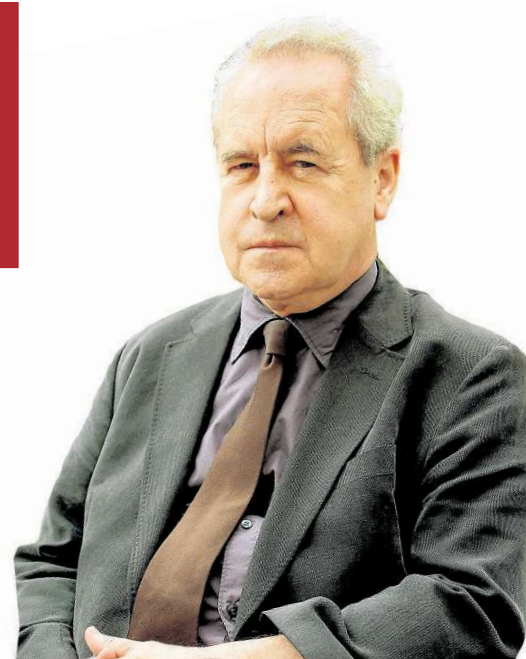


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What we can learn from Ireland's best place

Westport, named by 'The Irish Times' as the Best Place to Live in Ireland, isn't perfect, but it comes close. Its success is a product of careful planning, an innovative approach to voluntary work, and a triumph of public spiritedness



Fourteen years after her last article about the Co Mayo town, **Kathy Sheridan** returns to see what has changed and why it stands out as a place to call home

THE MAN WHO coined the phrase "When I hear the word 'culture'... I release the safety catch on my pistol" had it easy. He never had to wrestle with words such as "community". Or "partnership". For several days this week we wandered around Westport, asking people what made it the best place to live in Ireland. "It's the community," they said, over and over. "And partnership".

The problem, we said a bit testily, is that anyone with a flitter of loyalty will say much the same thing about their own settlement. "Community" and "partnership" trip off tongues so easily nowadays that they mean something only when someone is obliging enough to cite an example of, say, anti-partnership. Involving himself, ideally.

Step up Noel Kavanagh, who was already a major employer in Westport in 1998, when he bought O'Connor's Fashions on Shop Street. The alterations he had in mind for the premises were clearly not in sympathy with its status as a very prominent listed building, and a battle royal ensued between one hard-nosed, determined grocer and the town council. Somehow, the council prevailed.

"It's a battle I lost, and happily so," Kavanagh says now. He tells the story against himself to explain why his message of congratulations to council officials on Monday credited the town's success in no small part to officialdom. That is not an admission often made by members of the entrepreneurial classes.

He mentions men such as Peter Hynes, the county manager; Martin Keating, the director of services for the Westport area; and Simon Wall, the town architect. "They had a significant part to play in all this... by insisting on our conforming to a particular style, sometimes at my own considerable expense," says Kavanagh wryly. With a string of supermarkets scattered across the west of Ireland, in Northern Ireland and in England, he has dealings with 16 town councils. "Westport's is right up there at the top," he says.

Given the general cynicism about politicians and council managements, this is one of the surprising features of Westport's success story. A willingness to cross party lines for the good of the town is a noble tradition. Members shared the chair even when Fianna Fáil held a majority, says one of that party's councillors, Margaret Adams. She remembers when they all combined their expenses to fund civic receptions and once even used them to pay for the first load of gravel on the railway line.

It was that long-term solidarity and prioritising of the town that put steel in their spines when council initiatives came under fire. Minister of State for Tourism and Sport Michael Ring - a true "covey", as locals are known, with Westport lineage that goes back at least to his grandparents - swears that his most testing time in politics was in the 1980s when the town council decided to ban plastic signs. "You can laugh, but that was one of the biggest battles I've had to fight. We came up against tremendous political pressure. But we held our ground and we were proven right."

