



NIIRTA

Northern Ireland Independent
Retail Trade Association

LOCAL FIRST

80 POLICY PRIORITIES FOR LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

THE NIIRTA PROGRAMME FOR LOCAL
GOVERNMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND



Danske Bank



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WHAT IS NIIRTA?

The Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association (NIIRTA) is the representative business organisation for the independent retail sector. Our members include Retailers, Wholesalers, Suppliers to the Sector, affiliated Chambers of Commerce and Traders' Groups. Our 1500 members come from every village, town and city across Northern Ireland.

NIIRTA is committed to standing up for our High Streets and local Town and City Centres to ensure our independent retail sector gets a fair deal from Government.

We have also established a Suppliers' Forum to support local companies who supply or wish to supply goods and services to our members.

If you are interested in joining NIIRTA, please contact us.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Policy Priorities of Local First:

Belt and Braces Town Centre First planning policy

3000 new Independent Retailers by 2020

Strong Cabinet Style Local Government

Effective Town Centre Partnerships

Small Business Commissioner for Belfast

Regeneration Commissioner for Derry/Londonderry

Restructured Chambers of Commerce

Shop Vacancy Strategy

Retail Development Plans

Town Centre Incubator Units

Community Hub model for Town Centres

More Grade A Office Space

Expanded Empty Premises Rate Relief Scheme

Shared Future Town Centres

Establishing Local Growth Partnerships

First year Small Business Strategy

Partnership Accords with FE Colleges

On Street Car Parking to Councils

Public Transport - First Option, not Last

Free Town Centre Wi-Fi by 2020

Apps for every Town Centre by 2016

Smart High Streets and Digital Town Centres

INTRODUCTION

NIIRTA enjoys strong and constructive relationships with both elected representatives and officials within Local Government in Northern Ireland.

On behalf of our members, we have made formal presentations to the majority of the twenty-six Councils on planning, economic development and town centre regeneration issues over the past thirteen years.

Our members are Community Entrepreneurs who provide an important service to the local community and believe in real and genuine partnerships with their local Councils. They champion strong, vibrant and diverse town centres, which are in themselves, centres of both retail and hospitality excellence.

We believe that the proposed new system encompassing eleven Councils, with enhanced powers, provides a real opportunity to make a difference to local communities, the economy and town centres.

They can be the change makers.

It is about refreshing local government to permit a greater freedom for citizens, expressing and fulfilling their ambitions for their local communities.


The reform of government to date has been very much about process. We believe now the focus needs to move towards policy development and external consultation, so the newly elected Councillors will hit the ground running when power is formally devolved to them in 2015.

The mechanism exists in the form of the 'Shadow Councils'. These must actively develop their relationships with local businesses and other stakeholders during their tenure.

What are they going to do with these new powers to help create employment, regenerate town centres, revamp car parking and create a fair planning system, which supports local business? These are key issues which should be considered a priority.

New Community Planning powers will be key in integrating all the various streams of public life. Councils will work with their local businesses, communities and statutory bodies and agencies to promote the well-being of their area and improve the quality of life of its citizens.

Essentially, community planning will ensure that citizens' needs are at the heart of decision-making on local



“Councils and Councillors have a key role to play in addressing issues that affect the lives and the life experiences of all our people...

“The Executive’s vision is one of strong, dynamic local government, creating communities that are vibrant, healthy, prosperous, safe and sustainable and that have the needs of all their citizens at their core.

Councillors play a unique role in delivering that vision by linking the delivery of services with local people’s needs and ambitions. Working together, they have a clear role in providing strong civic leadership and acting as a consistent advocate for their area.”

services. NIIRTA has produced this manifesto to provide solutions rather than problems for our newly elected Councillors as they take power.

We have set out some ideas on giving further powers to the new Councils and our thoughts on possible new structures and wider economic policy priorities for the NI Executive.

We very much value your feedback and look forward to hearing from you.

Glyn Roberts
NIIRTA Chief Executive

glyn.roberts@niirta.com

Mark H Durkan MLA, Minister for the Environment,
Northern Ireland Assembly, 1 October 2013

‘The high street and the retail sector are facing a period of flux with tremendous pressures from local, national and global consumer trends, including rapid changes in the fiscal climate affecting local authorities. This situation has become particularly acute since the global economic downturn of 2008, which many see as the start of a significant long term global restructuring of the world’s economy.’

