive as there are many other factors impacting the overall health and economic vitality of Dundrum Main Street (see 'Phase 2-b DLR Covid-19 Mobility Review - Dundrum Village' 2024 study for more details). However, the public realm gains have been widely welcomed and the Main Street is a much more hospitable and footfall friendly environment than pre-Covid.
10. **Temporary Works (& High Return on Investment Potential):** The temporary nature of the works on Main Street meant they were able to be undertaken rapidly and for a relatively small budget, and allowed the public and business to experience considerable road-space reallocation in a way that may not have been achievable any other way. This also had the benefit of allowing for some adjustments on-site, as required, such as allowing for sufficient bus turning circles. It is the public realm expansion including attractive and comfortable wooden benches for on-street seating, picnic tables, and greenery/planting that are the most consistently popular elements in both Blackrock and Dundrum. This particularly highlights the importance of attractive temporary works as demonstrated though the 'placemaking phase' in Blackrock (that was implemented shortly after the 'engineering phase').
11. **Step-by-Step Approach/ 'Chunk the Change'**³⁰: Change can be very hard for people, including traders who can have a real fear for their livelihood. Thus significant change must be carefully thought-through, and sometimes it will need to be approached in a 'step-by-step' way where one needs to 'chunk the change'. This will give people time to experience and see any benefits (or disbenefits) of the change, and to adjust a project or approach as needed, before further change is implemented. While not every project will need this approach, some may, and without it there could be the risk of losing overall support for it. This was the case in Blackrock where extending the

³⁰ Berger, J., (2020) *'The Catalyst: How to Change Anyone's Mind'*, Simon & Schuster.

missing piece of cycle-lane (and associated car-parking loss) from Newtown Avenue to the Main Street and the Coastal Mobility Route was seen as 'too much too soon' initially. A collaborative solution developed with the business association and the Council over time allowed this to go ahead as part of the proposed permanent works, and for the public to largely accept it.

12. **Monitoring & Evaluation:** Having an evidence base from which to learn from in Blackrock and Dundrum is very beneficial, not only for the future of these towns, but also for other towns. There is a particularly significant knowledge gap in Ireland in this area of the impacts of road-space reallocation, thus this research has proved very beneficial. The clear project objectives set for the Covid Mobility Works in both Blackrock and Dundrum played an important role in their monitoring and evaluation. In Blackrock in particular, the process has played a significant contribution to its journey towards a permanent public realm plan for the village. As the Covid Mobility works were rapidly implemented, there was very limited baseline data to draw 'before' and 'after' comparisons from. Having this baseline data is very beneficial, and it is particularly recommended in very significant, transformational or potentially controversial projects (whereby it is recommended that a monitoring and evaluation strategy is built-in and budgeted for as part of the project). Although the baseline data was limited in this case, the 'People-Place-Movement' evaluation methodology helped overcome this, and in particular interview data (although time and resource intensive) and medium-term mobility data proved very insightful. The true impacts of a project is usually revealed over time, thus there are limits and risks to short term monitoring/evaluation only. For more information and to assist Local Authorities in the monitoring and evaluation of their active travel and public realm interventions, see Rock & Flavin, 2025 (extract overleaf).

Figure 21 Extract from ‘Draft Active Travel & Public Realm Evaluation Framework’ with indicative evaluation indicators and metrics for town typologies (Rock & Flavin, 2025 [DRAFT ACTIVE TRAVEL & PUBLIC REALM EVALUATION FRAMEWORK \(SUMMARY\)](#))

SAMPLE VILLAGE, TOWN OR CITY CONTEXT/TYPOLOGIES									
Metrics/evaluation tools suggested: ↓	Small Scale Interventions (Urban Suburban & Rural)	Village, Town Centres & City Centre Roadspace Reallocation*	Urban Centre Pedestrianisation*	Residential Neighbourhood/ 'Quiet Streets' Intervention Type 1	Residential Neighbourhood/ 'Quiet Streets' /Low Traffic Neighbourhood' Intervention Type 2*	School Zone/School Street	Quick Build Cycle Tracks	Linear/Networked Urban Cycleway/Greenway Type 1*	Linear/Networked Urban Cycleway/Greenway Type 2*
Sample Active Travel & Public Realm Scenario/Typology ↓	Small scale interventions e.g. minor road space reallocation, small scale removal of car-parking, reduction of vehicle lane widths, traffic calming/speed reduction, footpath widening, minor crossing improvements.	Large scale interventions e.g. significant road space reallocation & traffic reduction such removal of one direction of vehicular traffic for increased public realm and active travel, traffic calming/speed reduction, new & enhanced pedestrian crossings.	Pedestrianisation scheme and/or larger scale 'Circulation Plans' (i.e. removing vehicular through traffic from a centre).	Small scale interventions e.g. widened footpaths, traffic calming, pinch points, enhanced public realm, minor crossing improvements.	Large Scale interventions e.g. involving removal of 1 or 2 directions of vehicular traffic; traffic calming; use of modal filters for active travel and/or public transport; significant public realm expansion; pedestrian priority measures.	Traffic calming and speed reduction, pedestrian priority & public realm enhancement, improved measures for cyclists, or School Street - time related vehicular road closure/traffic reduction.	Through mainly residential or mixed-use areas, use of temporary materials and little/no public realm improvements.	High quality cycle infrastructure through mainly residential areas involving roadspace reallocation such as removal of a vehicular traffic lane, with public realm and pedestrian enhancements.	High quality cycle infrastructure mixed land-use areas inc. urban/village centres, employment, residential & community areas involving roadspace reallocation such as removal of a vehicular traffic lane, with public realm and pedestrian enhancements.
Guiding Stars (Key System Wide Indicators)*^	Guiding Star Indicators - Overall & Longer Term Impact & Success (e.g. Dashboard)								
1. Children's Active Travel to School or Independent travel to School	(x)	(x)	(x)	(x)	(x)	x	x	x	x
2. Vision Zero (Fatalities & Serious Injuries)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
3. Female Cycle Modal Share		x	(x)		(x)	x	x	x	x
4. Town & Village Centre Vitality		x	x				(x)		x
PEOPLE, PLACE, MOVEMENT	Project Level Evaluation - Baseline & Outcome (Before & After - Key Metrics)								
PEOPLE (& Perception, Process)									
Business & Business Representative Perceptions & Satisfaction		x	x				(x)	(x)	x
Community & Community Representative Perceptions & Satisfaction		x	x		x	x	(x)	x	x
Visitor & Tourist Perceptions & Satisfaction		(x)	x						x
PLACE									
** refers to a NDC metric (version dependent)									
Ease of Crossing (inc. accessibility & navigation for those with additional needs) **	(x)	x	x	x	x	x	(x)	x	x
Quality of the Footway/Path**		x	x	(x)		x		x	x
Footpath/Pavement Width**	(x)	x	x	x	x	x	(x)	x	x
Quality of the Carriageway Surface **		x	x		(x)	x	(x)	x	x
Space for Cycling **		x	(x)		(x)	x	x	x	x
Cycle Parking **		x	x		(x)	x	(x)	x	x
Public Seating**		x	x	(x)	x	(x)		x	x
Trees (and opportunity for shelter) **		x	x		(x)	(x)		x	x
Green Infrastructure (Greenery & SUDS) **		x	x	(x)	(x)	(x)		(x)	x
Lighting & Passive Surveillance**		x	x		(x)	x		(x)	x
Bus stops: Access, comfort, shelter**		x	x		x	(x)		(x)	x
%/Ratio total road/street space allocation to different modes/uses	(x)	x	x	(x)	x	x	x	x	x
Sociability of Public Realm (& Sense of Place**)		x	x		(x)	(x)		(x)	x
Air quality**		(x)	(x)		(x)	(x)		(x)	(x)
Noise (traffic)**		(x)	(x)		(x)	(x)		(x)	(x)
MOVEMENT (& Network)									
** refers to a NDC metric (version dependent)									
Mobility Counts, inc. Footfall (all relevant modes - over time hours, days & seasons)		x	x		x	(x)	(x)	x	x
Pedestrian Crossing Time at Signalised Junctions (Green & Amber Man)	(x)	x	x	(x)	x	x	(x)	x	x
Pedestrian Waiting Times at Signalised Crossings	(x)	x	x	(x)	x	x	(x)	x	x
Public Transport Travel Times; or Air Travel Speed		(x)	x		(x)			(x)	x
Cycle safety at Junctions**		x	x		x	x	x	x	x
Vehicular Traffic Speed** & Flow (inc. free flow speed conditions)	(x)	x	x	x	x	x	(x)	x	x
Vehicular Traffic Volume & Vehicle Mix (inc. large vehicles)**		x	x		x	(x)		x	x
Extent and nature of Vehicular Through-Traffic & Routing		x	x	(x)	x	x		x	x
Modal Share/Demand (disaggregated, inc. age & gender)		(x)	x		(x)	x		x	x
Impact on Intermodality & Public Transport Patronage		(x)	x		(x)			(x)	x

Legend:

x = Likely to be a relevant, reasonable & helpful metric within particular typology (however, it is also project objectives specific & context specific).

