



Public Realm Plan for Birr

Public Realm Plan for Birr

prepared for
Offaly County Council
Birr Town Council

with funding from
The Heritage Council
Shannon Development

by
The Paul Hogarth Company
ERM Ireland Ltd

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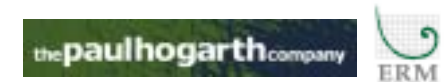


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“Public Realm is a broad term used to describe the form and use of outdoor areas that are accessible to the public. This includes streets, squares, paths, parks and car parks”

Located at the confluence of the Camcor and Little Brosna Rivers, the County Offaly town of Birr is known across Ireland as an important historical centre. A unique range of scientific, cultural and sporting achievements have succeeded in putting this relatively small, rural town on the national stage, boasting a rich collection of fine buildings including Birr Castle, Georgian town houses and the Pugin designed Civic Offices, all of which are of national architectural importance.

Historic Birr is also of course a modern day town, with a busy commercial centre and sizeable areas of 20th century development. As such, both opportunities and challenges are afforded to it including greatly improved regional linkages, yet increasingly heavy volumes of traffic dominate its central core. In addition, the global economy has recently undergone dramatic change, thus altering the economic landscape within which Birr and its county find themselves.

It is within this context of a historic and modern day town with both opportunities and challenges, that this Public Realm Plan for Birr has been commissioned. The aim of the Plan is to propose how improvements to Birr’s public realm can enhance the town as an attractive place in which to live, work and visit.

So what is public realm? Public realm is a broad term used to describe the form and use of outdoor areas that are accessible to the public. This includes streets, squares, paths, parks and car parks, thus accounting for a large percentage of the town’s land mass and greatly influencing the way in which it looks and functions. As this study has found, Birr is home to some particularly fine examples of public realm, including Emmet Square and its two Georgian Malls. However, the plan also identifies great scope for improvement, both in these areas and other parts of Birr.

Sometimes mistakenly viewed as a cosmetic exercise of beautification, investment in the public realm can bring real sustainable socioeconomic and physical benefits. By improving the way in which Birr functions through its public realm, the town can be positioned to enhance its role as a centre for tourism, retail and commerce, as well as an excellent place in which to live.

Through this document, we will analyse the town of Birr today, enabling the identification of opportunities to improve its public realm. A total of 27 proposals are made, accompanied by an Action Plan that details when and how their delivery can come about.





Open Day
to inform the development of the draft

Public Realm Plan

2-8pm, Thursday 4th December, Birr Civic Offices

Members of the public are kindly invited to Birr Civic Offices to view draft proposals for the Public Realm Plan for Birr. This will be an opportunity to meet the design team and to share your views so helping to shape the direction of the emerging plan.

77% of the population of Birr are within walking distance of a bus stop.

Public Realm is a term used to describe the outdoor spaces that we all use in our daily lives. It includes streets, public parks and squares. The plan will aim to improve the quality of the public realm and provide a framework for the future development of Birr.

The Public Realm Plan for Birr was commissioned in the summer of 2008 by Offaly County Council and Birr Town Council with funding from Shannon Development and The Heritage Council. The Plan was prepared by The Paul Hogarth Company (TPHC), a multidisciplinary company comprising Landscape Architects and Urban Designers, with extensive experience in the design and delivery of public realm projects. TPHC were joined by environmental consultants ERM Ireland Ltd, providing support in the fields of planning, economics and tourism.

The process, shown in the adjacent diagram, was undertaken over an eight month period involving a close working relationship between the consultant team, the Offaly County Council Heritage Officer, Birr Town Council and a steering group comprised of key stakeholders. Development of the Public Realm Plan was also greatly informed through consultation with the people of Birr, a full account of which is provided in the Appendix of this document.

While this plan is not a statutory document, it was compiled concurrently with the Birr and Environs Development Plan and in close cooperation with the Council’s planning team, enabling both documents to inform one another, resulting in many key aspects of public realm being reflected in the forthcoming development plan. In addition to providing a shared vision for the Public Realm of Birr, this document will also play an important role in ensuring the sustainable development of the town.





Blur from above

Location

The town of Birr is located in the heart of Ireland, in the west of County Offaly and close to the border of North Tipperary. Birr sits at the junction of two important cross country roads, the N62 and N52, making the towns of Athlone (43km), Tullamore (36km), Nenagh (37km) and Roscrea (19km) easily accessible. Birr is also located between two major east / west transport corridors of the N6/M4 (Dublin to Galway) and the M7/N7 (Dublin to Limerick), with both routes being the subject of ongoing investment through the National Development Plan. Roscrea and Tullamore represent the nearest railway connections and as a result bus travel remains the primary form of public transport servicing the town.

