

'REIMAGINED' CORK CITY RAPIDLY RESPONDS TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

With 14 people-friendly places recently rolled out by Cork City Council, the 'Reimagining of Cork City' plan has enabled changes to the configuration of city streets, traffic, modes of transport and quality of life. The main focus is support local business while creating a more liveable and safer city.

Cork City Council has quickly re-energised the existing core partnership (a representative group consisting of key stakeholders, including elected members of Cork City Council, Cork Chamber, Cork Business Association, An Garda Síochána, Iarnród Éireann, Bus Éireann, as well as representatives from the retail and hospitality sectors in the city). Brian Geaney, Assistant Chief Executive, is chairing a City Council Cross-Directorate Action Team as 'a war cabinet' to co-ordinate collaboration and strengthen its relationships with businesses, key stakeholders and the public to create and hammer home a rapid response to the pandemic.

The public response to this initiative, a more pleasant, safer, and greener city centre is heartening and suggests that people are open to change. A survey by Cork Chamber had already prioritised issues such as public transport, cycling and green spaces. The council's speedy stakeholder consultation got similar feedback. It awakened the city, encouraged footfall, protected public health, and facilitated responsible behaviour; thus, improving the visitor experience and quality of life.

At the heart of this is the creation of 14 new 'people friendly' pedestrianised streets in the city with a multi-million euro enhancement of pedestrian and cycling options and improvements to city amenities (for details visit www.corkcity.ie). The transformation means that up to 1,000 residents and visitors to the city can eat and drink alfresco.

COLLABORATION IS KEY TO SUCCESS

According to Geaney, "The key to our initial success was collaboration. It was not going to happen otherwise; tremendous efforts were made to enable this; the success and public acclamation of the project is testament to our iterative Stakeholder Engagement Plan. You must be authentic, build trust and constantly nurture relationships. It was important to consult and tweak plans even though this takes time."

This involved regular meetings to bring all facets of the project together, including the legal and regulatory changes necessary to close streets, redirect traffic, adjust street furniture, reorganise operations, extend footpaths and modify the public realm, add signage and messaging. This meant cross directorate collaboration at a level never witnessed before.

The council has measured results from the public and media reaction, the data showing increased visitor numbers to the city



and from local businesses who, in some cases, have a larger turnover than before.

The plan is funded by public and private investment. Substantial investment was made by businesses. The council has tapped into funding pools, in particular from the National Transport Authority (NTA) from existing programmes and its own resources. However, there is a grander plan.

"The future of the physical city is dependent on how we live in it, how we congregate in it and carry out our leisure activities. It must be good inside, at the heart. Cork City needs to remain compact, be light on its feet, and be one of the best. This is just the opening salvo in our journey. The City centre was burned to the ground 100 years ago this year; we too will overcome our challenges and emerge stronger together from this," noted Brian Geaney.

Open spaces are critical to the informal economy, which many people depend on for their livelihoods. Geaney considers that Cork City needed to change anyway to be sustainable, the pandemic has only served to accelerate the process, a positive rethinking.

He added that the media has been awash with praise for this creative plan, particularly environmentalists who support limiting cars into city centres, not to mention from the retail sector – 'Here is a great example of a collaborative effort to find new ways of enhancing the consumer experience,' - Retail Excellence Ireland.

So, quick off the mark on this one, let's watch out for the next move from Cork City Council!