ATCM: Successful Town Centres - Developing Effective Strategies (2014)

1. SHAPING UP TO DELIVER

This new system of local government is not just about reducing the number of Councils and administration; it is about devolving significant powers from the Northern Ireland Executive to local government.

In our view this means a change in how local Councils undertake their business and their structure to ensure these new powers deliver for local communities. In our experience of working with the twenty-six local Councils, they deliver best when there is effective partnership and power sharing among political groups.

We also need to see the eleven new Councils establishing effective

partnerships with their local private sector and central government.

NIIRTA works closely with, and fully supports, the extensive networks of town based Chambers of Commerce. These will underpin the ‘local’ nature of local government and help to counter the perception that local identities are being eroded.

However, these structures will require radical changes for Chambers of Commerce to influence the new Council structure.



» NIIRTA RECOMMENDATIONS

- » The new extensive powers are a game changer and we would recommend that the eleven Councils adopt a Cabinet style partnership administration, which is inclusive of their political groupings. This would ensure local Councillors are able to make decisions and be accountable to local communities.
- » A system of scrutiny committees would hold each Cabinet member to account and ensure wider input into policy development.
- » The parties making up the Council Cabinet would produce an agreed four-year programme in which local businesses and Chambers of Commerce are fully consulted.
- » All Council meetings should be open and transparent to the general public, including Cabinet meetings.
- » The DOE should amend the legislation to allow individual 'Cabinet Members' to hold a policy portfolio and head Council Departments.
- » We would recommend the establishment of a 'Cabinet Member' for Town Centres, Regeneration and Planning.
- » Councils should establish a strong network of effective Town Centre Partnerships.
- » In addition, the Cabinet Member of Town Centres will take the lead for establishing Business Improvement Districts (BIDS), car parking and planning on behalf of the Council.
- » A Cabinet Member for Enterprise, Tourism and Small Business is created to work in partnership with Chambers of Commerce, Invest NI, Northern Ireland Tourist Board, DETI and Further Education colleges.
- » Given Belfast's role and size as a key regional economic driver, we would recommend consideration of the NI Executive and Belfast City Council to establish a Small Business Commissioner based on the New York City model. Like that of NYC, the aim of this model is a one stop shop to assist new start SMEs and promote business and growth by providing direct assistance to business owners, fostering neighborhood development and linking employers to a skilled and qualified workforce.
- » This Commissioner model could be adapted for Derry/Londonderry on a different basis to promote a regeneration led City of Culture legacy for the city, replacing the wide number of existing regeneration agencies.
- » We would recommend that the existing network of town based Chambers of Commerce reform their structure to better reflect the new Council boundaries. This could mean a governing body matching the Council boundary, whilst retaining the local nature of each existing Chamber, which is often one of its biggest strengths.
- » Following this re-organisation of Chambers of Commerce, we would recommend that each Chamber President be given observer status at Council Cabinet meetings to ensure effective partnership with the local private sector.
- » Given that several NI Executive departments are passing over responsibilities to the eleven Councils, we recommend the reorganisation of the twelve Executive Departments to seven. This will ensure a more focused and strategic approach by the Executive.

2. TOMORROW'S TOWN AND CITY CENTRES

Retail is the largest sector of our private sector in Northern Ireland, contributing 1 in 10 jobs and generating billions in revenue for the local economy.

NIIRTA has long championed the need for vibrant and diverse town centres, which are centres of excellence for both retail and hospitality. To survive in modern retail, it is a constant process of change, innovation and embracing new technology to reach out to an increasingly sophisticated consumer.

Town centres are living and breathing spaces where consumers can enjoy a rich and diverse experience that is not available on-line or in a retail park. Unique and characterful shops, cafés, restaurants, essential services, brand name retailers and cultural events are an essential part of what makes the

high street different and appealing. In order to engage with the modern consumer and for the future of the high street to be assured, this physical experience must integrate with the digital-virtual-mobile experience.