Birr is also on the junction of cross country roads N62 and N52, connecting the town with Tullamore, Roscrea, Nenagh, the N6 and N7. These connections mean that Birr is also centrally located to several tourist attractions and activities including Clonmacnoise, the Slieve Bloom mountains, Lough Derg and others.

Geography

Birr is situated upon sand and gravel deposits associated with the rivers Camcor and Little Brosna that flow through the town. These join at Birr Castle Demesne to form the River Brosna, a tributary of the Shannon, making Birr a key point of the Shannon Basin. The landscape of the area is predominated by gently undulating pastures, pockets of deciduous woodland and peat bogs on higher ground to the north. The impressive Slieve Bloom mountains mark Birr's southeastern skyline, making a popular tourist destination some 14 km away. Other nearby geographic features include Lough Derg known for its natural beauty.

History

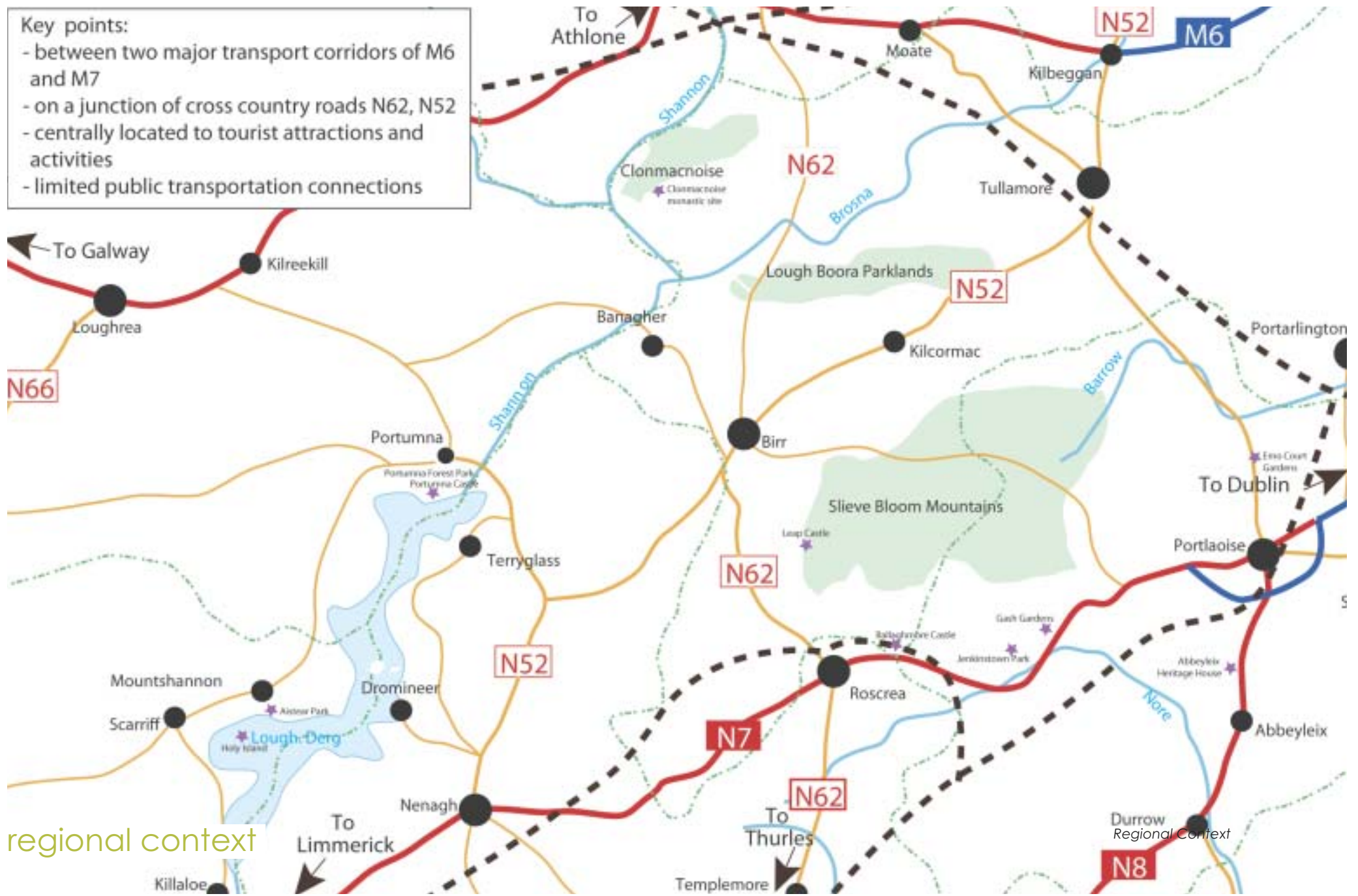
Birr has a long and particularly interesting history, a very brief summary of which is only possible within this plan. Settlement is known to have first occurred as early as 540AD, although nearby archaeological evidence points to human activity in the region long before. It was St Brendan's founding of a monastery that led to first historical references to Birr. During this time the town's importance became established, with the early MacRegol Gospels scribed there, as well as the Cain Adamnam, one of the first known charters to protect the rights of woman and children. The Irish name of *Biora* is thought to describe the town's riverside setting, with good fish stocks and defensive properties making the locality well suited to inhabitation. Its native population later became The O'Carroll dynasty residing in Birr until the 17th Century, with successive fortifications repelling Anglo Norman authority. In 1620 Birr was granted by James I to Sir Laurence Parsons, the descendents of whom can still be found in the castle today. A tumultuous century, including the Siege of Birr Castle in 1690, gave way to a prosperous and thriving settlement.

