



Public Realm Plan for Birr 2021 Addendum



Comhairle Chontae Uíbh Fhailí
Offaly County Council

the **paul hogarth** company



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OFFALY LOT DONE ON PUBLIC REALM PLAN!

Offaly County Council's Public Realm Plan to revitalise the historic Offaly town of Birr was recognised by Chambers Ireland with the 2017 Excellence in Local Government Award in the 'Enhancing the Urban Environment' category.

Offaly's historic town of Birr boasts a rich collection of fine buildings including elegant Georgian town houses and the Pugin-designed Civic Offices. It is overlooked by the inhabited Castle with its exquisite gardens and the world famous



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Great progress has been made on enhancing the town of Birr since production of its public realm plan in 2009. Emmet Square is now an expanse of attractive limestone with space for people and not just cars; visitor numbers to Birr Castle and Demesne have risen dramatically through much investment there; and many of the town's fine buildings have undergone improvements and restoration, enabling them to contribute far more positively to the public realm of Birr.

This addendum to the Public Realm Plan for Birr has been written in 2021 to reflect changes in the town since the original plan was launched in 2009. It has been commissioned by Offaly County Council and written by the authors of the original plan, The Paul Hogarth Company. This addendum, which has been informed through consultation with local stakeholder groups, will be used alongside the original plan to further inform future planning policy and investment decisions for Birr.

A Public Realm for Birr was initiated by Birr Town Council and Offaly Council in 2008 with funding from The Heritage Council and Shannon Development. It was compiled using a collaborative methodology with local people to assess the town, develop a shared vision for its future and to identify a series of proposals for improvements to its streets and spaces.

From the outset, the plan launched in 2009 was recognised as a valuable tool with which to guide development, winning a commendation from the Irish Planning Institute at their 2009 awards. Almost immediately Birr Town Council and Offaly County Council set about pursuing delivery of projects, including the restoration of the column and the town gateway on the Tullamore Road. In 2014 the most ambitious project was executed to radically improve Emmet Square, which despite some vocal opposition, saw the transformation of the space from a car park to an attractive civic space. Other successful projects delivered have included the William Street car park, frontage improvements and 'the addition of high quality street name signage around the town delivered by the Chamber of Commerce.

The success of these improvements has been recognised in the winning of the Chambers Ireland award for Enhancing the Urban Environment in 2018 and the winning of the National Tidy Town Silver Medal in 2019. Another indication is the level of investment Birr has seen since the plan was launched, most notably at Birr Castle & Demesne, as well as other locations around the town. Finally, arguably the great legacy of the plan and its delivery has been the partnership working and spirit of 'can do' collaboration that exists across Birr today, forming a vital foundation for further improvements articulated in this document.

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The original Public Realm Plan and this addendum are notable for having both been written at a time of crisis. In 2008 – 2009 Ireland was reeling from the impact of the global recession, often referred to as the Credit Crunch. The lack of available finance saw the pace of Ireland’s development grind to halt, property values plummet and hardship placed upon many families and businesses. Therefore, on the one hand, the plan came at a time where resources for delivery were limited, yet on the other, when development activity was low, effectively creating a ‘breathing space’ during which to put policies in place.



Today in 2021 Birr, Ireland and indeed, the world face a number of interrelated crises. The first is Climate Change and Biodiversity Loss. While this process began well before 2009, its only relatively recently that the global community has begun to face up to the major changes that will be needed to mitigate impacts and stem the rising Carbon Dioxide emissions. In signing the Paris Agreement in 2015 Ireland has now a commitment to reduce emissions and further more stringent targets are likely.

The second crisis is public health, ever since the outbreak of the Covid 19 Coronorivirus in late 2019. The global pandemic has seen a tragic loss of life and necessitated radical public policy interventions to stem transmission prior to the development of a vaccine. Restrictions have impacted upon businesses in the town (especially for those in hospitality and tourism), while social distancing has placed extra demand on the public realm.

Introduction

A number of key strategic documents set out the policy context for the town of Birr. These national, regional, and local policy documents should be consulted alongside this plan in considering the future of the area by providing further clarification and guidance. Since the original publication of the Birr Public Realm Plan in April 2009, the Irish Planning policy landscape has completely changed with a renewed series of plans and policy documents adopted. The previous foundations of the Public Realm Plan, the National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 and the Midland Regional Planning Guidelines 2010-2022, have both since been superseded and a new international pressure has now been applied to seek a much more sustainable approach to planning and placemaking to address the current climate and biodiversity crisis that the planet faces.

The following hierarchy of statutory plans, key strategies and planning policy documents outline the latest policy context in regard to the town of Birr.

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

Adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. The 17 SDGs are integrated—that is, they recognize that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability. Achieving the SDGs requires the partnership of governments, private sector, civil society and citizens alike to make sure we leave a better planet for future generations.

National Policy

National Planning Framework – Project Ireland 2040

Published 16th February 2018, the National Planning Framework (NPF) is the Government's high-level strategic plan for shaping the future growth and development of the country to the year 2040. The NPF sets out 10 National Policy Objectives (NPO's) that seek to create attractive, liveable, well-designed, and high-quality urban places. The National Policy Objectives seek to regenerate and rejuvenate urban environs, done so through enhanced levels of amenity space and design quality to reverse patterns of stagnation and decline.

The NPF also details a series of objectives that promote the integration of residential development with safe and convenient alternatives to car use, such as prioritising walking and cycling travel modes, to assist in the creation of sustainable communities. Whilst the town of Birr is not specifically mentioned within the NPF due to its high-level and strategic nature, out of the 10 NPO's those of greatest relevance to the Birr Public Realm Plan are: Compact Growth, Sustainable Mobility, Enhanced Amenities and Heritage, and Transition to a Low Carbon and Climate Resilient Society

Climate Action Plan: To Tackle Climate Breakdown 2019

Published 5th July 2019 and in line with the United Nations SDG's, this National Government document commits to achieving net zero carbon energy systems for Irish society and in the process, create a resilient, vibrant and sustainable country. The Plan clearly recognises that Ireland must significantly step up its commitments to tackle climate disruption and highlights the leadership role both the Government and public bodies must play in taking early action on climate to achieve decarbonisation goals.



