

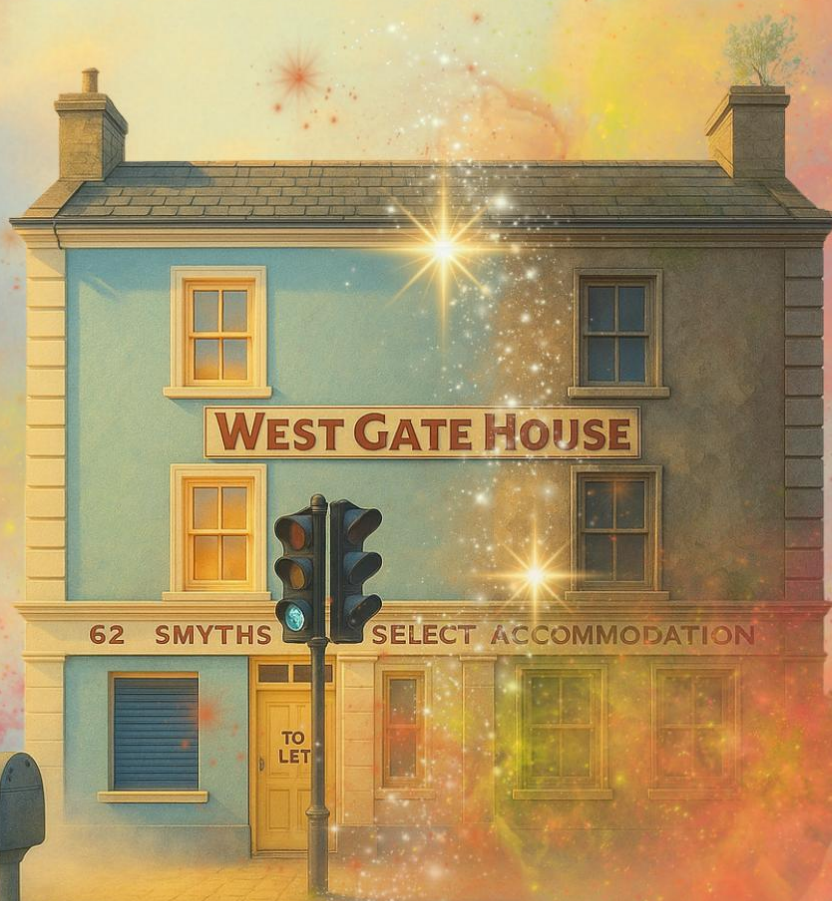
FESTIVAL OF IDEAS

13th - 15th June 2025, Drogheda, Co. Louth

Drogheda Vacancy and Dereliction (DVD) presents

Building Future(s) - Revitalising Drogheda

Report By Wiza Kabaghe



BUILDING FUTURE(S): REVITALISING IRELAND

In June 2025, Drogheda Vacancy and Dereliction (DVD) hosted the Festival of Ideas—a public event dedicated to exploring innovative and collaborative approaches to tackling dereliction, vacancy, and urban regeneration in Drogheda. The festival served as a platform for dialogue, creativity, and community participation, encouraging a shared vision for the town’s future development.

Over the course of the festival, a diverse range of participants—including residents, community groups, artists, architects, planners, and local business owners—came together to examine how the town’s disused and underutilised spaces might be reimagined. Through a programme of workshops, exhibitions, site visits, and discussions, attendees contributed ideas that combined artistic expression, architectural insight, and grassroots action to inspire practical solutions.

The Festival of Ideas demonstrated the value of bringing people together around a common goal: to transform challenges associated with vacancy and dereliction into opportunities for renewal and creativity. By fostering conversation and collaboration across different sectors, the event reinforced the importance of civic participation in shaping Drogheda’s urban landscape.

This report presents the outcomes and key themes that emerged from the Festival of Ideas. It documents the ideas, proposals, and community perspectives shared during the event, offering a foundation for future initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable urban regeneration and strengthening the cultural and social fabric of Drogheda.

