



COUNTER REVOLUTION

Ireland's First Rural Community Retail Conference



CONFERENCE REPORT 2014





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

'We are sleepwalking ourselves into a situation where we have villages with absolutely no commercial entities. No pubs, no garda stations, no post offices, no shops. Everybody will have to drive somewhere to get what they need.' That was the scenario outlined at Counter Revolution, Ireland's first ever Rural Community Retail Conference, held in Co Tipperary recently.

Organised to address the social, economical and environmental impact of small towns and villages losing access to vital services. The conference also looked at one simple way of addressing this problem – the community shop.

A relatively new concept in Ireland, community-owned shops are generally set up in response to the loss of vital retail services. When a village loses its local shop, post office, café or even pub – rather than simply suffering the consequences, a growing number of communities are coming together to create an alternative.

Delegates at the conference heard just how successful community-owned shops have been in the UK, with like-for-like sales outstripping major supermarkets. While there are relatively few shops here in Ireland, those that have opened their doors are thriving. Owned and supported by local communities and aided by willing teams of volunteers, they are bringing much needed life and vitality back to many rural communities. These aren't just places to shop, they are social centres, a place to meet your neighbours and an important tool in fighting rural isolation. And, with an average of 26% of sales coming from local producers, they are also a vital outlet for farmers, food producers and craftspeople. Delegates were told there was no right or wrong way of setting up a community shop. It was something anybody could do – once they had community support and knew where to go for help. Mentoring, training, advice and capital grants are all available. Local Development Companies are on the frontline of the movement, already involved in setting up some successful shops. Other important resources are the Irish Co-Operative Organisation Society (ICOS), the Plunkett Foundation in the UK and local Enterprise Boards. Programmes like the Rural Social Scheme (RSS) and Community Employment Scheme (CE) as well as TÚS and other initiatives are also there to be availed of.

Over 200 delegates attended the conference, from as far afield as Donegal and West Cork. Representing communities badly hit by the recession, these champions were keen to embrace the concept of the community shop. In fact many had already taken the first steps towards bringing vital services and, by extension, vitality back to their towns and villages.

Counter Revolution was the first community shop conference to be held in this country. But if the enthusiasm and interest on the day is anything to go by, it certainly won't be the last.

Helen Carroll
RTE Ear to the Ground Journalist and Broadcaster



Helen Carroll is a journalist and broadcaster, probably best known for her role as one of the presenters of RTE television's Ear to the Ground programme on rurally-relevant issues. Helen has also worked extensively in television - researching and reporting on RTE programmes such as Prime Time, Kenny Live and Gerry Ryan Tonight.

She has previously worked as a sports reporter/presenter for RTE radio and for TV3. Helen also presented that television station's current affairs programme '20/20' before taking on the role with Ear to the Ground. She now lives in her native Kilkenny with her husband and daughter, where she writes a weekly column about country life for the Kilkenny People, where she reveals her passionate interest in the subject and the changes that are affecting it.

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES



Bobby Kerr is an Irish entrepreneur and businessman. He presents 'Down to Business' a Saturday Business Breakfast show on Newstalk 106-108fm since 2010. He is a founding 'Dragon' on RTE's Dragons' Den. Bobby is the Chairman of Insomnia Coffee and one of the owners of Bang Restaurant.



Mary Fogarty & Maeve O'Hair set up Loughmore Co-operative Shop and Tearooms in 2012 - Ireland's first co-operatively owned village shop. According to Mary: "A village shop is not just the heart of the community, it's the heartbeat."



Joan Vaughan is a community volunteer in the Crosspatrick Community Shop, Kilkenny's first community run shop. Joan played a vital part in the initial concept of this completely voluntary community project and with other community volunteers continues make this shop a success.



Peter Couchman is Chief Executive of the Plunkett Foundation. He came to the post after spending his career so far in the co-operative movement, where he was best known for helping to make Oxford, Swindon & Gloucester Co-op an internationally recognised example for engaging members and marketing its co-operative identity. He serves the Social Enterprise Coalition Council, Defra's Civil Society Advisory Board, Defra's Social Enterprise Strategic Partnership and Community Retail Network Board in Scotland.