Town and city centres are eco-systems for many different types of business and we need to focus on supporting their growth to boost footfall and sales for retailers.

As the Association of Town & City Centre Management rightly says, we need to think of the strategic positioning of town centres to reclaim them to their rightful position and role as places that serve their communities, visitors, businesses and key stakeholders, with a quality of experience that encourages them to keep coming back, and staying longer.



‘Policymakers need to start focusing on the role of the city centre economy as a whole. For this to happen the Government should make city centres a key priority within its National Infrastructure Plan and allocate funding to address the physical and digital infrastructure requirements to support business growth within city centres.’

Centre For Cities: Beyond the High Street: Why our city centres really matter -
Paul Swinney & Dmitry Sivaev (Sept 2013)

We have previously produced the Town Centre First report, which sets out over fifty solutions for reinvented retail for tomorrow's town centres, building upon the Mary Portas report.

Our local town centres face huge challenges, with the highest shop vacancy rate in the UK of nearly 20% and, according to the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium, the lowest footfall rates in the UK.

Instead of looking at the massive amount of empty shops in our town centres as just derelict building, let's be ambitious and see them as the new retailers and small businesses of the future.

NIIRTA applauds the establishment by DFP of the Small Business Rate Relief scheme and Empty Premises Relief in recent years, which are supportive of existing and new small businesses in local town centres.

We believe that the eleven Councils will have a crucial role in leading change in planning, regeneration, car parking, rates and many other policy areas for our town and city centres, building on the firm foundations laid down.

Crime against town centre retailers remains a serious problem and whilst there have been many initiatives and groups formed over the last few years to combat it, many retailers still believe there is an absence of a coherent strategy to catch and punish offenders.

NIIRTA strongly welcomes the new Single Planning Policy Statement (SPPS), 'Town Centre First' approach to retail planning, issued by DOE Minister Mark H Durkan MLA in February 2014. This new Policy Statement should be the template for the Councils when they take over major elements of planning in 2015.



» NIIRTA RECOMMENDATIONS

- » As part of the Area Plan process all Councils should adopt a strong and vigorous 'Town Centre First' approach planning policy to all major retail applications.
- » In order to boost town centre footfall, we urge Councils to also adopt this approach when considering major planning applications such as cinemas, hotels and leisure parks.
- » Councils should draw up standing orders to ensure effective consultation with local traders on significant planning applications which impact on town centres.
- » NIIRTA supports a strong planning guidance element within any new statutory Code of Conduct for Councillors.
- » Decisions on major Article 31 planning applications should remain with the DOE Minister.
- » Every Council should have a Town Centre Manager and effective Town Centre Partnerships to bring forward BIDS, to be in place as an early priority.
- » A comprehensive Shop Vacancy Strategy should be put in place with targets and six-month progress reports.
- » Councils should produce tailored Retail Development Plans for every town centre.
- » The eleven Councils should put in place common Key Performance Indicators to measure the economic health of each of their town centres and publish this on an annual basis.
- » Councils should establish Town Centre Retail Incubator Units in vacant shops to encourage start up retailers and provide affordable rents and marketing support for the first year.
- » There should be clear endorsement given to the Grimsey Review recommendation that town centre/high street plans must encompass a complete community hub solution incorporating health, housing, education, arts, entertainment, business/office space, manufacturing and leisure, whilst developing day-time, evening and night-time cultures where shops are just a part of the total plan.
- » NIIRTA supports the Grimsey Review proposal of making it compulsory for national retail and leisure chains to invest 0.25% of one year's sales into a local economic development fund to sponsor local start up businesses in a similar way to the Prince's Trust. This would be a one-off levy.
- » Given the importance of Grade A office space to the local economy, Councils need to put in place a strategy with the NI Executive to address potential lack of supply to provide suitable accommodation for multi-nationals in, or within close proximity to, town centres, thus boosting potential retail footfall.
- » Developing a town centre living strategy is a priority. This should be reflected in the new SPSS and Councils' new community and spatial plans.
- » Councils work with local Chambers of Commerce to support an annual Small Business Saturday and at least three 'Super Saturdays' throughout the year to promote local retail and hospitality sectors.
- » Every local Council should establish an annual Culture Night, or similar equivalents, in their town centres to boost footfall and help to support positive community relations.
- » The promotion of town centres should be included as a core part of a Council Tourism Strategy in parallel with a greater Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) focus on promoting Northern Ireland as a weekend shopping destination.