Signage was always a red-flag issue. Simon Wall - who, significantly, was the first town architect in the country when appointed to Westport, in 1997 - remembers counting no fewer than 38 signs at Knockranny junction alone, "enough to cover three-quarters of an acre when laid on the ground". The council met a lot of what he delicately calls "negativity" when it took action.

That Westport-first ethos was crucial to the town's successful drive to protect its core in the era of the bubble. It kept Tesco and others at bay amid demands for out-of-town retail parks, until the retailers caved and settled within the town's confines.

Westport has no ghost estates. Luck, poor infrastructure and timing played a role, but the council also ensured there was little of the developer-led free-for-all that is evident elsewhere. Although section-23 development and town-renewal incentives seemed to threaten in the late 1990s, the council was far-sighted enough to insist that apartments be family-sized, to prepare for the day when tax incentives ran out. In the meantime, lettings are healthy, avoiding the dark holiday-home syndrome, and the schemes are well managed.

It was a struggle. Developers are what they are, says Seán Staunton. "A lot of them thought a blade of grass was a waste of space," and it was always up to the councils to keep them in line. Staunton, a former town councillor and a former editor of the *Mayo News*, remembers

“One judge worried aloud whether it might be a bit 'retirement-homey, hanging-baskety, Stepford-wifeish'. It's not

developers "complaining bitterly about getting less - far less - than they wanted". The council was quick to refer schemes to An Bord Pleanála, "a great friend" of the Westport 2000 development plan, says Wall, even though the plan was nonstatutory.

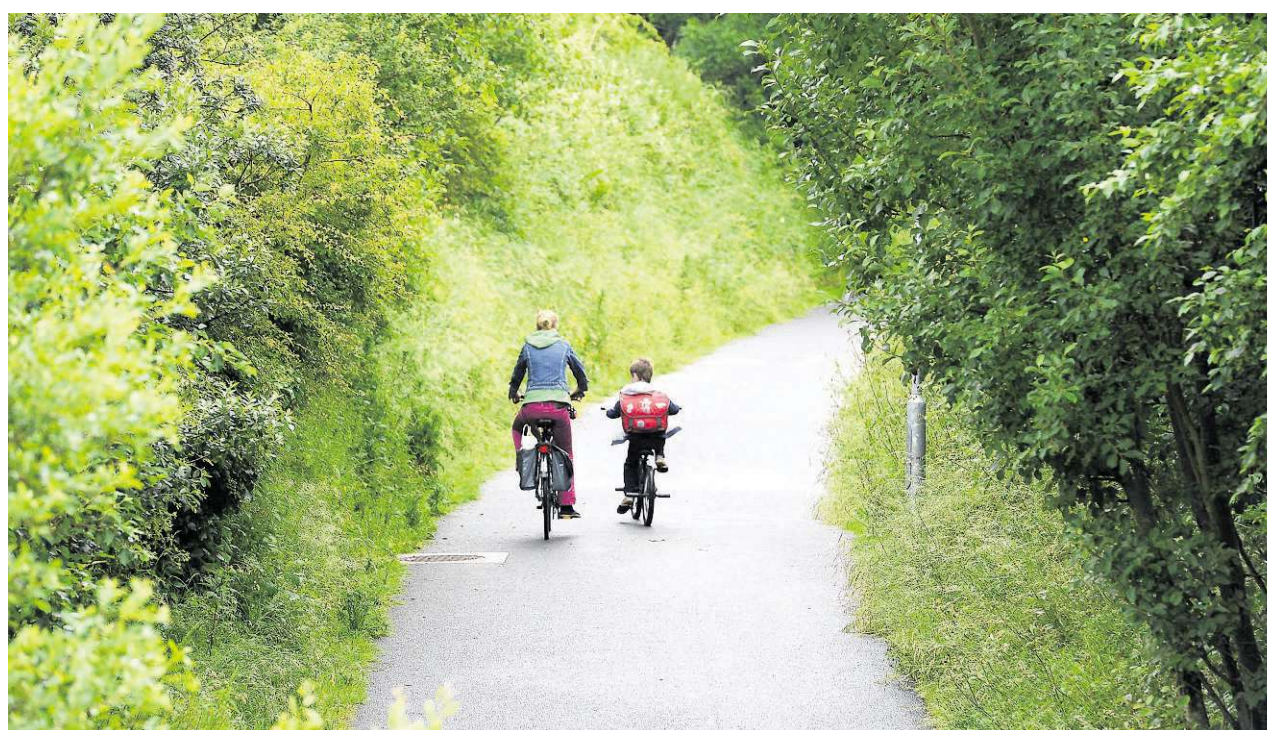
Now the worst of the bubble's depredations is an idle medical and retail centre on the edge of an estate, which may yet see life in the form of new business incubators.