Patrick Killeen is Project Officer with North Tipperary LEADER Partnership. He holds a post-graduate Higher Diploma in Co-operative Organisation & Food Marketing and a MSc in Rural Development. He was involved in the development of the Loughmore Community Shop and Tearooms from the beginning



Kevin M. Leyden is a Professor of Political Science at the NUIG. He also serves as Co-Director of the Creative, Liveable and Sustainable Communities Cluster of the Whitaker Institute. Professor Leyden's research interests include social capital, land-use & transportation planning and issues of sustainable development.



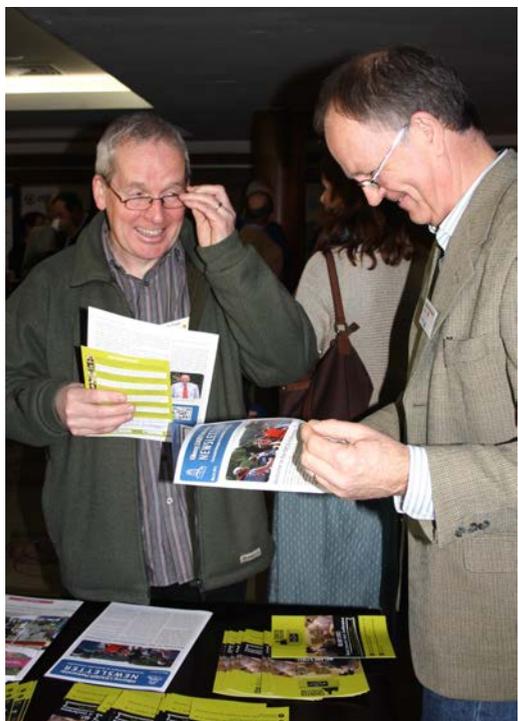
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- Informing and enthusing community champions in the potential of rural community shops.
- Influencing public policy to support the rural community shop concept

CONFERENCE AGENDA

TIME	TOPIC
9:00am - 9:30am	Registration
9:30am - 9:40am	Welcome and Introductions: Helen Carroll (Moderator) and Declan Rice (CEO of County Kilkenny LEADER Partnership)
9:40am - 10:00am	The Growth of the Community Shop in the UK: The Plunkett Foundation - Peter Couchman
10:00am - 10:20am	Irish Success Stories: “The Cottage” Loughmore Community Shop and Tea Rooms: Mary Fogarty, Maeve O’Hair
10:20am - 10:30am	Irish Success Stories: Crosspatrick Community Shop: Joan Vaughan
10:30am - 10:40am	Questions and Answers
10:40am - 11:00am	Tea and Coffee Break / Networking Opportunity
11:00am - 12:00pm	1st Session of Workshop Sessions X 4
12:00pm - 1:00pm	Why Local Shops are Important to Local Communities: Kevin Leyden, Professor of Political Science and Sociology, NUIG
1:00pm - 2:00pm	Lunch & Networking Opportunity
2:00pm - 2:20pm	Revitalise Your Community: Bobby Kerr
2:20pm - 2:40pm	Local Development Companies - What Can We Offer? Patrick Killeen - North Tipperary LEADER Partnership
2:40pm-3:35pm	2nd Session of Workshop Sessions X 4
3:45pm - 4:15pm	Panel Discussion & Open Forum
4:15pm	Closing Remarks & Wrap Up

CONFERENCE INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

Almost 200 people attended Ireland's first ever Community Shop Conference, held in Horse & Jockey, Co Tipperary on Friday, March 21st. Organised by the Leader Partnership Companies of North and South Tipperary, Carlow, Kilkenny and Laois - the aim of the conference was to inform and enthuse rural communities in the potential of community-owned shops and also to influence public policy to support the concept.

But the reason behind the conference was, first and foremost, to address a growing problem – rural communities losing access to vital services. As shops, post offices, cafes and pubs disappear from the rural landscape – communities find themselves struggling to get by.