(x) = May be a relevant, reasonable & helpful metric in some cases within particular typology (however, it is also project objectives specific & context specific).

8. Case Study 2: Pontevedra Region³¹

8.1 Introduction

Pontevedra is both a region and city in Galicia on the Iberian Peninsula in north-west Spain. Pontevedra City (with a population of c.82,828 people³²) has a long history in road-space reallocation, vehicular traffic reduction and large scale pedestrianisation, implemented since the late 1990s. In addition to the city, many smaller towns and villages in the region of Pontevedra (inspired by the success of Pontevedra City) have more recently undertaken significant road-space reallocation and public realm reclamation through the Ágora Network. Outlined below is a short history of roadspace reallocation in Pontevedra City, followed by an outline of the Ágora Network and the Ágora Faculty and examples of a number of towns/villages that have undergone recent transformation.

The Galicia region is of particular interest to Ireland, and it shares some similarities in terms of:

- dispersed land-use patterns in rural and regional areas,
- high levels of car-dependency and very limited public transport provision especially in the rural and regional areas (although there has been considerable investment in rural public transport in recent years in Ireland that has generally not been the case in Pontevedra),
- a recent history of economic decline and depopulation, especially in the rural and regional areas,
- an oceanic climate in the north that is similar to Ireland's and influenced by the Atlantic Ocean (and a warm-summer Mediterranean in the south).

Although Galicia has higher maximum daytime temperatures and higher levels of sunshine, its daily minimum temperatures, annual rainfall levels, and number of rainy days per annum are fairly similar, particularly to the Leinster region (see Figure 22).

There are some differences too particularly in the area of local governance whereby there the elected mayors of local municipalities have considerable executive powers as compared with the case in Ireland. These mayors tend to be instrumental in the transformation of the villages and towns within their area. In addition the local police work closely with the mayor and have an important role in working with the public to gain their acceptance of the road space reallocation and public realm reclamation schemes especially in the city of Pontevedra.

³¹ The material from this case study is largely drawn from a study 'Towards Vision Zero for Cities & Towns: People Process & Package of Interventions' (2025) undertaken by The Sustainable Transport & Mobility Research Group at TU Dublin on behalf of and funded by the Road Safety Authority regarding Action 44 of the GoI's Road Safety Strategy.

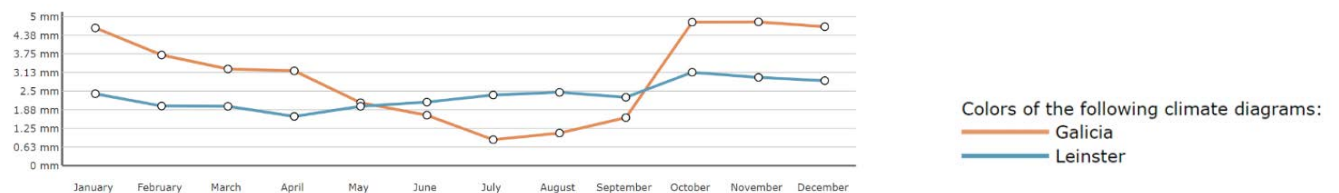
³² Instituto Nacional de Estadística (www.ine.es/nomen2/inicio_r.do)

Figure 22 Key average daily weather indicators of Galicia, Spain in comparison with Leinster, Ireland (source graph and data from worlddata.info)

Annual values	Galicia	Ireland Leinster
Ø Daytime maximum temperature	19.10 °C	13.30 °C
Ø Daily low temperature	9.1 °C	6.3 °C
Ø Humidity	78 %	83 %
Precipitation	1,110 mm	858 mm
Rain days	111.6 days	135.6 days
Hours of sunshine	2,227 hrs.	1,497 hrs.

Precipitation amount per day

Depending on the season and the location of a country, the wind brings a varying amount of water with it. As a rule, the water evaporating in the oceans is absorbed and then transported inland. The greatest amount of rain (hail or dew are also forms of precipitation) in Galicia occurs in November, when about 4.8 liters per square meter fall per day. In Leinster, the average amount of precipitation ranges from 1.7 liters per day in April to 3.1 in October. However, these are average values. If you consider that there are only 12.7 rainy days in Galicia in November, each of them accounts for about 11.4 liters.



The city, towns/villages discussed below can be see in Figure 23.

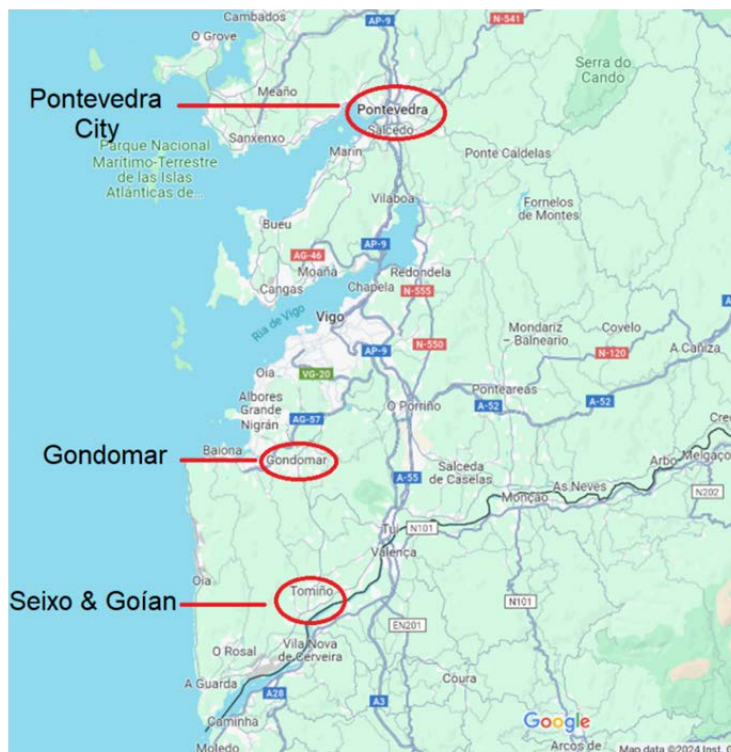


Figure 23 Highlighting Pontevedra City and a sample of the Agora Network villages, including Gondomar, Seixo and Goían (map source: Google maps, and adapted by author)

8.2 A Short History of Pontevedra City

As described above Pontevedra City has a long history in road-space reallocation, vehicular traffic reduction and large scale pedestrianisation, implemented since the late 1990s, and led by the Mayor of the City (who has been in power for 7 consecutive terms). The fundamental approach is one of ‘pedestrian first’, with public space considered as a citizen right, the creation of a city that is ‘better on foot’ and an emphasis on a high quality of life for citizens. The City has taken a ‘step-by-step’ approach whereby continual improvements to the pedestrian environment have been (and still are) achieved over time. Table 7 below outlines the key regulatory milestones that have been introduced since 1999. Traffic and speed reduction are key to the release of urban space for reallocation, and this forms the basis for the success of other interventions, including street re-design, narrower traffic lanes, and reduced car parking provision (see Figure 24).

Legal milestones	
1999	Old town, pedestrianised
2002	Mobility proclamation in 2002
2003	PEPRICA. Protection plan. Old Town
2006 - 2011	Loading and unloading proclamation
2009	Guidelines for public spaces
2010	Speed limit 30 km/h in the whole city
2010	With DGT, collaboration. Traffic Regulations
2012	30 km/h on all municipal roads
2019	Design instruction for traffic calming devices
2020	Regulatory ordinance for citizen-friendly mobility and the use of public spaces: pedestrian priority in public spaces, a maximum speed limit of 10 km/h in zones with pedestrian priority, single platforms, old town and spaces for coexistence

Table 7 Key Legal Milestone supporting Pontevedra’s Urban Model (source: PMUS Concello de Pontevedra p. 72)

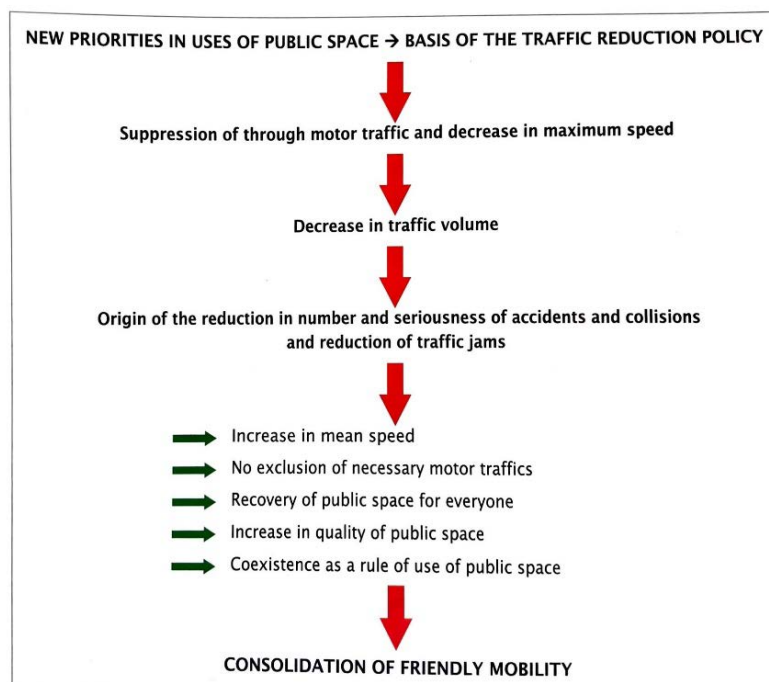


Figure 24 Extract from ‘The City First: Mobility in Pontevedra 1999-2019’ (Beltrán, 2019, p. 22)