Much of Birr's well known history can be traced to the activities of the Parsons family, whose scientific and engineering feats were widely acclaimed. The Birr telescope was for some time the largest in the world and Parsons' turbine engine revolutionised naval propulsion. Birr also became famed for its Georgian architecture, with a series of town houses and public buildings becoming the hallmark of the town. Birr was also the venue of the first All Irish Hurling Championships in 1888, beginning the town's long association with Gaelic Athletics.

Key points:

- between two major transport corridors of M6 and M7
- on a junction of cross country roads N62, N52
- centrally located to tourist attractions and activities
- limited public transportation connections

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regional context

Regional Context

Introduction

To inform the development of a Public Realm Plan for Birr, a thorough process of survey and analysis was carried out by the consultant team. This threefold process involved desktop research, including historic literature and relevant policy, site appraisal work (carried out during the summer and autumn of 2008) and consultation meetings with key stakeholders of the town. The main findings of these processes are contained within this chapter, organised by theme and illustrated with plans and photos, forming a foundation upon which public realm proposals are made.

Regional Context

An analysis of the town must begin with an understanding of its regional context. The central location of Birr, coupled with rapidly improving regional transport linkages, stand to bring further economic benefits to the town and its region. The upgrade of the M6 and M7 corridors effectively bring the major urban centres of Limerick, Galway and Dublin 'closer' to Birr, opening up new opportunities for employment and commerce. One likely result of this infrastructural investment will be the continued demand for new house building in the area.

Tourism is also likely to benefit from such investment, with Birr centrally located to attractions such as the Slieve Bloom Mountains, Lough Derg and Clonmacnoise Monastic Site. Whilst increasingly accessible as a day trip location, the potential of Birr as a tourism hub for the wider area is significant. The proximity to such sites, complemented by its own wealth of attractions, stand to make Birr an excellent base for visitors to the area.