- » Each Council should consider appointing a Director of Tourism and Hospitality to co-ordinate promotional activities and give support to local bars, restaurants and hotels to develop café culture and the night-time economy of town centres.
- » NIIRTA supports the ATCM position that Councils should adopt a holistic approach to the integration and management of the day-time, evening and night-time economies. These three segments of the 24-hour economy should be seen as part of one menu that town centres offer.
- » To assist Councils developing their Town Centre Vacancy strategies, we recommend that the DFP change the qualifying criteria of the Empty Premises Relief from a property having to be twelve months vacant to six months to ensure a faster turnover.
- » If a town centre shop vacancy rate reaches 40%, Councils should have the power to request that Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) automatically implements an emergency rate relief scheme. DFP officials should then be seconded for a short-term period to assist local officials to develop an action plan to deal with immediate issues.
- » DFP and local Councils need to ensure that the 2015 Rates Revaluation and Rates Convergence do not have a double whammy effect on small businesses. No small trader should have to pay any extra in rates as a result of the re-organisation of local government. This immediately defeats the new sense of enthusiasm that this reorganisation presents an opportunity for a fresh beginning.
- » Councils need to ensure they fully consult with local traders before they strike a business rate. A series of business consultation meetings should be held before an approval vote in Council.
- » There must be clarity on the future of policing in the context of local government reform. The current PCSP network has not built strong relationships with local businesses. Some perform better than others and this must be rectified as a matter of urgency.
- » The use of social media by the PSNI has been largely successful at local level but with limited input from the business community to date. This is a resource that could be developed effectively to help retailers combat crime and anti-social behaviour, as well as improving direct contact with local officers.
- » Crime 'hotspots' identified within Council boundaries should be prioritised for action – this is a factor that can deter business starts and inward investors and where problems exist, they should be combated head on.
- » There must be a zero tolerance approach to combat more serious organised crime, irrespective of its source, as much of it goes unrecognized for having a disastrous effect on many small retailers.
- » A review of the various retail crime schemes and programmes across Northern Ireland should be undertaken to ensure each is fit for purpose and where possible, benchmarking of good practice should take place.
- » A zero tolerance approach to offences such as shoplifting and anti-social behaviour must be adopted. These are often described as 'petty' and 'minor' but in fact cause distress and added costs to both law-abiding customers and retailers.
- » Councils must adopt a strong and effective Shared Future Strategy for their town and city centres, ensuring they are inclusive, welcoming and above all, shared spaces for citizens.

“Every place is unique. Local leaders are best placed to understand the opportunities and obstacles to growth in their own communities. Policies that are devised holistically and locally, and which are tailored to local circumstances, are more likely to increase the economy’s capacity for growth”

The Rt. Hon the Lord Heseltine, No Stone Unturned (October 2012)

3. LEADING LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

With significant Economic Development transferring from Invest NI, the eleven local Councils will be significant players in driving the growth agenda and putting in place conditions for the next generation of entrepreneurs.

Supporting small businesses and independent retailers must be a central theme for the newly elected local representatives who have the local knowledge to help deliver ambitious targets for growth.

Since its inception in 2000, NIIRTA has worked extensively with a network of town based Chambers of Commerce to promote local economic growth and sustainable town centre regeneration. We believe that reformed and refocused local Chambers of Commerce are absolutely central to developing local policy with Councils.

Too often innovation is viewed as being for the ‘techies’ and beyond the capacity of most businesses. This is not the case. All businesses have the potential and retail is actually one of those sectors where successful innovation is most visible.

As the retail sector depends on the overall growth of our economy, it is important that we set out our views on the best way for local Councils to play their role in achieving that growth.