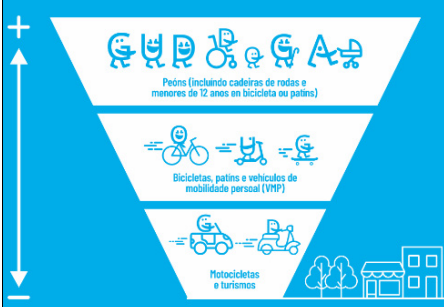
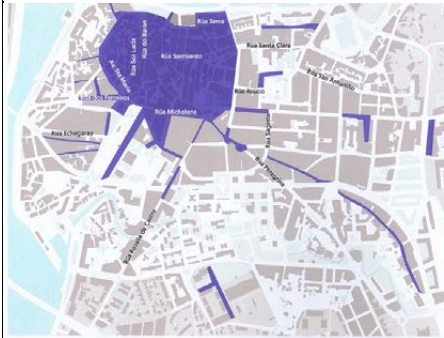
Monitoring & Evaluation

The City Council have been active in the monitoring of the impacts and outcomes of their urban model. There are two key related reports commissioned and/or written by Concello de Pontevedra (Pontevedra City Council) that undertake an evaluation of the City's 'Primero la Ciudad' / 'The City First' Programme. The first 'The City First: Mobility in Pontevedra 1999-2019' is a study written by Fernando Nebot Beltrán, VIATOBEN SL (1999), a civil engineer, commissioned by (and written in close collaboration with) the City Council. The second is the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan 'PMUS: Pontevedra' (2023) for Pontevedra written by the Council with input from Fernando Nebot Beltrán. The SUMP plan builds upon some of the 1999 study material to meet more general SUMP objectives. While neither are independent evaluative research studies, they both contain much useful evaluative material.

Figure 25 Sample images of the Pontevedra city showing both pedestrian priority and co-existence zones (image source: Author)

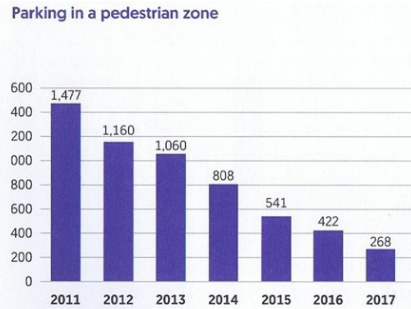
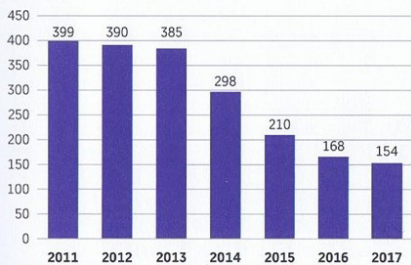


Table 8 Package of Strategies, Actions & Interventions undertaken in Pontevedra City to meet the overarching objectives of Pedestrian Priority, Accessibility, Road Safety and Traffic Reduction (table taken from 2025 TU Dublin study funded by RSA relating to Action 44 of GOI Road Safety Strategy 'Towards Vision Zero for Cities & Towns: People Process, Package of Interventions').

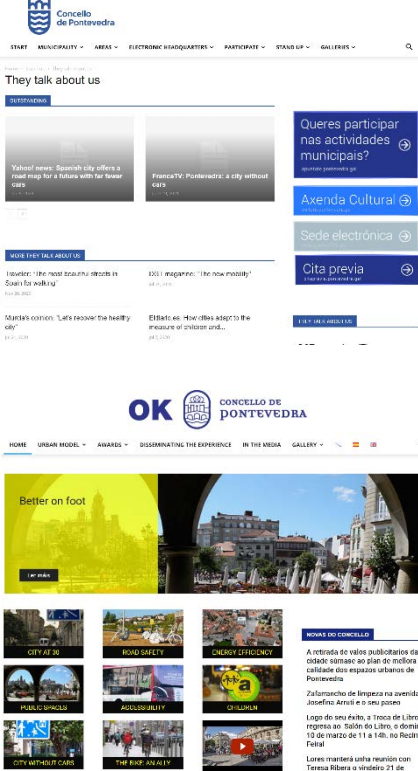
KEY STRATEGY	KEY ACTIONS	INTERVENTION DETAIL	SAMPLE IMAGES
PEDESTRIAN PRIORITY	1. Implementati on of new Mobility/User Hierarchy	- New order of priorities/user hierarchy implemented which puts pedestrian at the top, followed by cyclists, public transport, service vehicles, private cars & motorbikes. - Emphasis on culture of respecting the user hierarchy, <i>"the strongest must respect the weakest"</i>. - Webpage provided to public with more details https://www.pontevedra.gal/mobilidade/su mate-a-mobilidade/. - eScooters and eBikes are considered motorised vehicles	<i>Simplified User Hierachy (source: Pontevedra City Council)</i> 
PEDESTRIAN PRIORITY	2. 'Single platform streets' (i.e. pedestrian-ised streets) with access permitted for 'necessary traffic' only	- Major reallocation of road-space focussed on the historic city core and surrounding streets. - Decommissioning of National Roads where crossing through city centre. - Pedestrian level street lighting. - Quality paving materials & street furniture. - Regular programme of events on reclaimed public spaces. - Enforcement of pedestrian streets to ensure free of vehicles moving at speed or unloading/parking illegally.	<i>Extent of Single Platform Streets (source: top image - Pontevedra City Council)</i>  

PEDESTRIAN PRIORITY	3. Use of ‘Co- existence Zones’	- Used in rest of municipality outside of pedestrianised streets. - Minimum footpath width of 2.5m (this results in many streets being one-way for vehicles to facilitate the min. footpath width). 1.8m min. footpath width free of any obstruction including bins, poles, for universal accessibility. - Regular step-free/raised zebra crossings (most 5m+ wide; every 50m). - Context specific ‘green-man’ crossing time when traffic signals exist. - Vehicular speed and traffic reduction, including “agitated” traffic (explained further below). - Metrics recorded on number of pedestrian crossings per street.	<i>Co-existence zones’ showing streets that allow car access, wide footpaths, & wide zebra crossings.</i> 
PEDESTRIAN PRIORITY	4. Other initiatives	- Use of well-designed and attractive pedestrian level lighting. ‘Metrominuto’ walking map developed based on metro style maps showing walking times to key destinations in city. Maps strategically placed around the city. - Introduction of ‘The School Path’ programme, organised by the local police department, to ensure safe routes to school; and the development of a Children’s Council; and initiatives to assist in children’s independent mobility (of which the city has high levels of independent mobility to school).	<i>Example of pedestrian level lighting</i>  <i>Example of city walking map designed in a metro-map style (Source: Pontevedra City Council)</i> 

TRAFFIC VOLUME REDUCTION	1. Use of a Circulation Plan & very limited through-traffic	• Development of city centre vehicular circulation plan (which high limits through-traffic), and which is reviewed as needed including if any street becomes too heavily trafficked. • Declassification of 'National Roads' that traversed the city centre, and conversion to Municipality controlled roads. • 'Necessary traffic' & 'Destination Traffic' defined and permitted (see below). • 'Agitation traffic' (traffic that is searching for on-street car-parking spaces) largely removed.	Map showing the significant reduction in through-roads in 1999 v 2022 (source: PMUS, 2023)  1999 2022
TRAFFIC VOLUME REDUCTION	2. Necessary & Destination Traffic Defined & permitted (the flows the city needs to keep moving)	• Vehicles permitted at any time or day or night: ○ Emergency services ○ Public utilities ○ Private garage/basement access ○ Blue badge holders. • Vehicles permitted during specific times: ○ Commercial supplies ○ Home deliveries ○ Transport of bulky items, removal services etc.	Photo of pedestrian zone signage permitting access by bicycle and permitted service vehicles. 
TRAFFIC VOLUME REDUCTION	3. Car-Parking Management	• If live in the city centre: principle of 'better on foot'. • If live outside of the city centre & travel by car: principle of park'n'stride or 'park and then walk.' • Free peripheral parking lots 10-12 minutes max. walk to city centre. • Limited short-term free on-street and communal service parking areas (15/30min) to complete small tasks in city centre. • Paid underground parking lots within city centre available. • Commercial loading & unloading car-parks available. • Ban on parking on pavements, pedestrian zones etc.	Council car-parking strategy (top - source PMUS, 2023) 