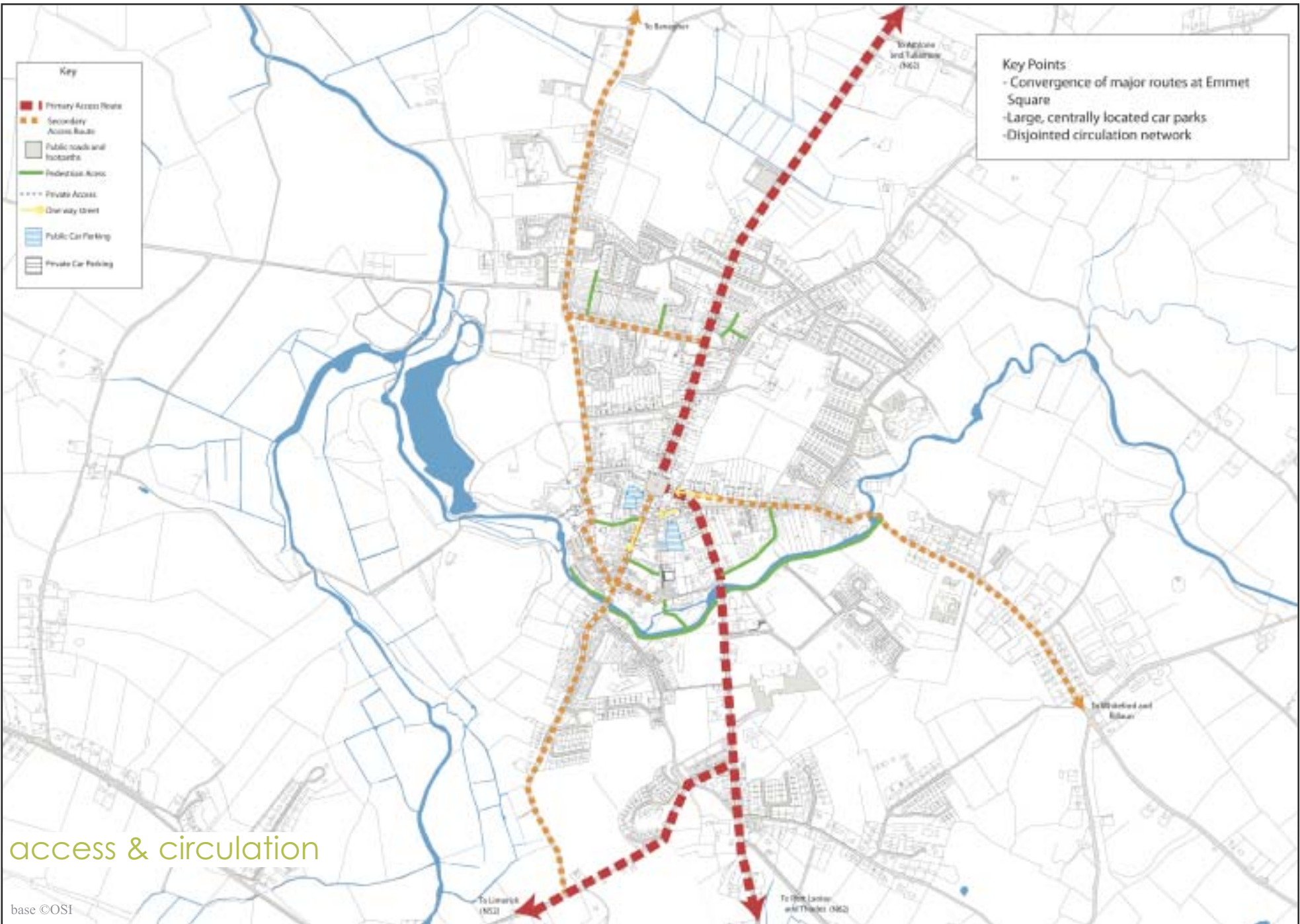
Slieve Bloom mountains



Clonmacnoise Monastic Site



Lough Derg



access & circulation

Access and Circulation

Birr's role as a market town and its position at the junction of the N52 and N62 cross country routes, have resulted in the town being heavily trafficked with congestion commonplace on Main Street, Roscrea and Tullamore Roads.

Whilst normally a positive indication of economic activity, the current heavy volumes of traffic, particularly within the central core, impact negatively upon the environmental quality of Birr. Most affected are of course pedestrians, who experience difficulties in crossing roads safely and find a lack of pedestrian priority areas located around the town centre. In Main Street for example, narrow footpaths discourage people from spending time in the area, who instead focus primarily on moving between specific destinations.

One of Birr's (and arguably Ireland's) finest urban spaces is Emmet Square, laid out in a formal style during the town's Georgian period. Unfortunately, the beauty of the square is greatly marred by the dominance of heavy vehicles passing through it, along with the abundance of parked cars. Detailed surveys have revealed that approximately 80% of Emmet Square is currently being utilised by vehicles, leaving very little space for people.

It is accepted that vehicular accessibility and car parking are vitally important to Birr, and necessary for supporting commercial activity. However, measures such as a town bypass and increased pedestrian space would greatly improve the environmental quality of the town centre. Put simply, this would make Birr a more enjoyable place in which to spend time, increasing its appeal to shoppers and tourists, thus bringing economic benefits to the town.