Whether it's having to travel longer distances to buy basic groceries, finding it increasingly difficult to collect a pension or simply no longer having somewhere to meet and chat with neighbours - the financial, environmental and social impact of losing these retail services can be far reaching.

A panel of speakers from the worlds of retail, academia, rural enterprise and the co-operative movement were invited to make presentations, alongside community champions who had themselves established thriving community-owned shops. The conference also included some practical workshops where people were given the opportunity inform, advise and exchange ideas.



Photo credits: Many thanks to Trisha Purcell

CONFERENCE SPEAKERS



Peter Couchman: Chief Executive of the Plunkett Foundation UK

'What we find is once a community has saved its shop, nothing on earth will make them give it up'

The first speaker of the day was Peter Couchman, Chief Executive of the Plunkett Foundation. Founded by an Irishman, Sir Horace Plunkett, in 1919 to improve the lives of rural communities, today it is the only national organisation in the UK to support the development of community shops.

Peter spoke of the impressive success rate of these enterprises throughout England Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In 1993 there were just 23 community shops trading in the UK. 20 years later – in 2013 - there were 319. He pointed out that these shops continue to thrive despite a bleak economic situation. In fact the growth of like-for-like sales outstrips most supermarket chains and, remarkably, in 2012 not one community owned shop closed anywhere in the UK.

'What we find is once a community has saved its shop, nothing on earth will make them give it up. If things change they will adapt, because they know the impact it will have on rural life if they lose it.'

A vital part of their success, he said, was the fact that community shops can be owned by everyone in the community. This gives them a reason to support and help their local shop. Community ownership also leads to much closer links with local suppliers. 'The average supermarkets has less than 1% of its produce coming from local farmers. The community shops have 26% of their sales coming from local producers. It is not just the shop that is benefiting. It is a whole range of farmers and people developing new businesses.'

Peter also spoke about how important community shops are in combating rural isolation, giving the most vulnerable in the community 'a place to go, a place to be welcomed and a community that can actually support them.'

The Plunkett Foundation doesn't just help with the development of community shops. They have also worked with pubs, cafes, petrol stations and exhibition spaces from premises as diverse as churches, community halls, a bus shelter, a public toilet and even burrowed underneath a village green. It all depends on the needs of each community. 'Each community decides what is right for it.....It is really important that the starting point is what you want to do and not what Plunkett says you should do.'

The work of the Plunkett Foundation has inspired people all over the world – in places as diverse as Western Canada, the Australian outback and even South Korea. Peter Couchman told the audience that these great ideas, which started in Ireland, need to come back to Ireland. 'Surely these ideas are so relevant to the times and challenges that you face now, that this absolutely is the moment to take that on. What we see is not people opening shops, but people saving the future of their village. We see people believing in themselves and I believe that applies to any country and certainly to Ireland today.'



CONFERENCE SPEAKERS

It was the turn of Irish Success Stories next with case studies of two very successful and very different community shops.



Crosspatrick Community Shop

Case Study 1

'Before, all the roads led into the village, now they led out in four different directions.'

Joan Vaughan from Crosspatrick Community Shop in Co Kilkenny spoke about how and why they opened a small shop in their local community hall.

'In January 2010, almost overnight, the local community woke up to the fact that the village had all but gone. The chilling fact came as first the pub closed, then the post office closed but it was only when the village shop closed that the reality of the situation dawned. No one stopped in the village anymore. There was no reason

and no excuse. Before, all the roads led into the village, now they led out in four different directions.'

The elderly and vulnerable were particularly hard hit as they couldn't drive and had to rely on others for a lift to the shops - leading to a huge loss of independence. For many of them, going to the local shop was simply an excuse to meet people. That opportunity no longer existed. The Crosspatrick community also didn't want people to get into the 'bad habit' of going elsewhere to do business.