Regional Policy

Eastern and Midland Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy 2019-2031

The elected members of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly adopted the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region (EMRSES) on the 28th June 2019, in accordance with section 24 (9) of the Planning and Development Act 2000.

The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy is a strategic plan and investment framework to shape the future development of the region to 2031 and beyond. The aim of the strategy is to create a sustainable and competitive region that supports the health and well-being of its people and places, with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunities for everyone.

The three key principles of the RSES are focused on: Healthy placemaking, Climate action and Economic opportunity. Each of these principles are supported by 16 Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSO's) that promote compact growth and urban regeneration, integrated sustainable transport options, a promotion of enhanced green infrastructure and protection of local biodiversity and heritage.

Within the EMRSES, County Offaly is identified within several designations firstly, named within the 'Midlands' section of the overall strategy and then again as part of the 'Gateway Region' within the Growth Strategy.

More specifically, Birr Town is mentioned within the Retail hierarchy, classified as a 'Level 3 Town And/Or District Centres & Sub-County Town Centres' (Key Service Centre). The town is also recognised for its Architectural Heritage and for being a historic planned town and designed Irish Heritage Town.

County Policy

Offaly County Development Plan 2014-2020

The Offaly County Development Plan 2014-2020 was adopted by Members of Offaly County Council on 15th September 2014 and became effective from 13th October 2014. The development plan outlines the overall strategy for the proper planning and sustainable development of County Offaly over the period 2014-2020.

The Offaly CDP 2014-2020 is set within the context of the National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 and the Midland Regional Planning Guidelines 2010-2022, both of which documents have since been superseded by the NPF and EMRSES. Until such a time as the draft CDP 2021-2027 is adopted, this earlier iteration still remains the statutory development plan for the County and should be the main point of reference.

Within the Plan, several key policy designations are applied to Birr Town. Aligned with the RSES, the Settlement Hierarchy highlights Birr as a 'Large Town' and 'Key Service Town'. This position denotes the economic importance of Birr within its wider hinterland, providing essential services and amenities to the local population. Associated with these designations is a Council commitment to expand upon the local tourism market through an increase in events and festivals to help bolster the town economy. The enabling infrastructure required to deliver upon this commitment would likely have a bearing upon the Public Realm Plan.

Of further importance, the CDP outlines a proposal to improve the road network connecting Birr and the Council's intention to implement the Birr Walking and Cycling Strategy. Finally, having stated the importance of towns' heritage, the CDP designates Birr as a 'Zone of Archaeological Potential', a point which would have to be taken into account for any future works within the town.

Draft Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027

Offaly County Council has commenced the review of the existing Development Plan by preparing the new Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027, which was agreed in draft by elected members on 13th July 2020.

The Draft Plan sets out a strategy to shape the future growth of Offaly and to plan for and support the sustainable long-term development of the county. The Plan is informed by Project Ireland 2040 and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region. As the Draft Plan has been written to align with the NPF, certain previous policy designations have been revised from the 2014-2020 iteration to reflect a change in terminology and new emphasis. Within the Core Strategy, Birr is now listed as a 'Self-Sustaining Growth Town', meaning it is projected to have an increase in population size and importance of function. Of relevance to the Public Realm Plan, Chapter 6 of the Draft CDP, Tourism and Recreational Development, informs that Birr has been chosen by Fáilte Ireland to become a Destination Town. In order to increase visitor dwell time and expenditure, the plan states that investment in the public realm should be a key action to help showcase the local built heritage and enhance sustainable connections between key tourist attractions.

Offaly Climate Change Adaption Strategy 2019 - 2024

This strategy is the first step by the County in increasing knowledge and understanding of our changing climate, growing resilience and enabling effective responses to the threats posed by climate change. The strategy contains a range of adaption and mitigation actions with a direct relevance public realm and infrastructure projects and should therefore be incorporated in this plan.

Local Policy

6 **Birr Town and Environs Development Plan 2010 (Extended until 2020)**

The Birr Town and Environs Development Plan 2010 came into effect on the 15th February 2010 and includes policies and objectives for the development of Birr Town. Variation No 1 of the Plan was adopted on the 4th March 2013. This variation, required under Section 7 of the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2010, introduced a core strategy to the plan. The purpose of the Core Strategy is to include a medium to longer-term strategy for the development of the town and has impacts on the zoning plan of the plan, including the introduction of phased lands.

The Plan sets out the following vision, “That all people in Offaly will enjoy equal opportunity and a good quality of life – that they will look forward to the future with confidence while cherishing the past”.

A series of Strategic Objectives cascade from the vision, those of which are of particular importance to the Public Realm Plan include the following:

Strategic Objective 5 - To positively reaffirm the role of Birr’s Town Centre and to implement positive measures for the continued vibrancy of the centre using its attractive built form as positive factor while acknowledging the strong level of protection of buildings and structures necessary.

Strategic Objective 6 - To maintain and improve Birr’s attractiveness as a place to live, work-in and visit by implementing, where possible, the recommendations of the Birr Public Realm Study where they apply to both the Town Centre and outer areas, by encouraging environmental and access improvements as part of new development

and by protecting the environs from inappropriate development.

Strategic Objective 7 - To continue to protect and enhance the built and natural environment of Birr town and its environs and to use, where possible, a positive approach towards development where it can be proven to enhance, preserve, re-use or increase the accessibility (where appropriate) of such features.

Over the course of 15 chapters, seven in particular feature varying elements of the public realm, namely the following:

Chapter 4 - Town Centre Retail and Renewal,

Chapter 5 - Amenities and Open Space,

Chapter 8 - Transport, Movement and Accessibility,

Chapter 10 - Infrastructure and Environment,

Chapter 12 - Built Heritage,

Chapter 13 - Natural Heritage and Landscape and

Chapter 14 - Built Form and Urban Development Standards.

For any future public realm proposals in the town that touch upon aspects of the aforementioned chapters, a closer cross-reference on a project case by case basis would be required to ensure specific local policy objectives are met.



Funding Successes

Since launching the Public Realm Plan for Birr, the town has been successful in attracting funding from a number of sources.

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Offaly County Council and its partners are extremely grateful to these organisations and others who have funded projects across the town of Birr and look forward to a continued working relationship well into the future.