» NIIRTA RECOMMENDATIONS

- » Councils should establish Local Growth Partnerships to assist them in delivering economic development. The Growth Partnerships should include key representatives from Council, Chambers of Commerce, Prince's Trust, NITB, local FE College, Invest NI, local bank branch and, to ensure links with the Assembly, local MLAs should be invited as observers. We stress that these partnerships should not become unwieldy in membership terms, thus blunting its effectiveness. An emphasis on delivery and speed should underpin each partnership.
- » We envisage Local Growth Partnerships playing a central role in ensuring that economic development is an essential part of Council Area Plan.
- » Local Councils should set yearly targets for new-start small businesses, with six-monthly progress reports to full Council meetings.
- » The Council and Growth Partnership should establish a wraparound first support system for new start businesses to move them beyond the challenging first year of business and beyond.
- » Increase the amount of Councils' spends with local suppliers to at least 70% by 2016. This should be open to public examination and verification.
- » Councils and local Further Education Colleges should sign partnership agreements to support local economic growth, establish apprenticeships and to ensure appropriate training schemes are in place.
- » With over 3000 independent retailers closing over the course of the recession and as a result of other factors, Councils working in partnership with NI Executive should set an ambitious target of creating the conditions to establish 3000 new independent retailers by 2020.
- » There is an immediate need for officials from the Northern Ireland Executive, Treasury and local Councils to work together to consider Enterprise Zone status for town centres which have high levels of dereliction, shop vacancy rates and low levels of business start-ups.
- » NIIRTA supports the NI Executive targets of Northern Ireland moving into the top five groups of European Innovation regions and increasing employment in the Knowledge economy by 15,000. Councils, the retail sector and town centres have key roles to play in achieving these targets.
- » Councils and the retail sector should be represented in the proposed Innovation Council for Northern Ireland as outlined in the Draft Innovation Strategy.
- » A light touch approach to any new regulations on local businesses by Councils and a strong and better regulation policy.
- » Local Councils, NITB and Tourism Ireland must work collaboratively to reach 2020 targets of £1 billion contribution to NI economy, 4.5 million visitors and 50,000 jobs.
- » NIIRTA would like to see Belfast City Council increasing by 50% its funding of Renewing the Routes to £3 million.
- » Councils to promote local Green New Deal projects and work with DFP to give rates reductions to retailers and small businesses which invest in new sustainable green technology.

‘The combination of great public spaces and diverse social and economic activity will create a place where people will want to come together to enjoy collective interaction. The combination of good architecture combined with quality public spaces has always attracted people to vibrant areas to live and work. Those public spaces may be the grand square or the small local neighbourhood park. The popular centre will also have a range of transport choices, which are attractive, safe and easy to use. What is required is a local shared vision and political will to deliver a new centre of activity in a quality place.’

The Grimsey Review: An Alternative Future For The High Street (2013)

4. WORLD CLASS TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE & DIGITAL HIGH STREET

Modern and vibrant town and city centres can only prosper with the very best transport system and infrastructure. Given the role that each new Council will have in designing their Area Plan and leading local Urban Development, this should be a key policy priority for each of them.

As we said in our Town Centre First report in 2012, having an affordable, accessible and effective public transport system is essential for the future regeneration of our town centres and the growth of our retail sector. While Councils do not have responsibility for transport, they will be significant influencers with Translink and DRD as they develop plans for their town centres.

In recent years we have made considerable progress with DRD in our campaign to drop charges for on-street car parks in thirty towns, secured a freeze on charges and had a very successful

Christmas parking discount scheme. Councils will have an important role with off-street car parking to build upon this progress. Town centres need to be able to offer a choice for shoppers of affordable car-parking and high quality, reliable public transport.

In order to engage with the modern consumer, and for the future of the high street to be assured, the physical experience of shops, restaurants and other town centre businesses must be better integrated with the digital-virtual-mobile experience. That's why the Digital Infrastructure in town centres must integrate with the physical infrastructure. Some existing Councils have made progress with the installation of Wi-Fi in town centres. This is welcome but there is much more to do.