About the Author

Wiza Kabaghe is a PhD Fellow at the University of Bucharest (UB) in Romania. He works for Development Perspectives (DP) in Ireland under the European Union (EU) PRESILIENT project. Wiza holds a Master of Science Degree in Urban Management and Development from Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands. His research interests include urban policy and planning, housing development, urban economic and financial analysis, sustainable green cities and climate change, and urban public management. Wiza also has extensive academic and professional experience working for the University of Zambia (UNZA) and the Ministry of Housing and Infrastructure Development (MHID) in Zambia.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Drogheda is characterised by a significant number of derelict or shuttered buildings, many of which are in poor structural condition and pose safety risks. The town centre is currently experiencing a severe shortage of available housing units, particularly on Narrow West Street. The community is expressing frustration with the situation, with residents concerned about neglect by both property owners and local authorities. Additionally, tourists arriving by car or train also face concerns about public transport connectivity and parking. In June 2025, Drogheda Vacancy and Dereliction (DVD) hosted the Festival of Ideas—an event inviting the public to explore creative approaches to tackling dereliction, vacancy, and urban regeneration through architecture, art, and community action. Throughout the festival, participants shared their ideas and visions for Drogheda’s future. This report presents the results of those contributions.

2. METHOD

This report employed a qualitative methodological approach. It involved selecting, organising, and synthesising 30 festivals of ideas from participants held at a public workshop in Drogheda on 13-15 June 2025. This approach deviated from a predefined systematic protocol. The data analysis employed a preferred reflexive thematic analysis (T.A.) approach, as outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2021) as a straightforward and adaptable method for analysing qualitative data. This flexible and accessible approach facilitated the identification of patterns within the data to form themes. NVivo 15, a widely used qualitative data analysis software, was employed to facilitate the analysis. This report employed the process outlined in Braun and Clarke (2020) in six distinct stages:

1. *Familiarizing oneself with the transcripts*: The researcher read through the transcripts to gain a thorough understanding of the data.
2. *Generating initial codes*: The researcher developed initial codes to categories the data.
3. *Generating initial themes*: The researcher identified potential themes based on the initial codes.
4. *Reviewing potential themes*: The researcher reviewed the potential themes to refine and clarify them.
5. *Naming themes*: The researcher named the final themes.
6. *Producing the report*: The researcher presented the findings in a report.

3. FINDINGS

A thorough data analysis of the excerpts of festival of ideas from 30 participants resulted in the development of a comprehensive set of themes and codes. This analysis yielded 10 initial sub-themes and 38 associated codes, which subsequently led to the identification of the 3 main themes. In

accordance with the thematic protocol, the analysis compiled the report as the inference of the thematic analysis process. The report encompassed the identified themes, associated codes, and participant excerpts, thereby serving as empirical evidence for the validity of the analysis.

3.1. Word Cloud

A Word Cloud is a common tool for visualising text data (Liao et al., 2019). The proportional size of the word and its distance from the cloud's centre indicate the topic's importance and frequency. The size of each word indicates its frequency or importance, making it useful for quickly identifying prominent themes or topics. As shown in figure 1, the overall word frequency count suggests a strong spatial and historical perception in public conversation. Words like "town", "Drogheda", "old", and "buildings" are prominent, indicating a collective desire to reclaim derelict spaces. This desire goes beyond physical restorations, as the prominence of "community", "access", and "people" suggests a desire for socially inclusive environments. Words like "music" and "food" highlight the appetite for cultural settings and shared experiences, which are seen as catalysts for regeneration. The recurrence of "street" and "area" emphasises that revitalisation efforts are happening at a local, pedestrian level, highlighting human-scale planning and accessibility.