Significantly improved locations and materiality



Enhanced frontages, although vacant units



Characterful spaces with charm and potential



Energetic community initiatives



Edge of centre spaces with a role to play



Scope to enhance local landmarks



Detailed design decisions needed to reinforce character



Untapped heritage assets

Site Analysis Findings

Birr has very visibly improved the quality of its public realm over the past decade or so and all involved are to be highly commended for their hard work and persistence. High profile interventions such as at Emmet Square and the Birr Castle and Desmene combine with smaller scale improvements, such as street signs and heritage frontages. Together they provide a far more fitting setting to the built and natural heritage of Birr and contribute significantly to its attractiveness as a place to live, visit and invest.

Regeneration and public realm enhancement is however, a never ending task. Like all town centres, Birr has to handle a range of complex challenges including the management of traffic and the impact of vacant buildings. Yet Birr also has immense potential for further improvements that can over time, help underpin its social and economic vitality. In this section and the remaining pages, we identify scope for further improvement and ways in which this can be delivered. The reader is reminded that the Addendum should be read in conjunction with the Public Realm Plan, rather than as a replacement to it.

The Allocation of Space

A persistent challenge for Birr is how to best allocate public realm space between different users and in particular, vehicles and pedestrians. Until such time as the N52 is re-routed around the town, vehicles will always negatively impact upon the pedestrian and cycle experience, especially along Wilmer Road, Emmet Street and Square. Road safety for all users remains a key concern. More locally, efforts are required to stem locally generated traffic by encouraging the use of alternative modes. Also, while an emotive subject for some, car parking requires further organisation so that valuable street space is given to people rather than being used to store empty vehicles.

Empty Buildings, Changing Economies

Vacant and in places derelict properties still persist in parts of Birr. This is in a large part symptomatic of economic conditions and the fundamental changes facing traditional retail, including the rise of online sales. There is no easy solution to this problem. However, town centres must work hard to attract people into them for purposes other than retail. This includes leisure, tourism, community events and places to live. A concerted effort, availing of every tool available, is therefore required to find sustainable uses for Birr's historic buildings and spaces.

Spreading Footfall.

A major drive of the Public Realm Plan was to encourage visitors to the Birr Castle and Demesne to spend more time in the town. This has been successful to some degree, but remains a key objective. A multifaceted approach is required including investment in other key attractions in the town to create a more compelling visitor offer. The public realm has an important role to play in this dynamic, including improved signage and wayfinding, as well as catering for outdoor events.

Attention to Quality and Detail

Finally, it is essential that investment in the public realm is of good quality design and craftsmanship. The introduction of natural stone paving, artworks and bespoke signage have gone a long way to uphold this key objective. However in places, the choice of street furniture, for example, jars with the character of spaces (eg through the use of stainless steel). Evidence also exists of some failures in paving that will require to be rectified. While quality design and craftsmanship do have a cost implication at the outset, this will be recouped through the extended lifetime of the public realm and the complementary levels of investment it attracts.

Vision, Aims & Objectives

10 The Vision, Aims and Objectives of the Public Realm Plan (p29) remain very relevant to the strategic direction of Birr today in 2021. As a planned heritage town with abundant existing assets, the Council and its partners have demonstrated their ability to use public realm enhancements to improve Birr as a place to live, work and visit.

Reviewed in today's context however, two key issues are noticeably absent or under-represented from the Aims and Objectives of the Public Realm Plan for Birr.

Climate Emergency - public realm is widely regarded as having a vital role to play in meeting the urgent challenges of a changing climate. This includes the promotion of sustainable forms of transport, the use of environmentally appropriate materials and the planting of trees. A renewed emphasis must also be placed on supporting healthy ecosystems and local biodiversity.

Public Health - research has increasingly uncovered the intimate relationship between public health and the quality of our urban environments. Cardiovascular and respiratory health is firmly linked to air quality and opportunities to exercise, while mental health and well-being is related to access to peaceful and sociable spaces. The emergence of the Covid 19 pandemic has further heightened an awareness of this issue, presenting its own unique challenges on the use of public spaces.

Transition Birr to a Low Carbon Future

- Promote and facilitate walking and cycling throughout the town
- Support public transport provision to and from Birr
- Provide for sustainable technologies, including electric vehicles where appropriate
- Source sustainable materials for use and re-use in the public realm
- Increase the urban tree canopy to absorb CO2 and pollutants

Enhance Environmental Quality for the Benefit of People and Nature

- Provide a safe, attractive and good quality pedestrian environment day and night
- Seek a sustainable balance between transport modes to make space for people
- Provide good quality spaces for recreation, play and active travel
- Maintain and grow rich wildlife habitats for the benefit of biodiversity and local people
- Improve levels of air quality

Protect and Enhance the Historic Fabric and Identity of Birr

- Support conservation of historic buildings and structures
- Contribute to the identification of sustainable new uses for old buildings
- Enhance the setting of landmark buildings and structures
- Imaginatively communicate the historical and cultural significance of Birr

Define and Maximise the Role of Birr as a Centre for Tourism, Based on Existing Strengths and Regional Position

- Maximise the role and quality of existing tourism assets
- Seek opportunities for new tourism attractions
- Strengthen connectivity between attractions within the town
- Support hospitality and associated retail activity
- Improve first impressions of Birr
- Promote and develop Birr's role as a regional tourism centre

Ensure Sustainable Future Development via High Quality Infrastructure and Public Realm

- Identify and enhance the role and character of Birr's existing open spaces
- Guide the provision of new development to protect and enhance the existing town
- Ensure high standards in the provision of new public realm
- Require and support the use of sustainable design and construction

Key Principles

A number of Design Principles are set out in the Public Realm Plan (p38), including balanced provision of street space, decluttering, activation of spaces from buildings and investing in quality. For the next chapter of Birr's Public Realm it will be essential that these fundamental principles are fully observed. In addition, the following key principles are proposed.

Walkable Urbanism - To fulfil the vision and aims of this plan, it will be vital for Birr to focus development within a walkable catchment of its centre. This means concentrating development within a 10 minute (800m) radii of the centre and discouraging edge of town construction that relies on car travel. The tourism and shopping experience of Birr should be based on a 5 minute (400m) radii from its centre.