TRAFFIC SPEED REDUCTION	1. 30km/hr default speed limit for all municipality streets & 6-10km/hr speed limits on pedestrianised streets 30km/hr max. on ‘co-existence streets’. 10km/hr max. in historic city core and certain streets. 6km/hr max. in pedestrianised areas where pedestrians are present. - Guidelines for narrower vehicular carriageway lanes set. - Raised zebra crossings also act as traffic calming. - Bicycles & scooters share low speed streets with vehicles, and can access pedestrianised areas at walking pace only.	Bicycles, scooters and permitted vehicles can access pedestrianised streets at walking pace only. 																																
KEY SUPPORTING STRATEGIES	1. Enforcement - Local police force buy-in overtime incl. integral role of Chief of Police. - Urban Design & Mobility education programme for police officers. - Fines for breach of regulations/ordinances. - Enforcement of short-term parking through mobile police vehicle with number plate recognition technology in-built. - No fixed cameras and limited deployment of other technology for enforcement.	Greater compliance with pedestrian priority demonstrated over time (source: PMUS, 2023) Parking in a pedestrian zone <table><tr><th>Year</th><th>2011</th><th>2012</th><th>2013</th><th>2014</th><th>2015</th><th>2016</th><th>2017</th></tr><tr><th>Count</th><td>1,477</td><td>1,160</td><td>1,060</td><td>808</td><td>541</td><td>422</td><td>268</td></tr></table> Parking in an area reserved for people with reduced mobility <table><tr><th>Year</th><th>2011</th><th>2012</th><th>2013</th><th>2014</th><th>2015</th><th>2016</th><th>2017</th></tr><tr><th>Count</th><td>399</td><td>390</td><td>385</td><td>298</td><td>210</td><td>168</td><td>154</td></tr></table>	Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Count	1,477	1,160	1,060	808	541	422	268	Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Count	399	390	385	298	210	168	154
Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017																											
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Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017																											
Count	399	390	385	298	210	168	154																											

KEY SUPPORTING STRATEGIES	2. Occupation & use of public space	Programme of events consistently planned for recovered public space including cultural, sporting and tourist events, bringing activity, people to support local trade & tourism. This also helps ensure that public spaces are well used and that the citizens don't see them as wasted or under-utilised space potentially questioning their value. Cars, for example, despite their inefficiency, are a very visual use of road space.	<i>Example of cultural event in public space. (Image source: ok.pontevedra.gal/en/picture-gallery/))</i>   <i>Pontevedra city centre hosts many major tourism events, such as the World Triathlon, Sept 2023</i> https://2023.pontevedra.gal/en/lesiur e-and-tourism/
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KEY SUPPORTING STRATEGIES	3. Communication, culture & public messaging	• Emphasis on message of access to high quality 'Public Space' for all as a fundamental right of a citizen & for the common good, with benefits to be experienced across the whole municipality (not just the city centre). • Particular emphasis on communicating benefits of model for children, women, and those with disabilities. • Emphasis on development of a culture of mutual respect, such as drivers to respect pedestrians, cyclists and e-scooters users; cyclists and e-scooters users to respect pedestrians. • Active leadership & regular public communication. • Pride in the urban model demonstrated & communicated regularly with public.	<i>Council webpages demonstrating pride in the achievements of the urban model</i> https://www.pontevedra.gal/pontevedra and https://ok.pontevedra.gal/en/home-2017/e/falan-de-nos/ 
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8.3 Rural Villages & Towns in Pontevedra: The Ágora Network

Ágora Network

The Ágora Network started in 2015 is a collaborative project with the objective of supporting and building the municipalities capacities in the reclamation of public space. It is based on the principle that public space is a 'right of citizenship', with an overarching goal to increase public space across every municipality in the province that signs up to it by 2023. It is heavily influenced by the experiences of Pontevedra City, and some of the key politicians involved (including Uxío Benítez) have also been involved in the City's approach to mobility and public space reclamation. The Ágora project appears now to have finished, with the last grants announced in December 2023³³. The authors are unaware of any current monitoring or evaluation studies into the impacts of the Ágora project yet.

The Network is promoted and driven by the Provincial Council of Pontevedra (Deputación Pontevedra) and is led at the political level by key actors including Carmela Silva (President of the Provincial Council until July 2023); César Mosquera (Vice-President of the Provincial Council until July 2023); and Uxío Benítez Fernández (Provincial Deputy for Mobility, Public Space and Cross-Border Cooperation).

The Network encourages Local Municipalities (Councils), which have **less than 50,000 inhabitants**, to join the Network and to commit to expanding and improving public space and the quality of life of its inhabitants and work together towards similar goals while sharing and exchanging experience and knowledge. Out of the 61 councils/municipalities within the Pontevedra Province, 57 joined the Ágora Network (as of March 2023).

The Ágora Network provides funding to local authorities that have signed up to the Network to increase the amount and quality of public space within their municipality. **The key criterion for receiving the funding is to increase existing pedestrian space by more than 50% and create exclusive areas for pedestrians of at least 300sqm**³⁴. The chances for securing funding increases if the municipality aims for over 1000sqm of recovered public space, and funding applicants must also demonstrate how they address the 10 Ágora Principles (see below). There have been a number of funding calls and funding values, with grant aid provided for both project development (up to €50,000, up to 90% of value) and construction costs (e.g. up to €100,000, up to 20% of value)³⁵. A significant outcome for the Ágora project is the large number of projects not only planned, but actually delivered on the ground over the space of a few years from 2021-2023 (**see Figure 27 and further below for more detailed examples of Ágora projects**). Like in Ireland, many of the Ágora projects also experienced a degree of backlash from the local business community in particular.

³³ For more information see <https://www.depo.gal/es/web/edepo/w/noticia-recuperacion-de-espazos-publicos-e-creacion-de-sendas-de-40-concellos-da-provincia>. The project also appears to have suffered from a change in Provincial Government who reduced or withdrew funding for the programme once they came to power in late 2023.

³⁴ <https://www.depo.gal/-/rede-agora>

³⁵ For more information see <https://www.depo.gal/es/-/rede-agora> and <https://www.depo.gal/es/web/edepo/w/noticia-recuperacion-de-espazos-publicos-e-creacion-de-sendas-de-40-concellos-da-provincia>

The Network is based on the following 10 key principles:

1. Public space is a right

- Governments must meet their obligations to guarantee that every person in an urban environment has a right to quality public space for self-development and socialisation.

2. People first

- Mobility priorities pyramid³⁶ to be employed guaranteeing pedestrian mobility as the priority transport mode, followed by bicycles, collective transport, and the private car.

3. Inclusive mobility

- Public space belongs to everyone.
- Duty to provide universal accessibility to public space, with needs of children, the elderly and people with functional diversity being prioritised.

4. Children's autonomy

- Returning safe public spaces to children.
- Providing socialisation and participation opportunities for girls and boys.

5. Alternative mobilities

- Promotion of walking and active mobility.

6. Safe spaces

- Road safety through traffic calming; speed limits 10-30km/hr max.; raised pedestrian crossings and pedestrian priority.

7. Healthy living environment

- Promotion of healthy travel /active travel.

8. Friendly and quality spaces

- Minimum footpath width of 2.5m for pedestrians.
- Use of single platform (all one level/grade) streets with traffic calming.

9. Local economic activity/Economic activity of proximity

- Presence of people in quality public space to serve local trade.
- Promotion of events (e.g. social, cultural, sports) in public spaces to support local trade & tourism.