Figure 1: *Word frequency*



Data source: NVivo 15

3.2. Community-Led Revitalization

This theme emerged from an innovative and inclusive bottom-up desire to utilise vacant buildings and sites for social and cultural purposes. Participatory urbanism (Kabaghe, 2017) approach emphasises a practical concept of citizen involvement in the planning, design, and transformation of urban spaces. By resisting top-down planning, it incorporates grassroots engagement and local knowledge into urban development. It expressed results such as community groups, community festivals and events, queer shed initiatives, and youth and education engagement. The theme 'Community-Led Revitalisation' results show that "community festivals and events" (n=5) and "youth and education engagements" (n=5) were coded more prominently, as shown in Table 2. We have also attached some excerpts from the participants.

Table 1. *Matrix coding query*

Codes	Sex = Male (n=8)	Sex = Female (n=19)	Sex = N/A (n=3)	Total (n=30)
☐ Community Groups	2	1	0	3
☐ Community festivals and Events	0	5	0	5
☐ Queer shed initiative (LGBTQ+) and Community spaces	1	1	0	2
☐ Youth and Education Engagement	2	3	0	5
Total	5	10	0	15

Data source: NVivo 15

Excerpts: (P01)

"It would be good to connect all small local groups in the area that are looking for a base. It is an extremely difficult task for small organisations to be able to avoid the space. Perhaps joining forces is the way to go until the "big plans" comes to fruition."

Excerpts: (P04)

"Convert O'Reilly's brothers complex building on 69 narrow west street (council-owned) into a sheltered housing project."

Excerpts: (P01)

"Even in a derelict state, Donaghy's Mill (West gate mill) would be a good open market / food mall music venue for pop-up events, markets, and food stalls. There's plenty of room to add private spaces; think of Rum Bars Budapest, an open music venue with food and craft stands. There's a lot of potential for a lot of 'loft' type accommodation, 1/2 bed units built inside the shell or old building."

Excerpts: (P26)

“Joint initiative with the Education and Training Board (ETB) for restoration of buildings like the old community youth training programme, e.g. use apprentices, Drogheda Institute of Further Education (DIFE) level 5 students, as part of the work experience programme. Young people need dedicated band practice space outside of what is available in the Boomerang Youth Club.”

3.3. Regulatory Gaps

This theme emerged from a desire to address regulatory gaps and propose solutions for revitalisation. The urban governance approach shows how cities are governed through complex networks of public institutions, private interests, and community actors, beyond formal government structures. Vacancy is often shaped by fragmented responsibilities, a lack of coordination, or regulatory gaps. This theme, ‘regulatory gaps’, encompassed results such as environmental issues, incentives and grants, vacant property rights and enforcement. Notably, the category ‘vacant property and enforcement’ (n=5) was mentioned more frequently by participants as shown in Table 3. We have attached some excerpts from the participants.

Table 2. Matrix coding query

Codes	Sex = Male (n=8)	Sex = Female (n=19)	Sex = N/A (n=3)	Total (n=30)
☐ Environmental issues	1	1	0	2
☐ Incentives and Grants	0	3	0	3
☐ Vacant Property and Enforcement	1	4	0	5
Total	2	8	0	10

Data source: NVivo 15

Excerpts: (P13)

Property tax - pay 10% more to be reinforced to help deal with local dereliction. Create a citizen bank to purchase and manage a portfolio of derelict properties within the town or city.

Excerpts: (P30)

“Architectural walk of Drogheda with a route showing Georgian, Churches and Medieval Gates, etc. the Louth Swift Project doing great work securing funding and affixing boxes for Swifts. This should be

mandated in planning permission for building on appropriate sites. Blocks incorporated in new boxes added to old."

Excerpts: (P11)

"Town seagulls are causing serious damage to property, particularly on West Street. This needs to be addressed before we have a health and safety issue with attacks on children and property. There is also a lack of community policies."