Proactive Animation of the Public Realm - One should be wary of a "Build it and they will come" mantra to any development, not least in the public realm. In order to successfully reap the benefits of investment in Birr's streets and spaces, it will be increasingly important to also invest in measures that activate them, from regular events, to outdoor seating and pop-up initiatives.

Flexible & Collaborative Design and Development - Placemaking is not an easy endeavour and organisations should not be afraid to experiment from time to time. Low cost, flexible changes to the public realm actively sought alongside more costly 'permanent actions' as proposed in the plan. This could include pop up seating areas, performance spaces, garden spaces, art installations and a host of other initiatives. Critical to their success will collaboration and communication with the people of the town, so that they can join the journey of testing alternatives.





400 m (5 min walk)

High Quality Streetscapes			Other Projects		
1	Main Street		15	Old Church & Graveyard	
2	Oxmantown Mall (& 2a Church)		16	Camcor River Park	
3	Church Street		17	Gateways and Approaches	
4	Castle Street		18	Neighbourhood Spaces	
5	Greene Street		19	Frontage Improvement	
6	Rosse Row / William Street		20	Street & Directional Signage	
7	Mill Street		21	Advertising Signage	
8	Emmet Street		22	Historic & Cultural Interp	
9	John's Place		23	Town Trail	
10	Connaught Street		24	General Lighting	
11	Wilmer Road		25	Feature Lighting	
12	St Brendan's Street / Chapel Lane		26	Cycle Network	
Squares			New Projects (2020)		
13	Emmet Square (& 13a Column)		27	Moorfield	
14	Market Square		28	Rectory Lands	
			29	Regional Greenways	
			30	Castle Entrance	

A total of 26 projects were proposed in the Public Realm Plan for Birr, as shown in the adjacent table. A number can be described as being substantially complete, while several more have been very well advanced.

In this section commentary is provided on the progress associated with each project and recommendations made on the next steps.

Four new projects have also been introduced, reflective of opportunities and priorities that have emerged since 2009.



Main Street



1. Main Street

Main Street remains the focal point of retail in Birr, although like all Main Streets in Ireland, it faces the challenges of changing shopping habits and economic ups and downs. Some excellent frontage improvements have taken place along the route, helping to make it more attractive and ‘more Birr’. The narrow street does however, remain dominated by vehicles. Congestion is commonplace as drivers manoeuvre into spaces. Moreover, pavement space is very limited with regular obstructions. This is particularly difficult for those with buggies and wheelchairs and more broadly, it discourages people from spending time on the street sitting, talking, window shopping, which is all vital for business life there. Also during the times of Covid 19, social distancing is very difficult to achieve.

Main Street Birr should have the reputation as being one of the best streets in the Midlands, if not the country. It is attractive and human scaled, with some great businesses along its length. By developing its role as a destination (not a thoroughfare or car park), great potential exists to transform this location. The options set out in the public realm plan now require serious consideration, alongside marketing and promotion of Main Street. A positive and energetic design process could also involve the testing of ideas. Full pedestrian may well not be appropriate for Main Street, although the ability to close the street to traffic for footfall inducing events should always be facilitated.



2. Oxmantown Mall

A street already of national significance in Birr is Oxmantown Mall, the Georgian set piece with St Brendan’s Church of Ireland at one end and the gates of Birr Castle at the other. Its proportions, fine architecture and mature trees make it one of the finest streets of its kind and something Birr should be very proud of and keen to share with the visitor.

While frontage improvements have made a notable difference to the quality of the street, Oxmantown Mall is tired in places. Furthermore, its mature chestnut trees are reaching the end of their natural life and each year present a health and safety risk that needs to be addressed.

Unlike some streets in Birr however, Oxmantown Mall does not need to be transformed. Rather it needs to be restored to resolve certain issues and ensure its beauty is safeguarded for future generations. Design work for the mall should therefore be progressed with careful attention to its history, introducing stone kerbs and paving traditionally found on such routes. The delightful gravel alley that runs parallel with the mall requires improved with edgings, sensitive lighting and seating. The mature trees unfortunately, will require to be replaced soon. This should be coordinated along the length of the mall, selected a species of appropriate scale and character and with the participation of local residents. The church setting should be enhanced as per the public realm plan, while the stunning Birr Theatre and Arts Centre needs to be supported to become a must-see destination.



Oxmantown Mall

Church Street

Church Street was identified in the public realm plan as a key link between the Castle and Main Street. This charming and very narrow street has a key role to play in encouraging the visitor to explore the town. In the short term, signage and interpretation can fulfil this role, while longer term, the introduction of stones setts and lighting would make a major difference.



Castle Street

The original medieval approach to Birr Castle, Castle Street is a very important part of the town. Frontage improvements and ongoing enhancements to the setting of the Castle walls as per the plan are to be applauded. The street however has scope for improvement. Proportions would allow for widened footpaths, cyclepaths and street trees here, creating the setting for sustainable uses to be found for its two landmarks and the old stable yard.





The Green

Green Street (The Green)

Another historic location in the town, Green Street has significant scope for improvement, including widened footpaths paved with natural stone and the introduction of street trees (as shown). This project has the potential to transform this attractive street as a place to live and do business. It would also form a strengthened link between Emmet Square and Birr Castle. Very careful consideration could event be given to a new entrance to the Caste from this point, replacing the modest pedestrian gate on William Street.

Rosse Row / William Street

Rosse Row and William Street is a unique part of the town, dominated by the beautiful walls of Birr Castle, built as part of Lord Rosse’s famine relief programme. New paving and signage has helped this location and in particular, to create better linkage between the castle and car park. As per the plan, creating a buffer between the road and walls (with potential uplighting) would greatly improve their setting and a feel of safety along this narrow stretch.





Mill Street

20 Running parallel to Main Street, Mill Street is a delightful little area of Birr Town Centre. It was the subject of largely successful improvements alongside works to the car park, much more generously proportioned pedestrian areas. In time this should be extended south and concrete pavers may require replaced with longer lasting alternatives.

The key issue for Mill Street is how to breath life back into the wonderful industrial buildings that remain there. Such buildings have huge potential for a range of uses, including accommodation or studio workspaces. Safeguarding the future of these structures should be a priority for the town.