Crosspatrick
Community
Shop



CONFERENCE SPEAKERS

In March of that year, a meeting was called in the community hall to see if anything could be done. It was decided that, 'until things got back to normal', a small shop would be run from the kitchen of the hall. It would have to be staffed by volunteers as there wouldn't be enough profit to pay a wage. Immediately people came forward to help. And they're still helping. Today the shop has volunteers of all ages - from the retired to young students. 'There is probably not a young person in the community that hasn't got working in the community shop on their C.V.'

When it first opened, the shop traded from 9am to 6pm but because it was a small community the

hours were scaled back to 9am to noon. Joan explained that the running costs have been part covered by fundraising and catering for funerals etc. Kilkenny Leader Partnership has also provided them with help.

'..But the real profit we get from the shop is that local people continue to meet each other and have a chat and a banter.'

Any profit generated by the shop is ploughed back into the community, paying for jobs like painting the local hall and school. 'But the real profit we get from the shop is that local people continue to meet each other and have a chat and a banter.'

A small, simple but very successful community shop, Crosspatrick is a great example of how a community can come together to help themselves. As Joan put it herself; 'all you need is a place, some volunteers and it can be done.'

CONFERENCE SPEAKERS



Mary Fogarty: Loughmore Co-Operative Shop and Tearooms

Case Study 2

'It created a little bit of history by being the first Plunkett model Co-Operative to open in Ireland in 150 years.'



Loughmore
Co-operative
Shop and Tea
Rooms

The second case study, Loughmore Co-Operative Shop and Tearooms, opened in Co Tipperary in 2012. Ireland's first co-operatively owned shop, it was set up by two local women, Mary Fogarty and Maeve O'Hair. Speaking to the conference, Mary explained the reason behind the shop: 'For seven years Loughmore had nothing, absolutely nothing. Every business had closed. All we had was the local pub that opened at 6 in the evening.'

It was Joan Vaughan from Crosspatrick Community Shop that first told them about the work of the Plunkett Foundation and recommended they get in touch. Mary said they were of great help, giving them much needed advice and encouragement.

Their first step was to see if there was an appetite for this type of enterprise in the locality. They organized a Christmas market in the community centre and invited all the local producers and crafts people to come and sell their wares.

The response from producers and the public was so positive that Mary and Maeve decided to approach North Tipperary Leader Partnership.

Under the umbrella of 'Village Rejuvenation' they applied for financial assistance and were delighted when their tearooms venture was granted 75% funding. However, as Leader does not fund retail, they had to find the funds for their shop elsewhere.

CONFERENCE SPEAKERS

A meeting was held in the community centre, attended by Leader, the Irish Co-Operative Organisation Society (ICOS), the local Enterprise Board and parishioners.

‘We offered our parishioners the opportunity to become shareholders in this new cooperative,’ said Mary ‘and were absolutely delighted with the response.’ ‘People really embraced the idea and offered us so much help. Volunteers even came and helped us prepare the premises, it brought out the best in everybody.’

The Tearooms opened its doors in a fully restored 18th century cottage in August 2012. It created a little bit of history by being the first Plunkett model Co-Operative to open in Ireland in 150 years.

Loughmore Community Shop and Tea Rooms is a local enterprise in every sense of the word. ‘Everything we

did to set up the business was done on a local level. We got local tradesmen to do all the work and purchased all our furniture from local suppliers. This meant a lot to them in these hard times. It is truly lovely to see the wheels of our Co-Operative in motion. We have nine food producers and ten craftspeople involved. All our food and crafts are supplied from within a five-mile radius of the cottage.’

Today the shop employs three permanent staff as well as people working on Tús schemes and volunteers. It sells basic groceries and newspapers while also providing a vital postal service. But, according to Mary, it does a lot more than that. ‘There are no words that can express the joy and happiness the cottage has brought back to our entire community. It has actually given it back its heartbeat. There is now life in what was a dead village.’

‘It has actually given it back its heartbeat. There is now life in what was a dead village.’

CONFERENCE SPEAKERS



Professor Kevin M. Leyden

School of Political Science and Sociology at
NUI Galway

The presentation, by Professor Kevin M. Leyden and Richard Silke from the School of Political Science and Sociology at NUI Galway, focused on why local shops are important to local communities.