Vehicular dominance on Main Street

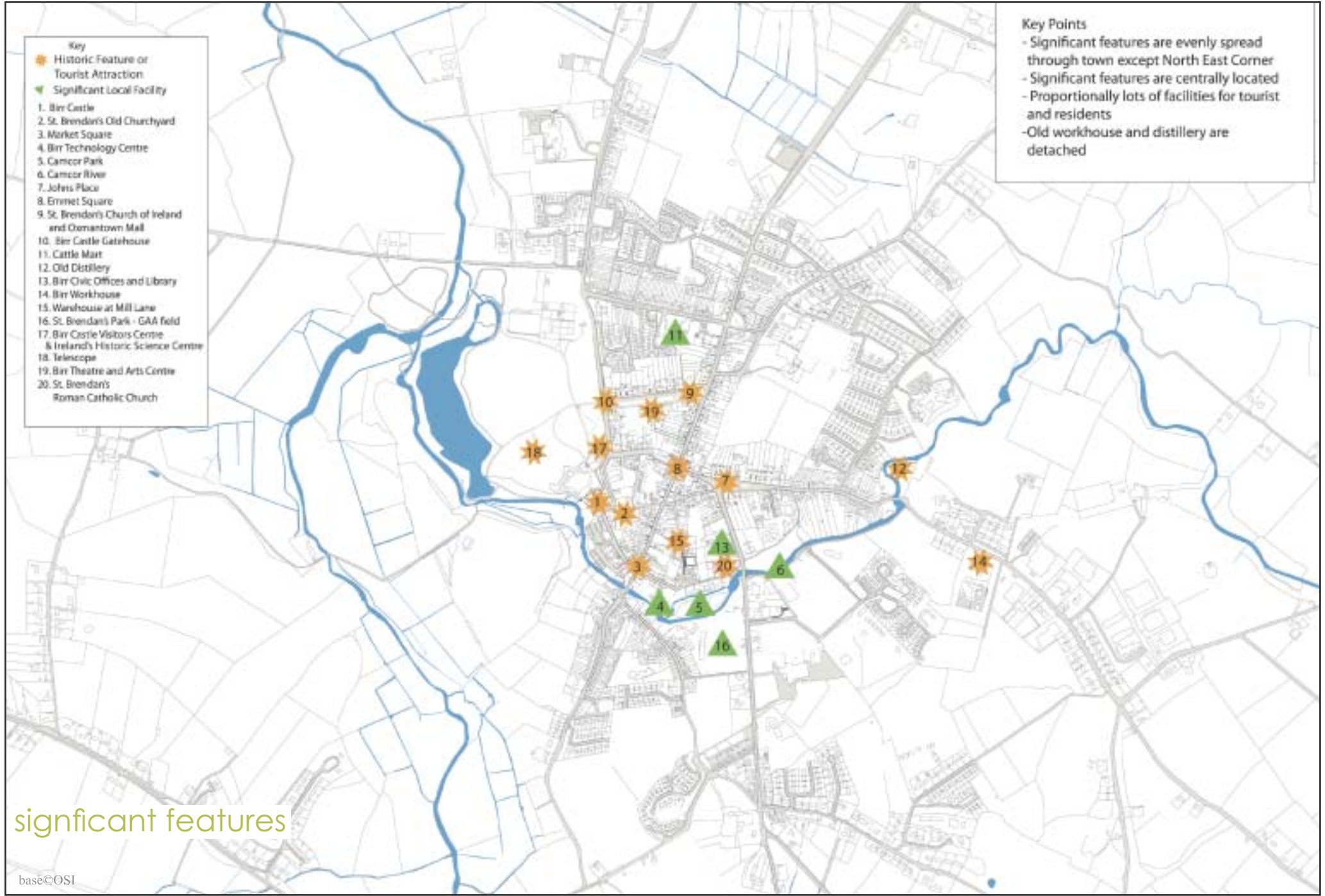


Heavy goods vehicles on Emmet Square

- Key**
- ★ Historic Feature or Tourist Attraction
 - ▲ Significant Local Facility
1. Birr Castle
 2. St. Brendan's Old Churchyard
 3. Market Square
 4. Birr Technology Centre
 5. Camcor Park
 6. Camcor River
 7. Jofers Place
 8. Ermet Square
 9. St. Brendan's Church of Ireland and Osmantown Mall
 10. Birr Castle Gatehouse
 11. Cattle Mart
 12. Old Distillery
 13. Birr Civic Offices and Library
 14. Birr Workhouse
 15. Warehouse at Mill Lane
 16. St. Brendan's Park - GAA field
 17. Birr Castle Visitors Centre & Ireland's Historic Science Centre
 18. Telescope
 19. Birr Theatre and Arts Centre
 20. St. Brendan's Roman Catholic Church

Key Points

- Significant features are evenly spread through town except North East Corner
- Significant features are centrally located
- Proportionally lots of facilities for tourist and residents
- Old workhouse and distillery are detached



significant features

Significant Features

Birr's rich history has left a legacy of attractions, or 'significant features' located throughout the centre of the town. Most famously this includes Birr Castle Demesne, renowned for the quality of its gardens and the restored telescope situated at its centre. Other significant features include the two churches devoted to St Brendan and Birr Civic Offices, housed in a former convent designed by the renowned architect Pugin.

However on closer inspection, many of Birr's most attractive and important buildings currently underplay their potential. John's Hall, the former library, Crotty's church, Birr Workhouse and the former Distillery are all either vacant or underused buildings, despite their significance to the development of the town. Great potential exists for all of these buildings to play a greater role as tourist attractions or community facilities, thus securing their preservation for years to come.

Birr has a notable track record in finding new uses for old buildings. The award winning conversion of the Convent of Mercy to Birr Civic Offices is an excellent example of a contemporary use being found to proactively conserve an old building. The continuation of this trend should be considered as key to the future of Birr, with careful attention paid to design quality and suitability of use.