Emmet Street

Emmet Street is an important thoroughfare in Birr, welcoming people who enter from the North. It has many historically important buildings along its length, including the old Courthouse which has plans to become a creative hub. The street also gives good views to Emmet Square and its restored column.

Over time improvements are needed to Emmet Street, enhancing the setting of its heritage assets and facilitating pedestrian movement towards Oxmantown Mall and the Courthouse. A short term priority should be the undergrounding of unsightly overhead cables that currently detract from its qualities.



John's Place

Another spectacular urban space in Birr is John's Place, dominated by its two Oriental Planes and town houses. Like Oxmantown Mall, care is required to restore the mall, rather than completely change its character. Frontage improvements to several houses have made a wonderful impact.

The future of John's Hall is an important consideration and finding a public use for this landmark, in conjunction with lands behind, is encouraged. The leasing of the old Town Council offices to the Irish Heritage School in 2019 and the refurbishment on the interior of John's Hall in 2020 leads the way to having this area back as a hive of community activity.

Resolving the dominance of Wilmer Road is another priority for John's Place. (see Wilmer Road)



John's Place / Wilmer Road



Connaught Street

22 Connaught Street is another attractive part of the town's street network, with two storey terraced properties and a several businesses along its length.

The public realm quality here is generally in good condition, although parking can at times dominate the street scene.

Further frontage improvements and the continued upkeep and maintenance of Connaught Street should be accompanied by efforts with local traders to stimulate more footfall along its length. This could include the occasional closure of the street to host outdoor seating and events.



Wilmer Road

As part of the N57, Wilmer Road is a busy street that sees heavy traffic on a regular basis. Road safety and the quality of the pedestrian and cycle experience will remain for the foreseeable future a priority along Wilmer Road.

An area of particular focus should be the round-about at John's Place. This presents a difficulty for pedestrians, cyclists and wheelchair users. A redesign of this junction should therefore be progressed to improve safety, as well as the setting of its heritage features. Wilmer Road should also be considered for the relocation of the main bus stop, alleviating Emmet Square from this role.



St Brendan's Street / Chapel Lane

Improvements to the park entrance of St Brendan's Street have helped to uplift the quality of this central location. Challenges still arise with the very narrow width of Chapel Lane towards Wilmer Road right next to the National School.

Ensuring pedestrian and cycle safety therefore remains a key priority for this stretch, through managed traffic speeds and other measures. In doing so, the opportunity to should be taken to further improve the aesthetic quality of the route.

Emmet Square

The transformation of Emmet Square has been a remarkable testimony to the value of public realm improvements in Birr. The space is now an attractive location at the heart of the town, with stone paved pedestrian areas used daily and for events. Some remedial work is required to the foundations of stone kerbs and road setts and over time, stainless steel street cycle stands could be replaced. Other than re-routing the N52, the priority for Emmet Square should be to animate the space as much as possible.



Market Square

Market Square is an attractive spot at the end of Main Street. Frontage improvements in the vicinity have made a notable difference. However the space and the monument at its centre do remain dominated by parked cars. In association with proposals for Main Street, consideration should be given to making Market Square a far more pedestrian friendly space, with potential for outdoor seating and canopies.





Market Square



St Brendan's Medieval Church

St Brendan's Medieval Church, on the site of the Early Christian Foundation of Birr. Conservation works on the structure have taken place to help safeguard its future. As per the Public Realm Plan, this site has much potential to attract visitors from the Castle into the town. The proposed project to introduce sensitive lighting and interpretation features has immense potential to create a very special must see attraction during the day, but also importantly after dark.



Camcor River

A highlight of any trip to Birr has to be the Camcor River. The watercourse is a haven for nature right in the centre of the town and its route is lined with many attractive buildings and other features. Work is underway to develop a plan for the river as proposed by the public realm plan. Priorities should be nature conservation, improvements to paths and street furniture and the creation of looped walks (potentially as far the Syngesfield Estate) aided by an appropriately designed signage system.





Gateways and Approaches

- 26 An early project delivered upon launching the Birr Public Realm Plan was the entrance gateway along the Tullamore Road. This added to attractive tree planting that had taken place there some years before. The result has been a dramatic improvement of first impressions from this side of the town, as well as the provision of safe space for cyclists. The challenges of planting box hedging in close proximity to the road is evident however, and may require remedial work in due course.

Attention should now be drawn to other points of arrival in Birr, most notably from the south along the N52. Steadily maturing avenues of Lime trees make for an attractive approach and the foresight of those who planted them should be greatly appreciated. However, the town does tend to sprawl slightly to the southwards, making it important to define a point of entry. Work will be required to identify the most suitable location for an entrance feature, potentially involving a need for a small area of privately owned land to be gifted or sold for such a purpose.

Sculpture by Ann Meldon Hugh.



Neighbourhood Spaces

Improvements to the neighbourhood spaces of Birr has been a success story thanks in a large part to the work of Birr Tidy Towns and the many residents who have participated in that process. This is an excellent demonstration of how local communities can play their part in caring for and improving the quality of their environments. This important work should continue on helping everyone across the town, involving as many people as possible in the process. While the aesthetic improvement of streets and spaces is important, an emphasis should continue on enhancing biodiversity (as per the All Ireland Pollinator Plan) and making local green spaces more usable for the people who live near them.



Frontage Improvement

Since the Public Realm Plan was written there have been many great successes in improving building frontages around the town. This has included shop fronts on Main Street, Castle Street and Connaught Street, as well as residential properties throughout the historic core. By replacing inappropriate windows, fixtures and fittings, and by introducing an attractive and appropriate palette of colours, the town centre now has an increased feeling of consistency that allows its distinctive character to shine through.

Improving town centre frontages will always be an ongoing task that comes with the challenges of encouraging building owners to participate. A strategic approach should be maintained wherever possible, targeting buildings of visual prominence and/or historic significance as a priority.

However the wider challenge for Birr will be to find ways of successfully populating vacant buildings with sustainable new uses. In a large part this will involve refurbishment of upper storeys to create good quality living accommodation. Getting more people back living in the centre of Birr, both permanently and for visitors, would greatly help to enliven the town centre economy and its public realm.