Professor Leyden started by quoting studies showing the lack of social networks and support, provided by a community, has been linked with an increased risk of death from heart disease, circulatory disease and cancer.

These networks and supports form naturally over time, he said, as we ‘bump into each other on the street or nod in acknowledgement of a familiar face.’ And a healthy retail element is an important part of this. ‘Living in areas where we can easily walk to get our daily needs brings people together on the street and mutual bonds of trust and caring form over time.’

Professor Leyden said public policy and planning are important factors in fostering a sense of community. As planning began to focus more on roads for cars and not streets for people, it became common to travel to distant locations for shopping and work. This resulted in services being lost to local communities and removed many opportunities of ‘bumping’ into each other on the street.

In order to level the playing field for both large and small shops, he said, planning should start placing the emphasis on ease of travel for pedestrians, not cars.

Local, independent shops, have suffered hugely over the last 30 years or so, he told delegates. The number of grocery outlets operating in Ireland has reduced by an estimated 54% since 1977. That equates to 13 shops shutting their doors every week. We have now reached a stage where almost 90% of our grocery choice is provided by 5 large corporations, leaving us with the second highest level of market concentration in Europe.

Professor Leyden said the economic impact of this is vast: ‘Small local shops have an economic multiplier effect as they use local solicitors, accountants and web designers. They advertise in local media. Profit tends to stay in the area while the corporate supermarket pays dividends to shareholders. Crucially, the local shop has been the first job for many young people. It has been estimated that up to 52% of a local shops revenue is recirculated in the local economy compared to only 13.6% of a national chain’s revenue.’

Local shops are also a vital resource for the disadvantaged in our society, he said. ‘For the disabled, the elderly and the car-less they enable independence, allowing us to age in place.’

For all of these reasons, he concluded, the importance of the local shop should not be underestimated. ‘Local shops are a key component to community. Our policy-makers should recognise the role they play and support them through planning guidelines and policy.’

‘Living in areas where we can easily walk to get our daily needs brings people together on the street and mutual bonds of trust and caring form over time.’

CONFERENCE SPEAKERS



Bobby Kerr
Entrepreneur

'We are sleepwalking ourselves into a situation where we have villages with absolutely no commercial entities'

'Winning Back the High Street' is part of a nationwide campaign spearheaded by entrepreneur Bobby Kerr and his weekly business show on Newstalk radio. Saving local shops is a cornerstone of that campaign and Bobby's conference presentation addressed how communities, both large and small, can work to do this.

'The only way to compete with large, out of town developments, is to do something different,' he said. 'We should start looking at empty shop units as an opportunity. They're probably now available to rent at a very low price and could be used to do something unique. Something that will attract customers. And as long as you get customers in, you will survive.'

But, he said, villages need more than just shops. They also need ancillary services, places to socialise and places that will bring a village to life.

Bobby warned that we were 'sleepwalking ourselves into a situation where we have villages with absolutely no commercial entities. No pub, no garda station, post

office, no shops.' 'What you end up with are conurbations of housing that have no services. This means everybody has to have a car. Everybody has to drive somewhere to get what they need.'

He called for radical steps to address the problem. 'We were very quick to come up with tax incentives for developments during the boom times. There should now be massive tax incentives for people to live over shops, to do up shop fronts. We should also put a tax on empty properties. If you want to keep a business boarded up, then there should be a tax on it'.

Bobby acknowledged that councils need rates to survive but pointed out that these rates should be 'relevant to the business'. 'We should look at the Australian model where businesses pay a percentage of their turnover in rates. So you only pay what you can afford.'

'Anything that can give a business a competitive advantage so they can survive and thrive can only be good. And our government should be doing for that.'



CONFERENCE SPEAKERS

The help received from Local Development Companies was acknowledged by the Community Shops in both Crosspatrick and Loughmore. And next up, to outline just what support they can offer to community groups was Patrick Killeen from North Tipperary Leader Partnership.