"You can see the town has developed evenly. There's no carbuncle stuck on to it," says New Jersey-born Judy Parker, a veteran of the tough New York rag trade. When I interviewed her in 1998 for a feature on Westport, she was one of a slew of blow-ins who had put down roots. Notably, there were no celebrities among them or members of the political, legal or business set who had overrun places in Connemara or west Cork.

At that time, having come to Westport only a year before, Rathfarnham man Wall and his art-historian wife, Sinéad, had stumbled on a flourishing, easily accessible visual-arts scene. To Wall, McGing's bar on a Friday night was like the UCD campus all over again "without the lecture series". This was because many of the people moving from mainland Europe were an artisan, bohemian crowd, looking for an alternative lifestyle. The Walls are now raising a family here.

"Five years ago, we came for a visit," Parker said at that time. "We were here 11 days and got four hours of sunshine. And I still felt it was worth a try. They tell me, 'You're settling in well,' but what they don't think of is that someone has to move first to give you a spot. It's like, 'Will they let you sit down?'"

This week, when we meet again, she says she



TOP Cycling along the Greenway
ABOVE Taking a break in a town cafe
LEFT Aisling Keating, Chelsea Joyce, Ellie Shackleton and Katie McLoughlin on the Mall, by the Carrowbeg River



ABOVE One of the town's modern bike racks **ABOVE** Looking over Westport towards a cloud-enveloped Croagh Patrick



ABOVE Local "force of nature" Pam Flanagan at Westport skatepark **ABOVE RIGHT** Town architect Simon Wall



PHOTOGRAPHS:
DARA MAC DONAILL

has never wavered in that view. "I can't say I'd never leave, but I don't want to." She runs a cafe and ice-cream parlour near the beach at Louisburg and is a director of the volunteer-run Westport Community Radio. "This is a place where businesses expect to lend a helping hand," she says.

The recession has shifted the sands here, as elsewhere. Emigration and unemployment are clearly issues - though, given the west's terrible history of loss, they are no worse than in the rest of the country and may even be slightly better. The Allergan company, which makes Botox, is prospering, thus making Westport the town capital of the world. It employs more than 1,000 people and is so optimistic about the next 20 years that it has just bought the council's business-incubator units for extra space. The workwear company Portwest and the fashion and giftware company Carraig Donn are also valued employers.

AND HERE IS the most startling part. Although some businesses inevitably close, about 13 new ones have opened this year, aided by council incentives. The 10 or so hotels are full nearly every weekend, boosted by a mutually supportive marketing scheme. The town has a surprisingly vibrant feel, boosted by a flow of tourists from Ireland and elsewhere, taking advantage of midweek hotel prices.

What blow-ins have always found in this far-west corner of Ireland has been a thriving, sophisticated, outward-looking community blessed with a solid core and graceful country

manners. As a port it has always been accustomed to new faces drifting through, and, for good or ill, the mass emigration of Mayo people through the centuries had opened them up to other cultures. So when the hospitality industry attracted vast numbers of non-Irish to Westport there were no issues. "The fact that Westport is so cosmopolitan rids us of our parochialism," says Staunton.

It focused itself firmly on tourism but managed to avoid the twee, film-set feel and the golf-club social hierarchy that had infected similar towns.