» NIIRTA RECOMMENDATIONS

- » NIIRTA calls upon the DRD to devolve on-street car parking to Councils by 2020 to give Councils more responsibility to develop the potential of their town centres.
- » Councils should give discounts on their off-street car park charges in key times such as Christmas and festivals.
- » Free first one hour on-street car parking in the thirty towns should continue and DRD should consult and give serious consideration to offering the same schemes to city centres in Belfast, Newry and Lisburn.
- » Existing large out-of-town superstores with free car parking should pay a rate surcharge for this competitive advantage, which should be redirected into maintaining town centre car parks and keeping their charges low.
- » Councils to work with DRD for the introduction of a 'timed disc' system for delivery and service vehicles.
- » Responsibility for local roads should be devolved to Councils by 2020, giving them a wider role in improving infrastructure.
- » Councils should work with Translink to give priority to more bus lanes, well-designed bus stops with sufficient shelters, good travel information and efficient services that run on time.
- » There must be enhanced provision of suitable park & ride sites to enable convenient and efficient passenger transport into the heart of town centres.
- » NIIRTA will work with partners to ensure that retail-led deals for passenger transport users are further developed to reward consumers and boost trade.
- » Translink should be included by the Council as a key consultee in any Town Centre development plans, to ensure appropriate access for buses.
- » Encourage Councils to work with Sustrans to encourage town centre shoppers and workers to walk, cycle and use public transport where possible.
- » Councils should ensure walkable city centres, priority areas for pedestrians and quality public realm where people feel safe and comfortable.
- » Safe, efficient access/cycleways should be developed to make cycling the low-cost, fast and efficient way to access the city centre. There should be quality routes with sufficient and safe bike parking.
- » Town and city centre bicycle hire schemes should be established.
- » Travel hubs should be introduced where information and advice on sustainable transport is available so people can plan their travel.
- » NIIRTA welcomes further investment in the Belfast-Dublin Enterprise Network, moving towards a one-hour service to develop retail North and South.
- » NIIRTA fully supports key Belfast economic infrastructure projects, such as the new Convention Centre and Exhibition Centre, Gaeltacht Quarter, University of Ulster City Centre Campus, Green Economy Business Park on North Foreshore and the Innovation Centre at Springvale.
- » Local Councils should set a target by 2020 for every town centre to have free Wi-Fi. As costs fall, NIIRTA would support universal Wi-Fi across Northern Ireland as soon as possible.
- » We commend Magherafelt District Council for establishing the first Town Centre App for the iPhone. We would urge all Councils to ensure they have Apps in place by 2016.
- » Councils should develop plans for Digital Town Centres that include 'networked high streets' which puts libraries and other public spaces at the centre of each community, based on the technology that exists today and will develop in the future.
- » NIIRTA supports the Smart Region project in Omagh & Fermanagh, Belfast's Digital Hub and super-connected broadband project as templates for other Councils to consider developing digital infrastructure.
- » Councils need to focus on the creative potential of planning, urban design and architecture to address dereliction and abandoned spaces in our town and city centres. They must also promote the economic and tourist potential of its built heritage in town centres.

CONCLUSION

These are exciting times for local government and businesses. There are challenges ahead and with goodwill and good planning, there is huge potential for significantly improving our town centre environments and giving them a unique sense of place.

NIIRTA stands ready to work with whoever emerges as our new elected representatives across Northern Ireland. Each proposal in this document is feasible and achievable. We look forward to working hard to see them implemented.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NIIRTA greatly appreciates the support of Danske Bank in producing this report.

NIIRTA would like to thank Lisa McMaster, NIIRTA Office Manager, George Dorrian of GD-Research and Hannah George, who have assisted in the compilation and editing of Local First

NIIRTA held consultative meetings with DUP, Sinn Fein, SDLP, UUP, Alliance, UKIP, NI21, Green Party, TUV and PUP. In addition we also met with the Association of Town & City Centre Management (NI), Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations, Pubs of Ulster, Belfast Chamber of Commerce and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association.

Several major reports are highlighted in our document. These are:

ATCM: Successful Town Centres - Developing Effective Strategies (2014)

Beyond the High Street: Why our city centres really matter by Paul Swinney & Dmitry Sivaev, Centre for Cities (2013)

No Stone Unturned by The Rt. Hon the Lord Heseltine (2012)

The Grimsey Review: An Alternative Future For The High Street (2013)

Publication design by Claire Ball

Photo of Guild Hall on front cover courtesy of Stephen Latimer Photography

Photo of Belfast City Hall on front cover, courtesy of AECOM Design & Planning



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