Birr also enjoys an impressive programme of events, far more extensive than many towns of a comparable size. These include Birr Vintage Week & Arts Festival, the Irish Game & County Fair, productions of the Birr Theatre and Arts Centre and a regular calendar of sporting events. The public realm should therefore support such activities and create opportunities to add events to the calendar.



The Great Telescope



Oxmantown Mall



Birr Vintage Week and Arts Festival



Birr GAC

built form



- Key Points
- Strong historic urban form in town centre
 - Clearly defined open space
 - Large gaps in urban form from the Castle and rectory lands
 - Very little river frontage
 - Isolated areas of housing to the south

Built Form

The town's influential Georgian heritage has given Birr a strong urban form within its central core. The adjacent 'figure ground plan', which illustrates the built form of the town, shows very clearly defined urban spaces such as Emmet Square and John's Place as well as the tight urban grain prevalent along the two main axis Main Street / Emmet Street and John's Mall. This collection of fine malls, squares and open spaces is not only of national importance, but a critical component of Birr's individual character and charm. The protection and redevelopment of these spaces and routes must therefore be approached thoughtfully to uphold or re-establish their quality.

Beyond the compact central core, however, the urban form of Birr 'dissipates' into lower density development typically associated with the 20th century. The result is less clearly defined open spaces and in areas, a lack of distinctive character or identity. Analysis also highlights areas of development that are isolated from the town, such as the neighbourhood of Scurragh located to the south east of the centre. This area does feel somewhat detached from the rest of the town, exacerbated by poor pedestrian connections which often result in increased car useage for short journeys.

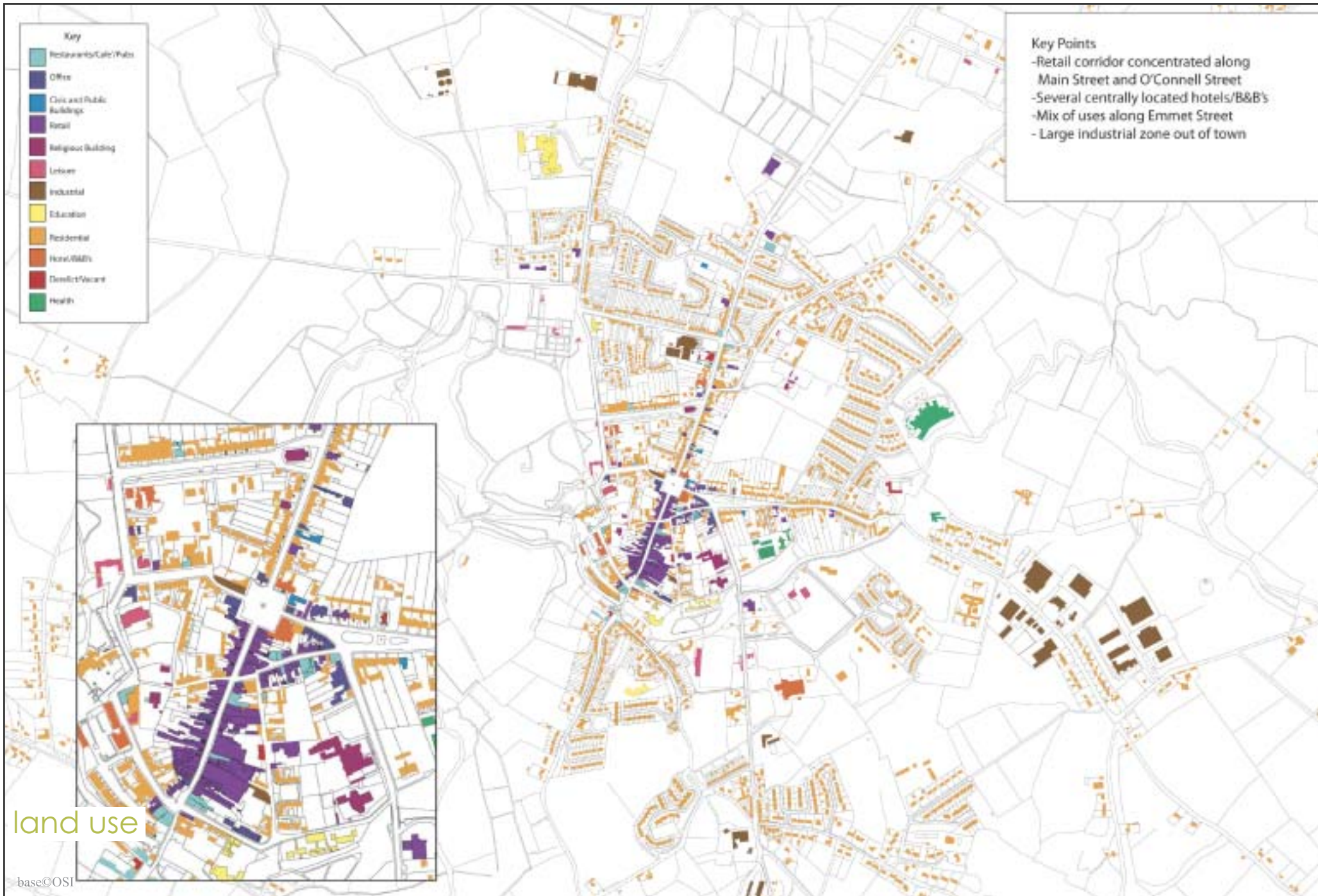
Analysis of built form also highlights a number of sizeable open areas. Whilst some are clearly inappropriate for development due to environmental or historic reasons, others such as The Glebe / Rectory Lands to the North East of Emmet Square have a potential role to play in the future development of the town. Taking forward such development provides an opportunity to concentrate on quality, drawing positive lessons from the more established parts of Birr.