10. Sustainable mobility

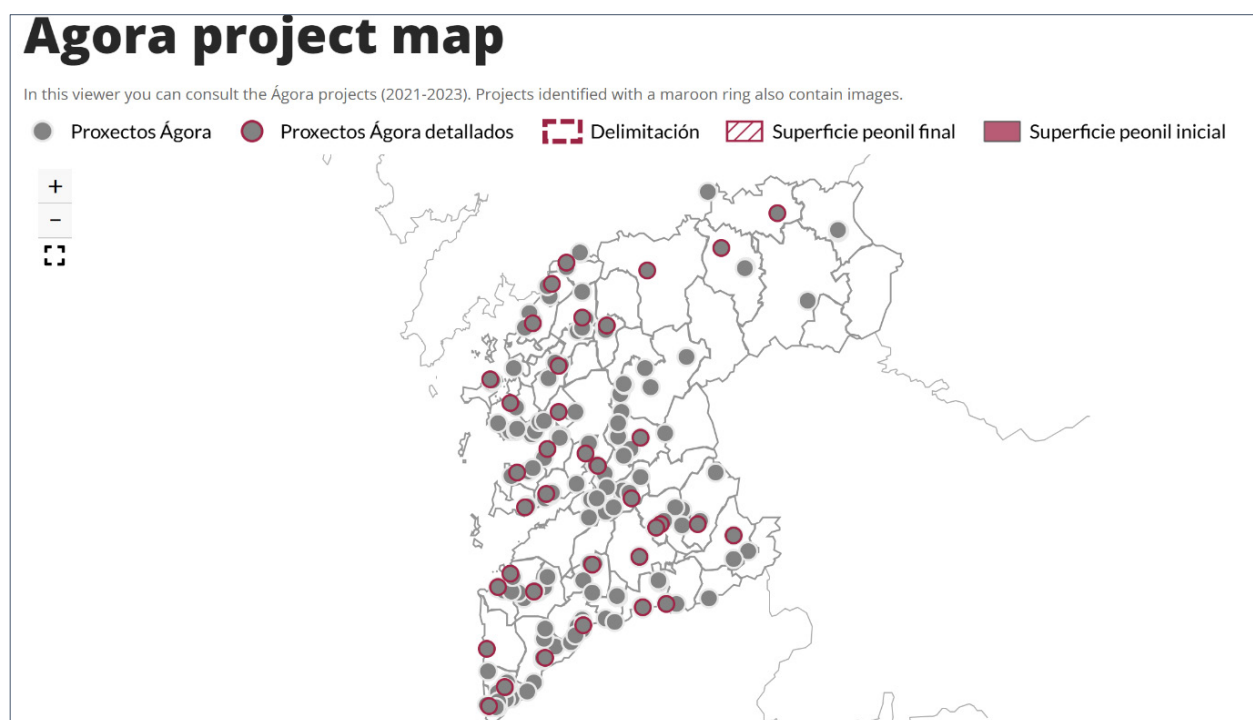
- Reduction in use of motor vehicles for alignment with Sustainable Development Goals and climate crisis.

³⁶ Pedestrians first, followed by bikes/scooters, followed by vehicles.

Figure 26 Ágora Principles (source: Ágora, Deputación Pontevedra)



Figure 27 Map showing the extent of reach of the Ágora project over a wide range of small to large villages and towns across the Pontevedra Province from 2021-2023 with significant road-space reallocation and public realm reclamation featuring highly (Source: <https://redeagora.gal/proxectos/>)



Example Village 1: Seixo, Tomiño, Rural Pontevedra, Galicia.

Key points:

- **Rural service village:** population c. 1908 (contains a market hall selling produce from the wider area)
- **Town Council** in centre of town (in reclaimed public space)
- **Public space in village increased substantially via road space reallocation from:**
 - o 15% in 2007;
 - o 36% in 2015;
 - o 56% in 2020;
 - o 62% in 2022.
- **Car-parking reorganised** - primarily in form of edge of village centre **peripheral carparks** (free of charge), and some on-street parking on 'co-existence' streets.
- **Vehicular traffic reduction** - through village centre supported by an **orbital vehicular by-pass** developed in 2022, although road-space reallocation/public space reclamation works commenced c.2008. However a National Road (PO-344 Rúa Gondamar) still transverses the village, and still takes traffic through the centre of town.

Figure 28 Map showing layout of Seixo village, with new by-pass built (ER-3103 in orange), and zoom in showing location of communal car-parking areas around the edge of the village, marked with a 'P' (source map: openstreetmap.org)

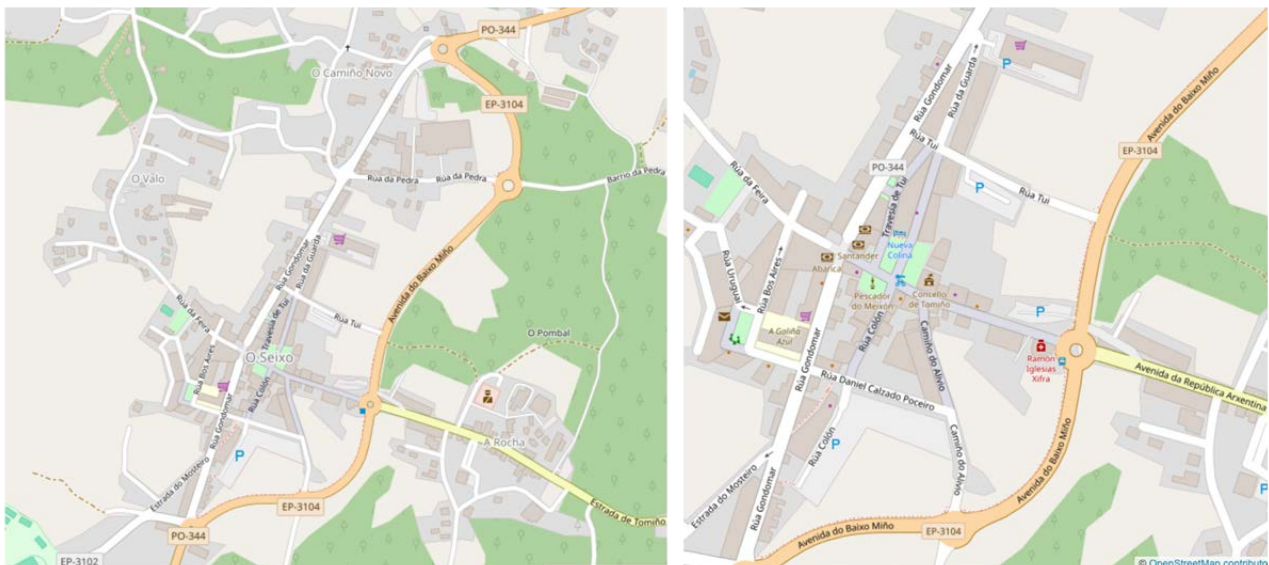


Figure 29 Aerial photograph showing the village centre, new plaza, the Council building ('Concello de Tomiño'), the roundabout connect the by-pass, and some peripheral car-parking areas (source map: Google Maps)

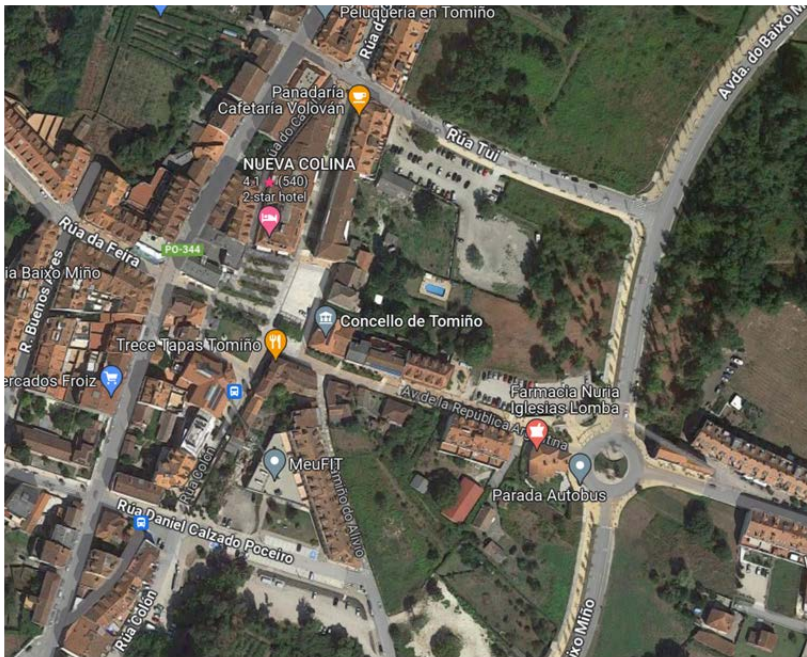
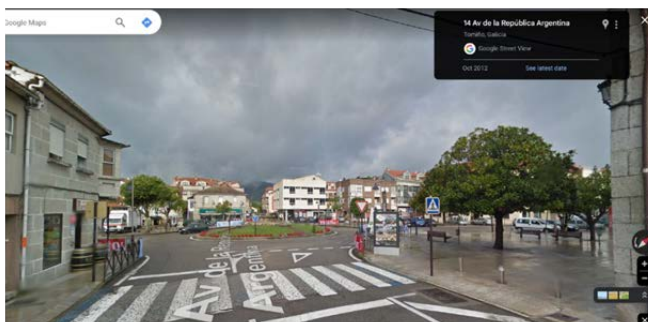
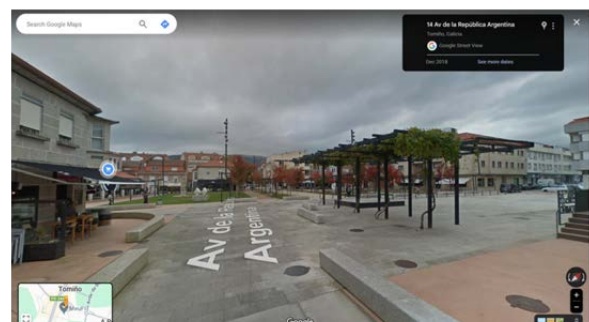


Figure 30 'Before' and 'after' images of the Ágora roadscape reallocation and public realm works in Seixo.