Excerpts: (P30)

"Business signage: can anything be outlawed and can a standard be legislated. Fix signs black /green posts with directional finger signs as all are pointing the wrong way. Get these fixed and screwed so they can't be twisted in the future, to be fair to visitors. Pedestrian / disability crossing / access from St Mary's bridge to the Scotch Hall area: chaos and dangerous"

3.4. Reimagining Public Spaces and Heritage

This theme underscored participants' aspirations for inclusive and dynamic urban settings that are essentially linked to cultural heritage, tourism, and historical significance. The right to the city approach recognizes that city inhabitants have a collective right to shape their city and its spaces to meet their needs. Heritage can be reimagined through participatory processes and alternative urban visions, challenging top-down conservation in favor of bottom-up reinterpretations of meaning and use. The overarching theme was further defined into subthemes that focused on tourism infrastructure, café culture, and transformative redesigns of pedestrian and public streets, as illustrated in table 3. Notably, no male participants participated in this discussion of public spaces and heritage. Furthermore, "pedestrian and public streets" (n=8) were mentioned more by the participants. We have attached some excerpts from the participants.

Table 3. Matrix coding query

Codes	Sex = Male (n=8)	Sex = Female (n=19)	Sex = N/A (n=3)	Total (n=30)
☐ Café Culture and Spaces	0	3	0	3
☐ Pedestrian and Public Streets Redesign	0	6	2	8
☐ Tourism Spaces	0	2	0	2
Total	0	11	2	13

Data source: NVivo 15

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Excerpts: (P23)

“Walking tour of Drogheda similar to what happens in European cities, focusing on the amazing key spots in town like Lawrence Gate, St. Peters Parish Church and Millmount fort. Local coffee shops /restaurants involved for tourists, especially in summer. More joined-up thinking and working together, and too many separate groups.”

Excerpts: (P21)

“Bring back the Boyne Regatta (Boyne Boat Race) and combine it with dragon racing (longboat racing), which helps breast cancer survivors mitigate lymphedema.”

Excerpts: (P7)

“More music festivals in the town. Make the quay pedestrianised again and make it the centre of the town again. More benches, restaurants, and bars to make the town alive again. A night link bus for those in surrounding areas to get them out into the town.”

Excerpts: (P13)

“Important to develop the Narrow West Street Area with cafes, shops, etc. Good that the old church will be used as a liability venue. And hopefully, the area alongside the river will be opened as a walkway and areas for sitting and enjoying a cup of coffee.”

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Linking Heritage with Community-led needs

The community's strong desire to preserve important historical buildings and use landmarks like Lawrence Gate, St. Peters Parish Church, and Millmount Fort as a miniature of Irish history reflects a commitment to preserving identity and continuity. Adaptive reuse proposals, such as converting O'Reilly Brothers complex building into sheltered housing or establishing a queer shed for inclusivity, demonstrate innovative approaches that repurpose derelict spaces to meet diverse community needs. Envisioning Donaghy's Mill (Westgate Mill) as a viable open market and food mall music venue underscores the transformative potential of restoration in creating multifunctional hubs that stimulate economic and cultural activity. Community-led restoration initiatives, such as collaborative projects with the Education and Training Board (ETB) that engage apprentices and unemployed individuals in learning opportunities, underscore the participatory nature of regeneration and asking school pupils to rejoin Sunday School adulated by Drogheda Youth Development (DYD), involved with Drogheda Institute of Further Education (DIFE).

4.2. Festivals and Events as Catalysts for Reimagining Public Spaces

Festivals and events have emerged as powerful instruments for cultural and tourism promotion, fostering community cohesion, providing economic support, and enhancing cultural vibrancy. The concept that food festivals could unite the numerous small markets representing diverse communities in Drogheda highlights how cookery celebrations transform into communal experiences, thereby connecting diverse groups through shared enjoyment and support for local businesses. The respondent's vision of evenings and weekends wine and food strolls envision the potential for recurring cultural rituals that agreeably combine leisure activities with commercial pursuits, thereby fostering social connections and facilitating economic circulation. This aligns with the understanding that such events serve not merely entertainment but as critical platforms for showcasing cultural heritage and revitalizing local economies.