Panorama of Market Square



Rectory lands



Landuse

Identifying and mapping the ground floor building uses within Birr shows a very prominent retail corridor along Main and O'Connell Streets. This lively corridor forms an important spine of economic activity, thus requiring special attention to be given to the quality of its public realm. The current mix of retail outlets is also a positive aspect of the town, with a selection of boutiques, cafes, grocers and chemists that are of interest to locals and visitors alike.

Landuse mapping also reveals a more recent trend of large retail units being established beyond the central core along the fringe of the town. Supermarkets such as Lidl and Tesco add to the retail offer of the town and reduce the necessity of residents to travel to places such as Tullamore for their provisions. However, care must be taken to ensure that such developments make a positive physical contribution, with appropriate architecture and the provision of good quality open spaces and footpaths. As the existence of such major retailers is likely to see a change in the type and mix of shops occurring within the town, it is vital that appropriate pedestrian priority public realm measures are taken to protect the primacy of the central retail core.

Many of the town centre streets such as Emmet and Connaught Streets have a mixture of uses along their lengths, adding a healthy diversity of activity to the town. Efforts must be made to sustain such mixes, to ensure that the town centre remains lively through different times of the day and week. This includes residential properties, as well as offices, shops and public houses.

Industrial uses are concentrated along Syngesfield Road, thus limiting their physical impact upon the remainder of the town. Whilst less visually sensitive than other parts of Birr, the public realm in this area should help to create an attractive setting for future investment, as well as contributing to the arrival experience into the town.