'Before' image, Av. de la Republica Argentina, Seixo from Oct, 2012 (Source: Google Street View)



'After' image, Praza de Seixo (Source: Google Street View)



'Before' image, Rua de Guarda from Dec 2018 (source: Google Street View)



'After' image, Rua de Guarda (source: Author)



Example Village 2: Goían, Tomiño, Rural Pontevedra, Galicia.

Key points:

- **Rural village population** c.2115
- Substantial **road-space reallocation**, new pedestrian links, and new public spaces and amenities. The Main Street is converted to a pedestrian street, and there is no through route for vehicles.
- **Car-parking reorganised** - primarily in form of edge of village centre peripheral carparks (free of charge), and some on-street parking on 'co-existence' streets.

Figure 31 Map and aerial photo showing layout of Goían village, with adjacent National Road (Avenida do Brasil, PO - 522 in orange). Communal car-parking areas are located around the edge of the village [source map (top): openstreetmap.org; (bottom) Google Maps].

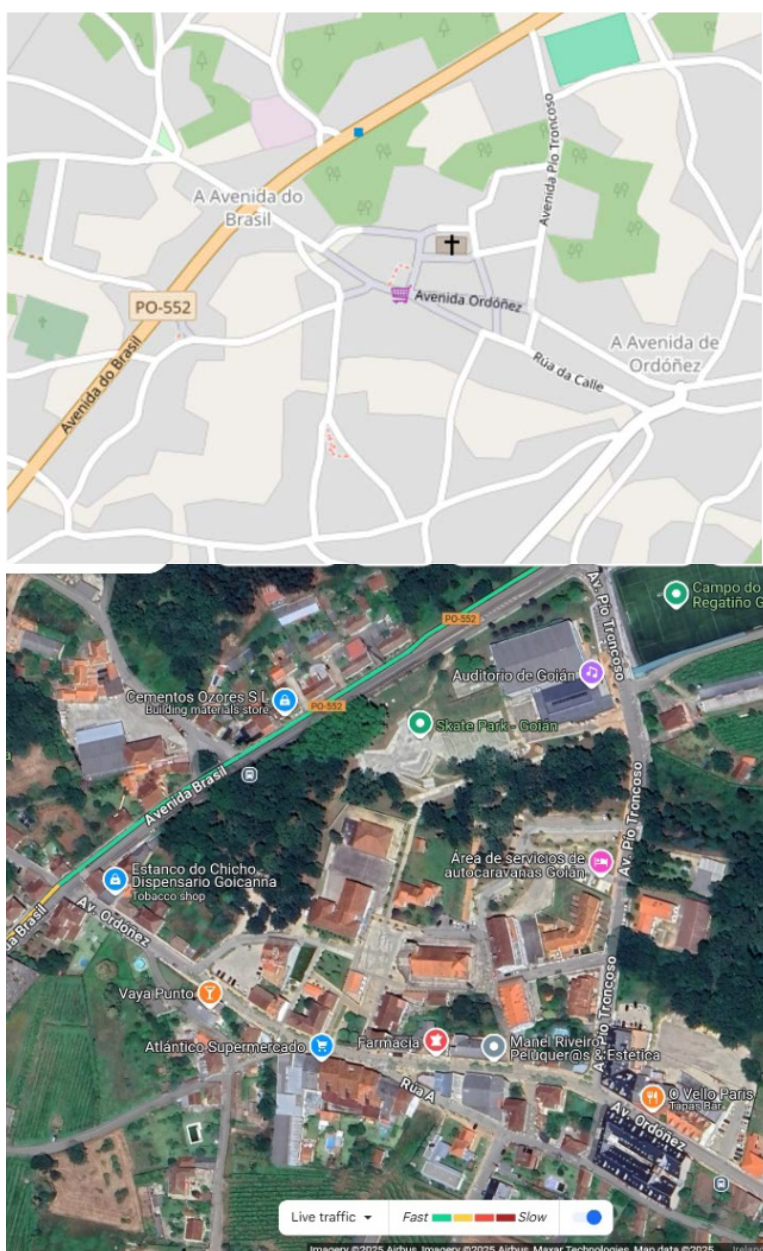


Figure 32 'Before' and 'after' images of the Ágora roadspace reallocation and public realm works in Goían.



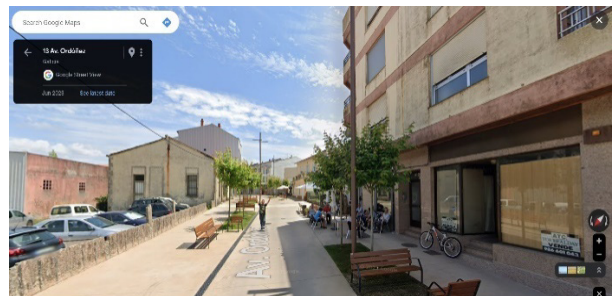
'Before' image from May, 2011 (Source: Google Street View)



'After' image Goían Av. Ordoñez.



'Before' image from May, 2011 (Source: Google Street View),
Goían, Av. Ordoñez



'After' image from May, 2011 (Source: Google Street View),
Goían, Av. Ordoñez

Example Village 3: Gondomar, Rural Pontevedra, Galicia.

- **Rural village population:** c.3856 (municipality: c. **15,103**)
- Substantial **road-space reallocation**, new pedestrianised streets, and new public spaces.
- **Town Council** in centre of town (in reclaimed public space) <https://concellodegondomar.gal/>

Figure 33 Map (pedestrianised streets in grey) and aerial photo (dating from pre-works) showing layout of Gondomar (sources - left: openstreetmap.org; right: Google Maps)

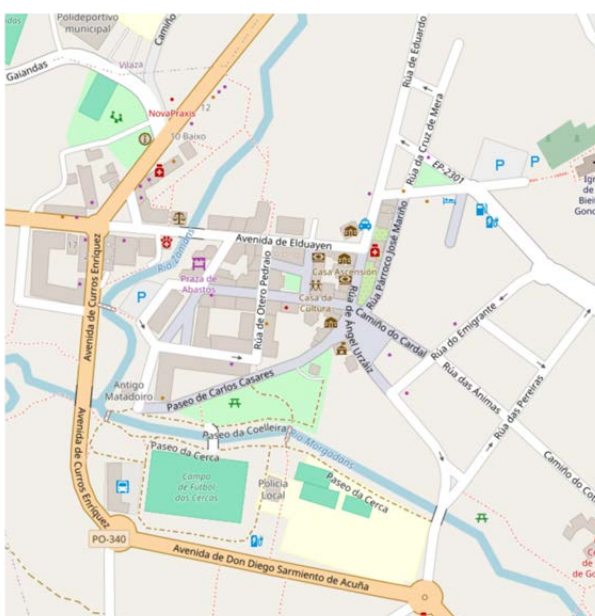
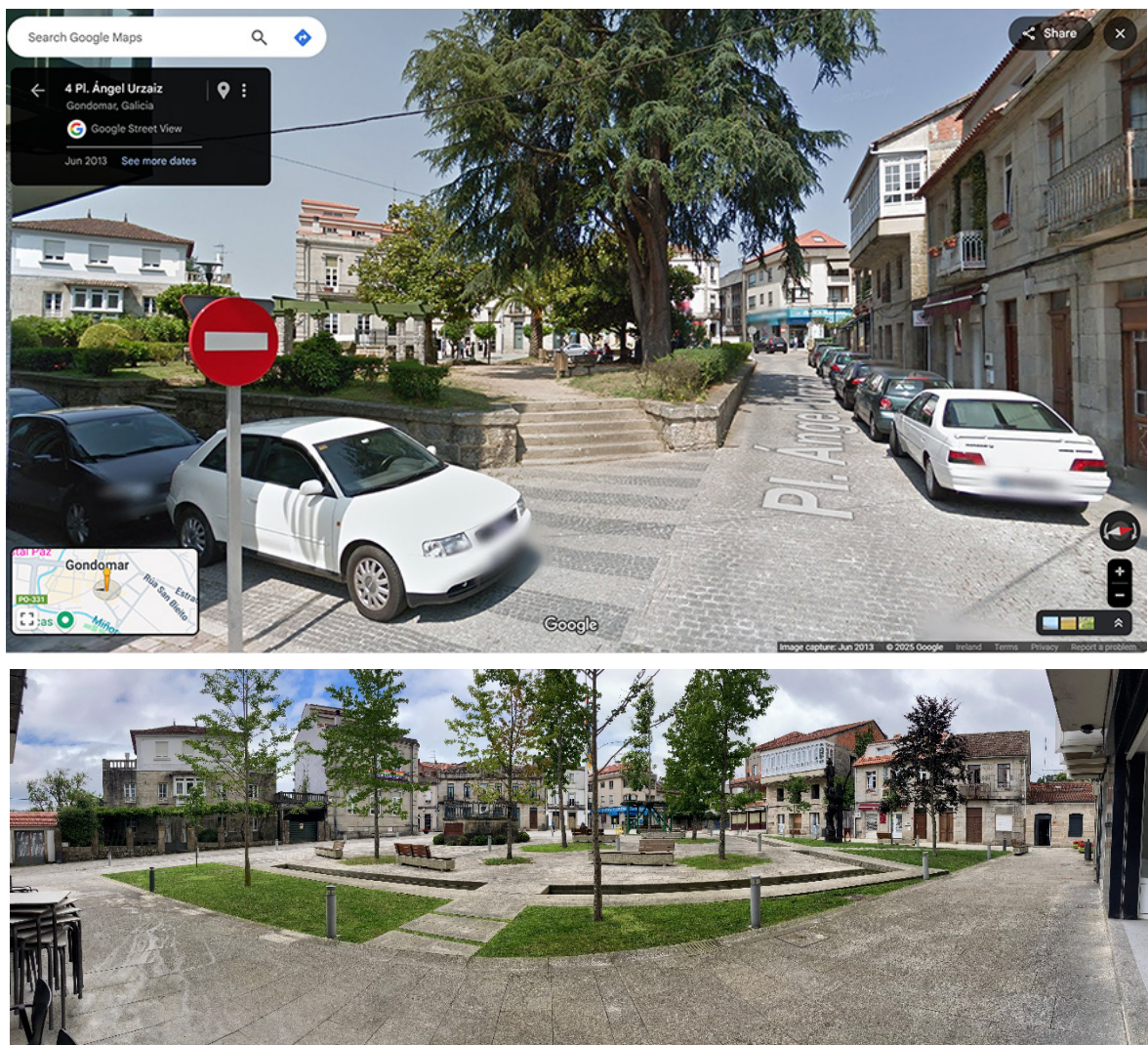