Patrick Killeen
North Tipperary LEADER Partnership



Patrick started by outlining the struggles facing rural Ireland today - an ageing demographic, wealth and employment being ‘sucked’ into urban centres, an increase in social isolation and the loss of public socializing spaces. Using photographs taken around his locality, he showed how the all too familiar sight of once thriving shops now lying idle and in disrepair was the perfect illustration of the plight facing many towns and villages.

But, Patrick said, the 36 Local Development Companies around Ireland are there to help address these problems with a variety of social and economic programmes – all operated through a ‘bottom-up’ approach, which puts people first.

Programmes like the Rural Social Scheme (RSS) and Community Employment Scheme (CE), the Rural Development and Local Community Development Programmes as well as TÚS and other initiatives were all there to be availed of. They could provide people

with mentoring, training, advice and capital grants.

Patrick also spoke about his experience of working with the Loughmore Community Shop and Tearooms.

‘These were local champions with an ‘is féidir linn’ approach. Local people recognized a local need for a strong social enterprise and they tapped into a huge amount of community capital.’

He said the Tearooms was of vital importance, both as a place to meet and socialize and as a vital outlet for more than 25 local suppliers. The other benefit for the community was that it offered people the opportunity to volunteer, work part time and also gain vital work experience – all within their own community.

Finishing up an interesting and encouraging presentation – Patrick Killeen told those in attendance that each and every one of their Local Development Companies were ‘at the heart of their community’s resilience.’

***‘Each and every one
of the Local
Development
Companies are at the
heart of their
community’s
resilience’***

CONFERENCE WORKSHOPS

Throughout the day, conference attendees also had the opportunity to participate in four different workshops:

Set Up & Structure which covered issues such as researching the need for a community shop, sourcing suitable premises, the legal options of setting up a Co-Op and management structures.

Finance which looked at start-up capital options, cashflow and provision for tax.

Volunteerism which included advice on agency support available and how to manage a volunteer/ staff mix

Attracting and Keeping the Customer which also dealt with food safety and health and safety

Summaries of these workshops are also available.



Photo credits: Many thanks to Trisha Purcell

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Counter Revolution conference consisted of expert presentations, panel discussions and detailed workshops. Participants on the day included Local Development Companies, representatives from the worlds of retail, rural enterprise and the co-operative movement. There were also participants from numerous voluntary organisations, academics and, of course, community champions from all over the country.

The main recommendations to come out of the conference can be summarised as follows:

1. One simple toolbox for all interested parties. This would be a centralised source of information detailing all agencies offering support and how to contact those agencies.

The process of accessing mentoring, training, advice and capital grants was described as ‘overly complicated’ with too many separate bodies involved. One toolbox would make it simpler for people to access all aid available and educate themselves on the rules of proper governance, setting up a co-op, writing a business plan, financial management, insurance, garda vetting, health and safety, food safety etc.

2. Research is necessary. There was unanimity among those involved in community shops that researching the need for a community shop is vital. Surveying the local community should be a part of this. An added advantage of such a survey was that it would give people a real feeling of being part of the enterprise. This research should also include meeting people who have already set up a community shop.

It was also recommended that those involved in setting up a shop put their cards on the table from the outset, initiating discussions and being open about the planning with everyone in the community.

3. A Community Shop Discussion Forum. Learning from the experience of others is invaluable. It was suggested that the best way of doing this was to set up a discussion forum – possibly on-line, on a Leader website. This would give all interested parties the opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences and support one another.

4. Find your Unique Selling Point. Community Shops should make a feature of their difference. They should not try to replicate High Street shops. In order to succeed, these shops should focus on their unique selling point and what makes them an attractive alternative to conventional shops.

5. Set up a Lobby Group. Many participants felt there were too many ‘obstacles’ in the way of setting up a new business. That something should be done to make it easier for new enterprises to get off the ground. The most popular solution to this problem was to set up a lobby group of stakeholders. This would be a more effective way of influencing public policy and access public representatives.



Photo credits: Many thanks to Trisha Purcell



inspiring community retail in rural Ireland

Visit the Rural Retail Website: www.ruralcommunityretail.com