Street & Directional Signage, Advertising Signage

Signage featured prominently as an issue to be addressed by the Public Realm Plan. This refers to Street and Directional Signage which was missing in many areas, as well as Advertising Signage that had spread unchecked in several locations. Once again, very good progress has been made on this issue.

Birr's new street signs are simply a triumph. Beautifully proportioned and crafted metal signs in both Irish and English now adorn every street corner. These not only provide a practical aid to navigation, but reinforce the local identity of streets and spaces, while reminding us of their fascinating history.

Directional signage remains an ongoing exercise, both for vehicular traffic (without compromising the setting of heritage spaces and buildings) and for cyclists and pedestrians. A coordinated wayfinding system would greatly help people find their way around Birr. As proven with the street signs, great attention to design quality and craftsmanship will be a must.

Birr also has much less cluttering signage than it did before, especially on its approach roads and other high profile locations like John's Mall. Continued efforts to manage advertising signage should remain.



Historic & Cultural Interpretation

- 28 Birr is bursting with history and a perennial challenge is how to best communicate its many fascinating stories with locals and visitors alike. The public realm plan proposed an array of innovative means to communicate the heritage, including quality bespoke signage, public art and lighting.

While there are some good examples currently in the town, there is much potential to further this objective as part of a coordinated strategy. Carefully planned stories can be told around the town in conjunction with high standards of interpretative design.

Furthermore, consideration should be given to where the town's story can be told. At present the town lacks a clear 'go to' location where visitors can learn more about Birr's history and orientate themselves for further exploration. Historic locations such as John's Hall should be examined for such a role.



Town Trail

The Birr Town Trail was updated in response to the Public Realm Plan recommendation and now offers the visitor two walking routes of just over a kilometre that take in the vast majority of Birr's points of interest. A good illustrated map and guide is available but needs to be posted in key locations such as the entrance courtyard of Birr Castle Demesne and other accommodation and food providers

The effectiveness and popularity of this trail should be studied in detail with visitors to ensure that it fulfils its potential. Taking the trail (and finding ones way around it) should be an easy choice for visitors to the town. The trail should engage the visitor along the way and encourage them to explore further. The use of digital technologies would help to further the reach of the town trail, both on the ground and also online.



General Lighting

Levels of lighting in Birr have improved over the years, thanks in part to the advent of main stream LED technologies. It is very important that the town feels safe and attractive after dark, primarily for those who live there, but also to encourage visitors on a summers eve or a winters afternoon. Furthermore, the transition to LED lighting greatly improves the energy efficiency and forms part of the Climate Change Adaption Strategy.

Care is required to specify the right lighting levels and fittings in areas of heritage sensitivity. Pastiche ‘heritage’ product should however be avoided, in lieu of simple, timeless design. Furthermore, light pollution must be monitored and reduced where necessary.



Feature Lighting

Great scope exists to further enhance the presence of Birr’s heritage assets through careful feature lighting that is targeted and assessed for minimal disturbance to wildlife.. At present there is an attractive selection of sites lit up after dark, including the Emmet Square Column and the Castle itself. However, there remain many buildings that would lend themselves to feature lighting, adding drama and intrigue to the after dark experience.

Lighting projections have also been used to great creative effect in Birr for events, such as Vintage Week and Heritage Week. Great scope exists to sensitively develop this activity into a major draw for the town.

A professionally produced lighting strategy remains the best vehicle for this potential to be fully researched, designed and delivered.



Cycle Network

Cycling is recognised more and more as a essential component of urban mobility, contributing to environmental quality, traffic reduction and personal health and fitness. Historic towns often struggle to accommodate cycle infrastructure due to the narrow width of their streets. However, a continued effort to improve cycling infrastructure in Birr is required. This will involve cycle lanes predominantly outside of the historic core and cycle friendly streets within it.

Consideration should also be given to a seasonal cycle hire initiative in Birr. This could be based at Emmet Square and allow visitors to explore town and its surroundings by bike.

Moorpark Street/ High

- 30 Upon review of the public realm plan it was felt that the corner of High Street and Moorpark Street is a location worthy of inclusion as a new project. This historic location, which is adjacent to the location of the town's old gaol, is a gateway between the town centre, the river and residential areas beyond. The space lends itself to development as a community square, consisting of traffic calming, resurfacing, planting, artworks and seating.