Figure 34 'Before' and 'after' images of Rúa Ángel Urzaiz (source: left – Google Street View; right – S. Rock)



Figure 35 'Before' and 'after' images of Place Ángel Urzaiz (source: top – Google Street View; bottom – S. Rock)



The Ágora Faculty

The Ágora Faculty supported the Ágora Network and provides multidisciplinary training and resources to professionals and political leaders in the area of Urban Design and public realm/public space design.

The Government's 'Deputy of Public Space & Alternative Mobilities' (at the time) Uxío Benítez Fernández described the need for education in this area (in Galician) as “En Arquitectura ensinan a facer edificios de fachada para dentro e en Enxeñería a facer as estradas. Do espazo que queda entre a fachada e o bordo, o que queda para as persoas, ninguén se ocupa.’ Nós queremos cubrir esa parcela: é necesario e impotante que todo o deseño urbano se faga ben.” (Deputación Pontevedra, p.15, undated) which approximately translates to (using Google Translate):

“In Architecture they teach how to make buildings with facades inward, and in Engineering how to make roads. From the space that remains between the façade and the edge, what – it’s for people, no one cares’. We want to cover that plot: it is necessary and important that all urban design is done well.”

Uxío Benítez Fernández describes the Ágora Faculty as having a “multidisciplinary, plural, and diverse vision of what public space is’ and that ‘public space belongs to everyone, truly democratic, and if that’s the case, what needs to be done is to democratise analysis, design, and the search for solutions. It does not make sense that it is only an architect or engineer who proposed solutions and designs the public space. You have to listen to medical staff, teachers, police, geographers, biologists, sociologists, photographers.....You have to make a choice, see different perspectives”(Deputación Pontevedra, p.15, undated, translated from Galician using Google Translate).

Seminars were provided by those from a variety of backgrounds including engineering, architecture, sociology, teaching, medicine, photography, sport, geography, biology, landscape, and the environment among other areas. The training included 11 seminars on four key themes:

1. good urbanism/urban planning;
2. good mobility;
3. healthy places/environment, and
4. healthy local economies.

A particularly innovative part of the Ágora Faculty was the training session dedicated exclusively to policing, run for police officers by police officers³⁷ (with an introduction by an elected leader). Topics include:

- The prevention of collision and its relationship with design of public realm;
- Speed reduction techniques;
- The defence of recovered public space;

³⁷ <https://redeagora.gal/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/mini-dossier-poli.pdf>

-
- Circulation Plan design, car-parking reorganisation & concept of necessary traffic and it's management; and
 - How to achieve buy-in and collaboration from citizens.

8.4 Key Lessons & Insights

1. **Step-by-Step Approach:** Pontevedra City commenced its road-space reallocation and public realm reclamation works in 1999 in the historic city core which was converted to a pedestrianised zone. The pedestrian areas are still being expanded today (with well-defined 'necessary traffic' still permitted in most parts the city). Over time a series of 'push' and 'pull' interventions were made, including regulatory and enforcement measures. National Roads through heart of the city centre were decommissioned, and these streets converted into pedestrian priority zones with high quality paving and street furniture.
2. **'Pedestrian First' & Quality of Life:** The fundamental approach is one of 'pedestrian first', with public space considered as a citizen right, the creation of a city that is 'better on foot' and an emphasis on a high quality of life for citizens. Outside of the main 'pedestrianised' areas of the city centre, road-space is predominantly allocated on the principle of a minimum footpath width of 2.5m on each side of the street. If there is space left-over after this allocation, then this may be considered for other uses such as on-street loading bays or car-parking, or as a carriageway for vehicles.
3. **Leadership, Communication & Citizen Buy-in:** The Pontevedra Model (both City and regional) has been championed at the political level, particularly by the Galician Nationalist Bloc³⁸ party's Mayor of Pontevedra City Council, Miguel Anxo Fernández Lores (who has been in power for 7 consecutive terms since 1999), and Councillor César Lourenzo Mosquera. The latter is the Councillor for Urban Improvement which includes responsibility for urban mobility management, car-park management, and public transport. At the rural town level, Councillor Uxío Benítez Fernández has been particularly relevant, overseeing town planning, mobility and public space, road safety and traffic management. These and others have been particularly strong in leading change, communicating regularly with their citizens, and working hard to gain citizen-buy in for the works including via the Ágora Faculty, and working to the principle of 'benefits for the citizens outweighing the disbenefits' associated with the road-space reallocation.

³⁸ Bloque Nacionalista Galego, BNG. The left leaning coalition, however, lost some share of the vote to the conservative People's Party of Galicia (PP) in the most recent election (May 2023), as was the trend across the autonomous region as well as Spain. The impact of the change of government at the regional level is yet to be fully determined, but it appears that funding for the Agora project has now been diverted elsewhere.

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4. **Road Safety & Culture of ‘Mutual Respect’** : Road Safety is a significant issue in Ireland currently, both in rural and urban areas, including town centres. One of the most significant outcomes of the Pontevedra City model are large scale reductions in vehicular traffic levels, vehicle congestion, and vehicle speeds, and an associated reduction in road traffic related serious injuries and fatalities. Pontevedra City has been internationally recognised for its record on road safety having won the first European Transport Safety Council’s ‘EU Urban Road Safety Award’ in 2020. The City has consistently reduced deaths and serious injuries since 1999 and has achieved Vision Zero for fatalities. A culture of mutual respect on the streets and roads is embedded into their urban model and approach to communication with citizens, whereby drivers must give way to pedestrians/cyclists/scooters, and cyclists and scooter riders must give-way to pedestrians.
 5. **Re-organising car-parking:** Re-organising car-parking into mainly communal ‘park ‘n’ stride’ locations is a key principle of the Pontevedra approach. In Pontevedra City, there are also service car-parks within the city centre, and fee-based underground parking, but the park ‘n’ stride locations are incentivised through free parking at locations of no more than 10-12 minutes from any point within the City Centre, or a few minutes walk in the case of rural towns/villages. The pedestrian experience and a sense of pedestrian priority from these car-parks to the centres are also very important.
 6. **Population Growth in a Stagnating Region:** The Galician region has experienced largely stagnating population over the last two decades (some areas have experienced some growth and others some decline). However, the Pontevedra province is attracting modest growth (c.3.8%), and Pontevedra City is attracting people to live there at a considerably greater rate (at c.11.7%) than the largest city, Vigo (at 3.1%)³⁹.

³⁹ For more information see [Historico de poblacion - Deputación de Pontevedra](#)

9. Conclusions & Key Insights for Irish Towns

There is significant opportunity for public realm and road space reallocation to contribute towards better social, economic and environmental outcomes. This is wholly consistent with Project Ireland 2040 policy and funding. Quality of life, quality of places and liveability are recognised as key drivers to achieving the ten strategic outcomes, and specifically, in the case of this study, achieving the objectives of ‘Compact Growth’ and ‘Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities’. The literature also shows the particular potential role of road-space and public realm (re)allocation in the ‘restructuring’ of town centres, contributing to the ‘4 Rs of Regeneration’ and the priority factors for viability and vitality as identified in Parker *et al.* (2017).