At the final judging session for the Best Place to Live competition, one judge worried aloud whether it might be a bit "retirement-homey, hanging-baskety, Stepford-wifeish". It's not. Westport is still a living, breathing, working town with a proper, old-fashioned ironmonger's shop and others that look as if the displays haven't changed since the 1950s; shops selling tweeds and near-designer boutiques; a SuperValu that has lobsters floating in a tank; a salon offering fish pedicures; fast-food outlets as well as a superb seafood delicatessen and restaurants.

The window boxes are plentiful but restrained, and the ground planting is a colourful riot of French-inspired ornamental broccolis and cabbages as opposed to the old monobloc, Victorian-style displays.

As for the "retirement-homey" vibe, there's no chance of that. According to Pat Dunne, a teacher at Rice College who came here from

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The Best Place to Live in Ireland How Westport won

The *Irish Times* Best Place to Live in Ireland competition began in late March. Westport was announced as the winner last Monday.

For the competition *The Irish Times* invited people to nominate the place they lived as the Best Place to Live in Ireland and to write a short pitch, explaining its appeal. All kinds of habitats were eligible: a town or city suburb, a village or remote rural spot, a tiny community halfway up a mountain, a street, a road or a housing estate. From early April until late May the competition attracted 563 entries from all 32 counties.

The judges were Dr Maureen Gaffney, adjunct professor of psychology and society at University College Dublin; Paul Keogh, founding partner of Paul Keogh Architects and former president of the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland; Gerard O'Neill, chairman of Amárach Research and a founder of Hireland.ie; *Irish Times* Environment Editor Frank McDonald and *Irish Times* journalist Edel Morgan.

With Westport on the final shortlist were Ardara, Co Donegal; Killarney, Co Kerry; Cork city; and Rathmines in Dublin. You can see *Irish Times* videos of Westport and the other four finalists on irishtimes.com/tv. You can read all 563 entries and learn more about the competition at irishtimes.com/bestplace.

The *Irish Times* is discussing with the people of Westport how best to mark the accolade in the town. An official celebration of the win will take place later in the summer.

Conor Goodman



Past Times How we reported Westport's appeal in 1998

On July 4th that year, *The Irish Times* also published an article by Kathy Sheridan about Westport. It was titled "The Real Ireland". Here is some of what she wrote

"It's like walking through Temple Bar without Dublin around it," says Judy Parker, the American rag trade veteran. And hark to a Californian, five years in town, eyes gleaming, as the rain - "health spa rain", she calls it - belts off a pub window. "It's just a magical, romantic place. That's all."

You want cosmopolitan? The arts committee boasts two Germans, one American and a Frenchwoman. Scan the shelves of Don McGreevy's newsagents and the papers range from *Le Figaro*, *L'Equipe*, *Libération* and *Le Monde* to *La Repubblica* via *Die Welt*, *USA Today*, *El País* and the *Herald Tribune*. A bureau de change manager is said to be "staggered" by the weight of German marks and US dollars flooding the place. Flights between Zurich and Knock are booked out to the end of August.

In this far west corner of Ireland, blow-ins have found a thriving, sophisticated, ages-old community blessed with a solid core, a working brain and graceful manners.

"There is something in this town which makes me feel not a tourist," says a Dutch man hesitantly, trying to define its appeal. "I have seen Kinsale and Killarney and I felt a tourist there. Here you feel there is a real life going on and that these people allow you to be a part of that, even for a short while. And this town is so beautiful but not too much pretty... I do not like this type of town too pretty."

In fact, what is happening in Westport, under the guidance of passionate Westport-lover and county secretary Pádraig Hughes, is almost a miracle. A story that goes all the way from dereliction to rebirth in a few years, involving beautiful Lacken stone from north Mayo, decorative lamp fittings and flowers, carefully considered paint colours, controlled signage and traditional shop fronts in virtually every case. What is absent is as significant as what is present. No international supermarket multiple to suck the life out of the town centre - and no burger chains (clever bye-laws forbid such trading after midnight).

WEEKEND

The Real Ireland