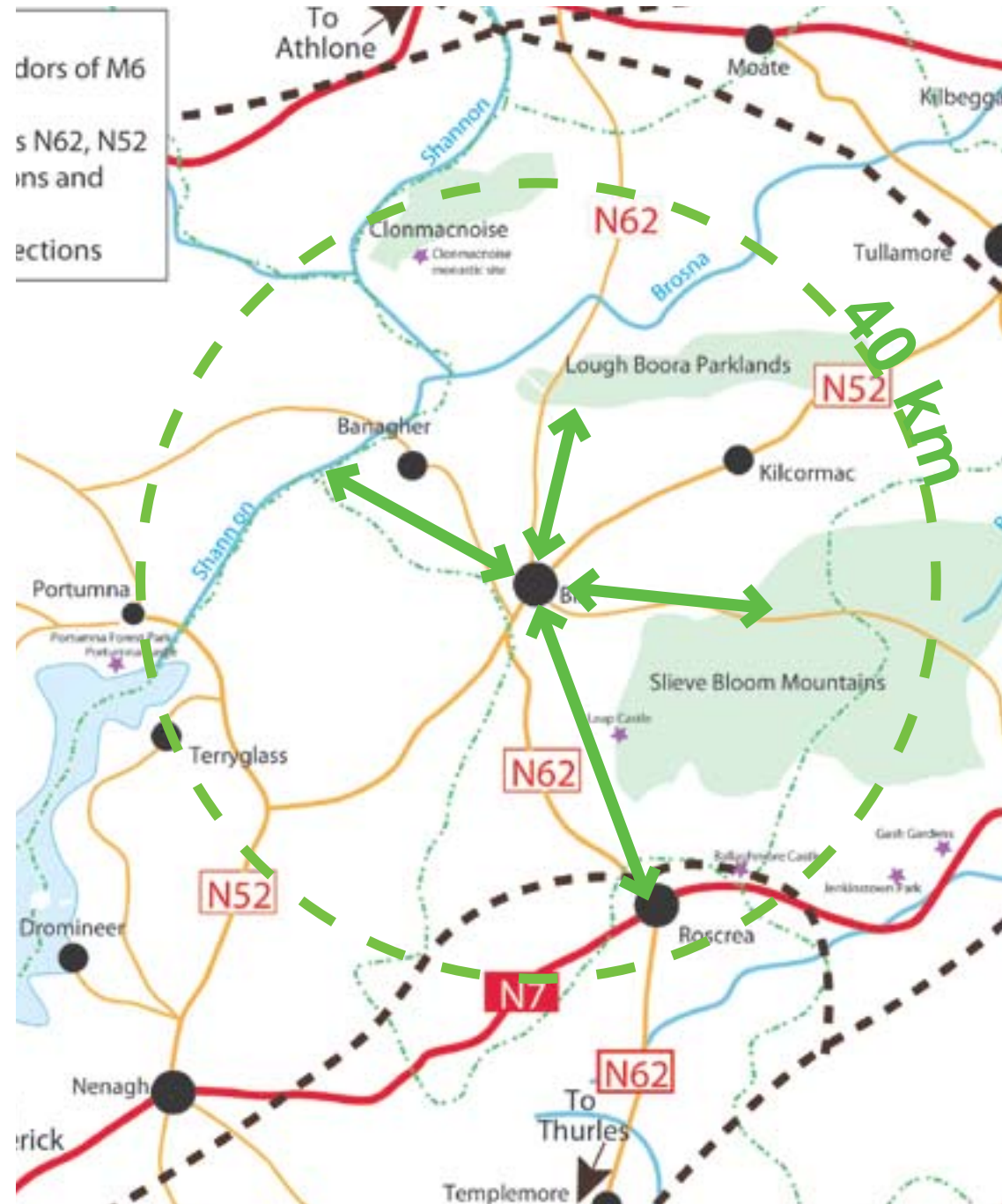
Rectory Lands

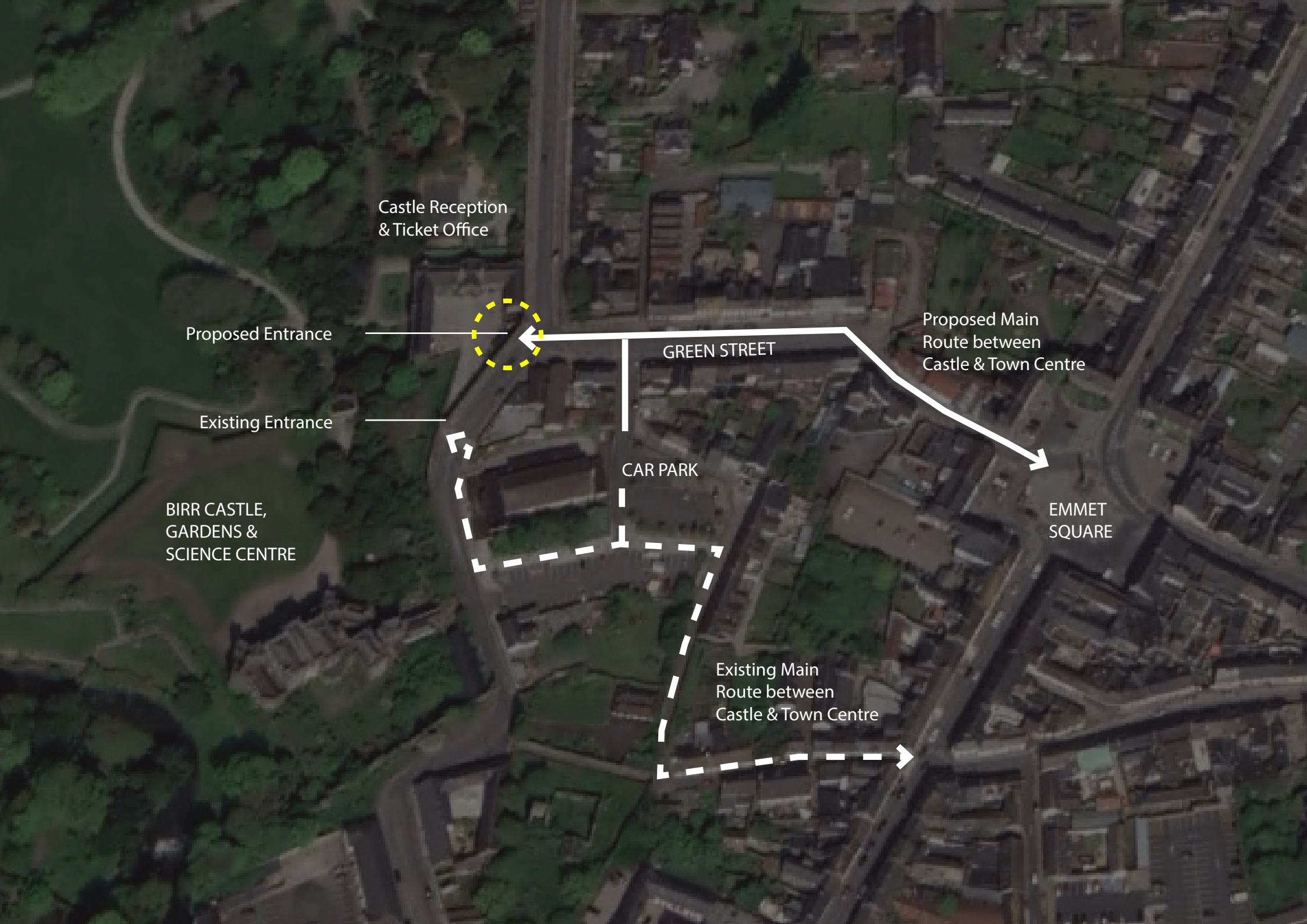
The former rectory lands to the north of John's Mall were acquired by Offaly County Council after publication of the Public Realm Plan. The large site has potential for a range of town centre and residential uses. It is vital that masterplan for this site is grounded in an understanding of the character and qualities of Birr, so that it can be developed in a manner that fulfils the vision and objectives of this Public Realm Plan.