Research & Evidence Base

There is a considerable body of knowledge internationally demonstrating the socio-economic benefits of road-space reallocation and public space reclamation. These mainly appear to be at a larger town or city scale; however, several learnings are still applicable to smaller towns, and this study has applied these in this review where considered contextually appropriate.

Studies on the impact of these interventions at smaller scale i.e. towns of smaller population and function (greater/less extent and diversity) is limited generally, and largely absent in the Irish context.

There is a research gap in this area within an Irish context, and it would be particularly beneficial for further research to be undertaken at the town scale. Car-access and car-parking is also a significantly under-researched area, including understanding the car-parking ‘market’ that currently exists and the extent of the public and private domain currently given over to car-parking and car-access in different town settings in Ireland.

Place Value

This study has viewed the value of road space reallocation and public realm interventions through the lens of ‘social infrastructure’ and the potential to improve quality of life, increase place value and address rural transport disadvantage. The intention is to provide a comprehensive understanding of value across policy areas and in the Irish context.

The consistent ‘decentralisation’ of retail through larger anchor stores and online sales means that retail property-led strategies are less effective. Changes in town centres prompt the need for the ‘high street’ to have a ‘USP’ (Unique Selling Point) and for towns to have an emphasis on place value. Footfall in urban areas is driven by the diversity of place features, not just one significant generator.

The research highlights the importance of understanding the diversity and potential of different places. Consideration of difference and variety is important for developing policy responses and the potential for public realm and road space reallocation to contribute to achieving their wider policy objectives.

Notwithstanding the importance of difference, the OECD, among others have identified that there is considerable potential for road-space reallocation in Irish towns. For example, many Irish towns have lost much of their previous public space, such as Market Squares, to car-parking areas. Many Irish towns also have considerable populations within walking catchments of the town centres, and policy seeks to increase this further through encouraging the return of more people to live within town centres.

The definition of “road” even in legislation, applies to all aspects of the public realm. It is not presumed to be primarily for the use of vehicles. Streets and public spaces can be considered social infrastructure across aspects of public institutions, commerce and mobility. When road space is viewed through the lens of social infrastructure, an abundance of car-dominated road space obviously falls short on delivering the social potential for people, commerce, public life and mobility functions.

The research demonstrates that investment in attractive, walkable places can deliver quantifiable commercial returns for businesses. Pedestrian activity and dwell time increase in tandem with public realm interventions, relative to streets/areas without intervention.

As place quality improves there is the potential for attracting increased investment, regeneration and strengthening community support for development. Certain sectors/skills are drawn to certain urban environments for reasons related to alignment with cultural values, quality of life, opportunities for socialisation, networking and innovation. There is potential to understand this more at the town scale considering the potential for remote working (in some sectors) and patterns of migration from cities to towns during Covid-19.

Emphasis on ‘value for money’ on investment in a scheme where the benefits and costs are understood in narrow financial terms under-represents the benefits to wider society in the increased health outcomes which result from increased active travel and opportunities for socialisation.

Providing walkable places increases physical activity and addresses issues of ‘community severance’ where people, particularly older and younger people are discouraged from walking as there are separated from goods or services by busy roads or transport infrastructure.

The 2022 EU Loneliness Study⁴⁰ finds loneliness is most prevalent in Ireland (across the EU) with over 20% of respondents reporting feeling lonely. In the Irish context, rural geography and the absence of public transport can perpetuate loneliness. Social infrastructure supports social connection and can help address loneliness.

Road-Space Reallocation in Ireland

In Ireland, there have been several towns and cities that have undergone considerable road-space reallocation and public space reclamation pre Covid-19, including Waterford City Centre, Clonakilty,

⁴⁰ For more information, see https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/projects-and-activities/survey-methods-and-analysis-centre/loneliness/eu-loneliness-survey_en

Dungarvan and Westport. There are, however, very limited detailed studies that have evaluated the impacts of these in socio-economic terms, although interesting and useful data is being collected in a number of locations around Ireland that could form the basis of future evaluative research. Westport was one of the ‘Smarter Travel’ towns and has been subject to ex-post analysis. It is also notable that Westport is now ranked number 1 on the 2024 Western Development Commission’s Sustainable Mobility Index (for rural towns in the Western Region). This suggests that these initial, and perhaps foundational interventions have acted as a catalyst for continuous improvement over time and suggests the value of incremental change. Again, the benefits for quality of life and economy are evident in this town.

Covid-19 brought about some of the most significant road and public space allocation changes in Ireland (through what are known as ‘Covid Mobility’ works), since the advent of mass motorisation. Significant schemes have taken place in several towns and villages around the country including: Blackrock, Dundrum and along the coast from Seapoint to Sandycove within Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council (DLR); in Kildare Town Centre; in Dublin City Centre; in Cork City Centre, and others.

DLR engaged TU Dublin to undertake a medium-term evaluative research project on their Covid Mobility works, which has demonstrated strong socio-economic benefits, particularly in Blackrock and along the Coastal Mobility Route (CMR). The most recent 4-year economic development follow-up study of the Covid Works in Blackrock Main Street (2025) has concluded that the Covid Mobility works in Blackrock has spurred on the revitalisation and regeneration of Blackrock Main Street, and this has been largely welcomed by the business community. Having an evidence base from which to learn from in Blackrock and Dundrum etc. is very beneficial, not only for the future of these towns, but also for other towns.

Step-by-Step Approach

Both Pontevedra (Galicia) and Blackrock (Co. Dublin) have gone for a ‘step-by step’ approach to introducing change in space allocation. This has allowed the public, as well as business owners, to get used to the idea of change over time and allows stakeholders to experience the benefits/lessons of certain changes before further road-space reallocation takes place.

In Blackrock temporary materials were used as part of this process, but a strong emphasis was given to ‘placemaking’ including high quality and comfortable wooden seating and attractive planting. This was critical to community buy-in.

Car-parking and car-access is a highly emotive area and can make or break a road-space reallocation and public reclamation proposal. Although there are many misconceptions around the role and importance of customers travelling by car, and an inherent bias associated with our current system of automobility, businesses tend to have a real fear that they will lose custom if car-parking is taken away, especially when this is the status quo.

Change is usually hard and brings many unknowns, and the status quo is often seen as ‘safer’. Given so many towns are struggling economically, this fear can even be enhanced further. The function and small size of many Irish towns will mean a degree of car-access and car-parking will remain important. However, if the balance is skewed too much in favour of car-access and car-parking, this will limit the towns potential to grow and regenerate, will limit the potential customer base, and can have negative impacts on the town

socially and economically, including for local businesses. Even the simple concept of understanding public realm versus road space ratios in an urban area have the potential to provide an indicative assessment of the extent of unbalance that currently exists in the use of space in Irish towns.

Pontevedra, for example, has shown that there is a way to cater for both car-parking and car-access through the reorganisation of car-parking areas and through the removal of vehicular through-traffic, while also regenerating socially, economically and environmentally.

Blackrock has also demonstrated that a greater balance in car-access versus public space can be achieved that has helped make the Main Street a successful destination again. The Coastal Mobility Route in Dún Laoghaire has shown how an adjacent high amenity 'urban greenway' (cycle-way) can be a real boost to a town that connects with it.

Pedestrian Priority & Quality of Life

Ireland currently has a considerable issue with declining safety on our roads and increasing deaths and serious injuries. Pontevedra has demonstrated that significant improvements in road safety, as well as urban and rural regeneration, are possible when the issue is addressed from a 'pedestrian first' and quality of life approach. URBACT (2022) recommends the establishment of 'pedestrian priority' areas and low traffic speeds as the most critical actions for the successful realisation of innovations in mobility and public space in towns with populations less than 50,000 and with limited public transport.

The ex-post analysis of the Smarter Travel Towns found that while the rate of change for modal shift was higher than the national level, it was reported as "reasonably low" in that evaluation. However, quality of life within the towns was found to be improved "*mainly as a result of the improved amenity presented by infrastructure investment*" (DTTaS, 2018:24).

It is evident that proposals which are perceived as inconveniencing drivers, such as reallocation of road space, removal of car-parking spaces and reduction of speed limits are difficult to implement as they may lack public/political support. In the case of the Ágora programme in Pontevedra, we see a very effective approach to communicating the socio-economic value of the interventions across towns and incorporating the diverse needs of people. The ten principles are easily understood, they promote mobility, quality of life, equity and environmental outcomes and, like the ten strategic outcomes in the *National Planning Framework*, they can be understood and applied across spatial scales. Research consistently shows the critical importance of meaningful and on-going engagement with key stakeholders for community and business buy-in.

There is a need to consider how political and public support for these schemes can be garnered and maintained, and for strong leadership. Leadership can come in many forms, and has proved instrumental in the success of the case studies. Political leadership from both the local and the provincial level was the key driving force behind Pontevedra's success, while leadership from the business community coupled with the local executive, and supported by local elected representatives being critical in Blackrock. These examples also illustrate that positive change for the wider community and the public good is achievable.

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