4.3. Regulatory Gaps

Environmental improvements prioritise coexistence between urban development and wildlife conservation. The Louth Swift Project's success in installing nest boxes for Swifts and advocating for their inclusion in planning permissions demonstrates proactive, biodiversity-focused urban planning. The ongoing addition of new Swift boxes to existing buildings highlights a sustained, future-oriented approach to integrating biodiversity into the built environment. Conversely, challenges posed by Town seagulls causing serious damage to property and attacks on children expose the complexities of wildlife management requiring balanced solutions.

4.4. Foundations for Engaged Tourism Experiences

Robust tourism infrastructure and services are essential for delivering successful cultural and heritage experiences. The identified need to improve pedestrian safety, particularly for groups of 50-100 people crossing a dual carriageway, and to correct signs pointing in the wrong direction, emphasises the critical role of accessibility and clear direction in visitor satisfaction. Infrastructure enhancements such as outdoor public pools with Wi-Fi seating and the creation of more benches, restaurants, and bars aim to brighten public spaces, extending visitor stays and promoting social interaction. The vision to 'make the quay pedestrianised again and make it the centre of the town' reflects a desire to create vibrant walkable environments that serve as cultural and social focal points. Tourism packages that integrate cultural sites with amenities and transport, such as tours to Newgrange in Drogheda combined with local medieval tours and dining, demonstrate a comprehensive approach to visitor services.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The involvement of education provisions in envisioning Ireland's future underscores the inclusive and educational character of these initiatives. Such approaches position restoration not only as architectural preservation but also as a catalyst for skill development, social cohesion, and empowerment.
- The festival proposals also emphasize inclusivity and social well-being, as seen in the plan to bring back the Boyne Regatta (Boyne Boat Race) combined with dragon racing that helps breast cancer survivors mitigate lymphedema, and the call for an alcohol-free New Year's Eve countdown to bring a sense of community back to the town. These examples reveal how festivals can revive traditions, introduce new celebrations, and reflect local values beyond mere entertainment.
- The acknowledgment of gaps in community regulations and policies points to the need for coordinated, strategic interventions that protect both human safety and ecological integrity.
- The vision to make the quay pedestrianised again and make it the centre of the town summarises a desire to create vibrant, walkable environments that serve as cultural and social focal points.
- Tourism packages that integrate cultural sites with amenities and transport, such as tours to Newgrange in Drogheda combined with local medieval tours and dining, demonstrate a comprehensive approach to visitor services. This is further enhanced by the promotion of coffee culture in town markets, adding unique local flavours to the cultural tourism ecosystem.
- These proposals collectively reflect an understanding that infrastructure and services are not merely functional but integral to shaping memorable and authentic tourist experiences.

Consequently, the next step is to present this report to all stakeholders including government and private sector to collectively collaborate and address dereliction, vacancy and urban regeneration in Drogheda and Ireland. Alongside some of the already existing efforts and mobilisation, Drogheda was selected as one of the towns for heritage-led regeneration under the Town Centre – Heritage Revival (THRIVE) Scheme. The aim of this initiative was to revive public-owned vacant sites in the Narrow West Street area. The Westgate Vision public realm scheme, funded through the Urban Renewal Development Fund (URDF) under Project Ireland 2040, is another initiative aimed at enhancing streetscapes. In addition to these initiatives, the Drogheda Digital Hub project aim is to transform a former derelict property at 69 Narrow West Street (O'Reilly Brothers complex) into a collaborative and innovative workspace. This transformative endeavour is funded by Enterprise Ireland and the Brexit

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Adjustment Reserve. The digital hub is intended to become a fundamental spark for increased foot traffic and economic revitalisation in Narrow West Street.

Henceforward, the intent is to host another festival of ideas through Drogheda Vacancy and Dereliction (DVD). This second festival of ideas will officially invite all stakeholders including local authorities, the private sector and international organisations to collectively discuss the progress made so far and the way forward towards revitalising Drogheda and Ireland.

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