Regional Greenways

To further develop Birr's role as a regional visitor destination it is proposed to explore the establishment of a network of regional greenways. Building on the success of other greenway initiatives across Ireland, these could follow old railway lines and waterways to connect Birr with some of the area's other tourism attractions, including the River Shannon, Clonmacnoise, Lough Boora and Slieve Bloom.





Castle Reception
& Ticket Office

Proposed Entrance

Existing Entrance

BIRR CASTLE,
GARDENS &
SCIENCE CENTRE

GREEN STREET

CAR PARK

Existing Main
Route between
Castle & Town Centre

Proposed Main
Route between
Castle & Town Centre

EMMET
SQUARE

Birr Castle Entrance



Since the outset of the Public Realm Plan process a key issue has been how to encourage more people visiting Birr Castle to also visit the town centre. Successfully doing so would bring economic benefits to a range of local businesses, while elevating the status of Birr as a visitor destination worthy of a longer stay. Efforts to date have centred on improving the car park at William Street and the zig-zag of pedestrian links along Cornmarket and Church Streets. While these measures have undoubtedly helped, evidence suggests that many visitors to the Castle still stop short of exploring the town. Upon careful review of this situation it is suggested that a major issue is in fact the castle entrance itself. For the size and splendour of the attraction beyond, the current pedestrian gate is very modest in nature, almost like a secret door hidden from view. Furthermore to somebody new to Birr, the route from this point to the town centre is far from obvious, thereby reducing their likelihood to explore.



It is therefore proposed to sensitively consider a new main pedestrian entrance to the Birr Castle Demesne at the head of Green Street. Historic plans from 1808 show that a gate once existed in this location prior to construction of the present walls. The benefit of this particular point would be a strong visual and physical connection with Green Street and to Emmet Square beyond, making the route to and from the town centre far more intuitive and encouraging to the visitor.

Any such proposal would require the utmost care and attention to the historic integrity of the castle and its walls. High quality design options should be tested, but taking care not to suggest that the opening was an original feature. Road safety would also require particular focus to ensure ample pedestrian space and traffic calming at this location. While complex and requiring stringent approvals, if delivered this bold move holds significant potential for the castle and the town.



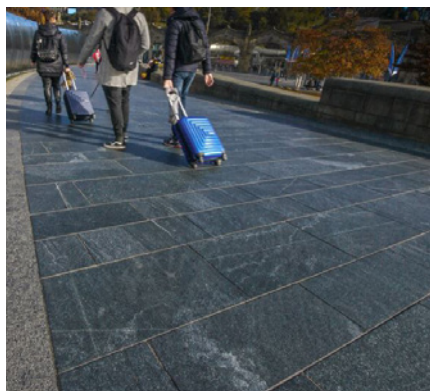
Stone Paving

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The use of natural stone paving is an important element for the principal streets and spaces of Birr Town Centre. Ensuring a degree of consistency is desirable, especially along streets that connect with one another.

As per Emmet Square, locally sourced Kilkenny Blue Limestone should be the aim for squares. For town centre streets, the use of Black Granite should also be considered as a slightly more affordable alternative that complements limestone. Grey / silver granite setts are to be used in tertiary spaces and where appropriate, on carriageways.

Where stone paving is not used, a bound surface such as asphalt is advised, over concrete block alternatives.



Stone Kerbs and Elements

Robust granite kerbs are advised for all streets in the town centre, whether stone paved or not. They must be of adequate proportions and foundations to withstand vehicular overrun. Curved stone 'specials' should be used for the radii of junctions to result in 'clean lines', avoiding the use of multiple short units.



Metalwork

As a town with Georgian origins, metal work is an important feature of Birr. This includes railings, drainage gulleys, bicycle racks and bollards. It is advised that in general, with the exception of artworks, all metal should either be dark coloured or painted black, avoiding the use of stainless steel or other bright colours that can detract from the historic streetscape.



The public realm plan sets out guidance on the specification and design of materials. This section elaborates upon this and for consistency, provides further clarity on their use in Birr. Importantly however, each design intervention should be made with careful consideration to its immediate context and appropriateness.

While Birr is a heritage town, the choice of street future should not be limited to 'heritage products'. Unless original features are in existence, good quality, contemporary design with a consistent use of materials, can in fact complement historic townscapes better, while adding to its character and interest.



Timber

Another natural element of value to Birr is timber. This could be used as a component to seating, bins and signage, especially in the vicinity of the Camcor River and other green spaces in the town. All timbers should be responsibly sourced using FSC Approved supply.



Existing Features

Whenever possible, original in situ public realm features should be conserved and incorporated into any new designs. This could include historic blocks, cobbles or pebbles found on site, weighbridges, old metal features such as gulleys of manhole covers or elements associated with adjacent buildings, such as steps of carriage wheel guard stones.



Quality Design

A bye-word for public realm improvements in Birr must be quality.

All around the town of Birr it is possible to see fine architecture, designed by leaders in their field, built by craftspeople using quality natural, often locally sourced, materials. The public realm should be no different and as per the public realm plan, it is advocated that long lasting quality interventions should drive decision making.

Since the public realm plan was written, the quality 'off-the-shelf' public realm products has improved. However, it is still advocated that by working with landscape architects, designers, craftspeople and artists, opportunities are found for bespoke elements to be added to the town's streets and spaces. These will help underpin the unique character of the town and create points of interest to the visitor and local alike.



Conclusions & Next Steps

In this addendum we have outlined the significant progress made to implement to Public Realm Plan for Birr since it was written in 2009. We have also reviewed the current situation in the town, including its current issues and opportunities, as well as the new policy context within which it finds itself.

The conclusion is that Birr now has a wonderful opportunity to continue of its process of renewal. By investing carefully in high quality public realm, it can fulfill its potential to:

- Transition to a low carbon future
- Enhance environmental quality
- Protect and enhance historic fabric
- Define and maximise its role in tourism
- Ensure sustainable future development

The historic town of Birr will be sensitively and sustainably enhanced through the provision of high quality public realm. This will improve the attractiveness and functionality of Birr as a place to live, work and visit.



Comhairle Chontae Uíbh Fhailí
Offaly County Council

the **paul hogarth** company