Main Street retail corridor



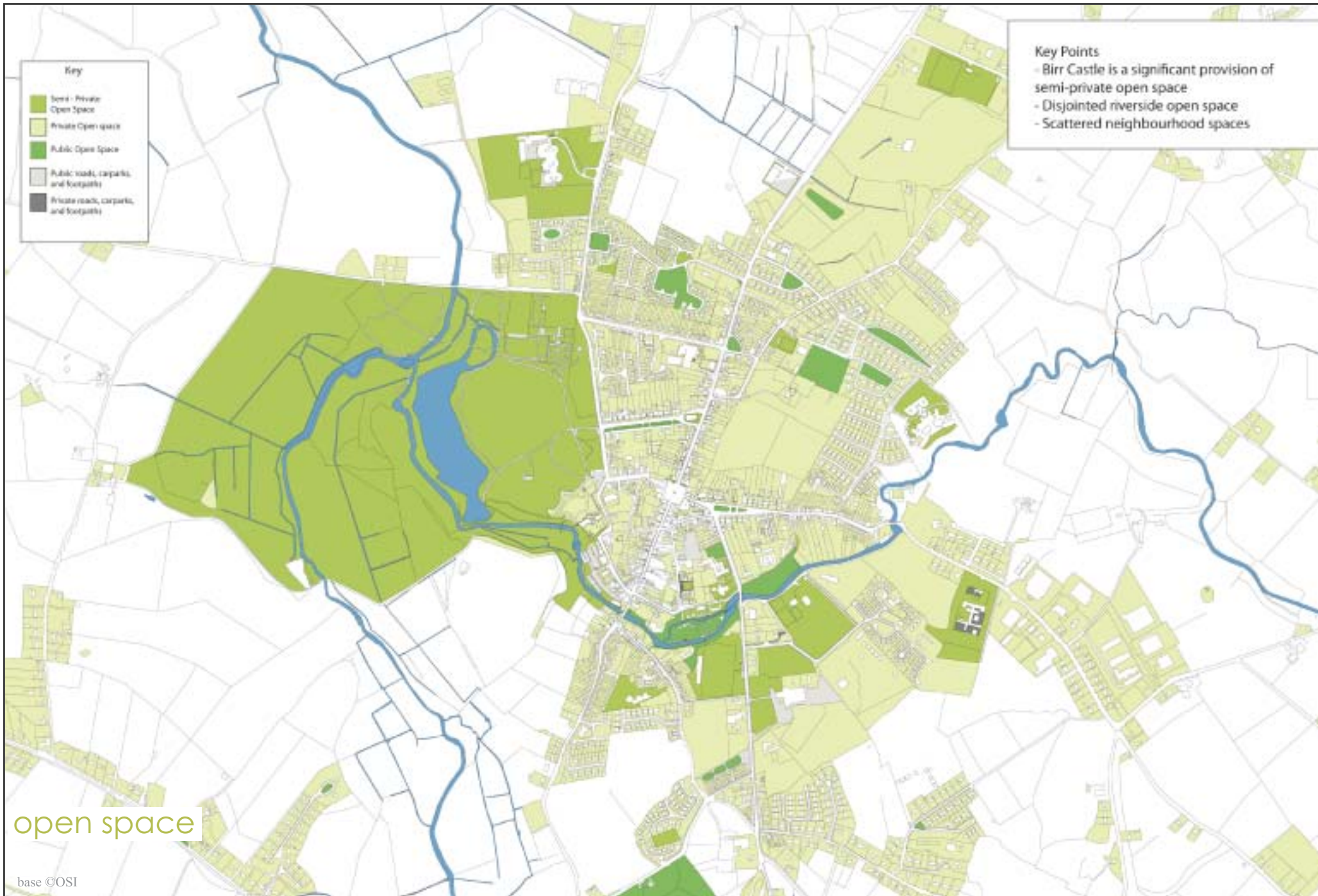
Dooly's hotel on Emmet Square



Industrial development



Emmet Street



Open Space

Birr has abundant quantities of open space, although much is in either private or semiprivate ownership.

The largest of these is Birr Castle Demesne, recognised as one of the most important gardens in Europe both for its design and extensive plant collection. Consequently, it plays an important role in attracting tourists to Birr. Scope exists to improve the integration of this important open space with the rest of the town, with potential for new linkages to and from the Demesne.

The importance of the rivers and other open spaces to wildlife must not be overlooked. They provide important habitats for a range of plantlife, birds and animals, including the Croneen fish, unique to this part of the country. As the town of Birr grows, care must be taken to protect and where possible enhance such habitats.

The Camcor River is a considerable natural asset, as it gently flows through the town and Castle Demesne, where it meets the Little Brosna River. At present, two public parks are located along the central stretches of the Camcor, both of which have charm and character as quiet public spaces. However, considerable potential exists to improve linkages between these spaces and the town, so that the river plays a greater role in the recreational life of Birr.

Finally, Birr has many small neighbourhood open spaces scattered throughout residential areas. Scope exists to improve the quality of these spaces, thus heightening their relevance to residents in the area.



Camcor River Park



Seating along the Camcor River



Neighbourhood open space



Neighbourhood open space

Halla Oxmantown
OXMANTOWN HALL
THEATRE

Dáimín Castleán Bharrá
BIRR CASTLE DEMESNE

enroute
MID - IRELAND

Birr
Equestrian
Centre

On Lár
TOWN CENTRE

Townsend House
B & B
(0509) 21276

enroute
MID - IRELAND

AONACH
B & B
1 km

Central
TOOL & PLANT
Hire

Rudd's
1.5km

Hassetts



Public Realm in Detail

It is often relatively small components of the public realm that can have a surprising impact on the overall quality of a place, be it on an individual or collective basis. In Birr, there are a number of such elements that add or detract from the overall quality of their location. It is therefore important that they are identified, so that improvements can be made as necessary. For example, the recent undergrounding of overhead cables has made a major improvement to several central streets and should therefore be continued in other areas.

Many of Birr's public spaces are home to a proliferation of signs of various shapes and sizes. Whilst many are necessary for directing traffic or pedestrians, the sheer number, variety and prominence of such signs at key junctions and approach roads has a negative impact on the town as a whole. A process of rationalisation is therefore required, so that signage provision is controlled in a coordinated manner.

Shopfronts in Birr also display a wide range of styles and character, some of which are fine examples of their era. It is important that good quality shopfronts are preserved for future generations, whilst mechanisms are found to improve others that are of a lower standard. Similarly, historic properties such as townhouses and businesses are of a varied condition and quality, with examples of inappropriate fittings, colours and materials common around the town. A detailed mapping and analysis of these is contained in the Appendix.

The quality and upkeep of footpath surfacings is another key element of the public realm. Generally, a consistency of material is required, whilst in other historic areas potential exists to introduce a higher quality of surfacing such as natural stone.



Vintage petrol pumps at Emmet Square



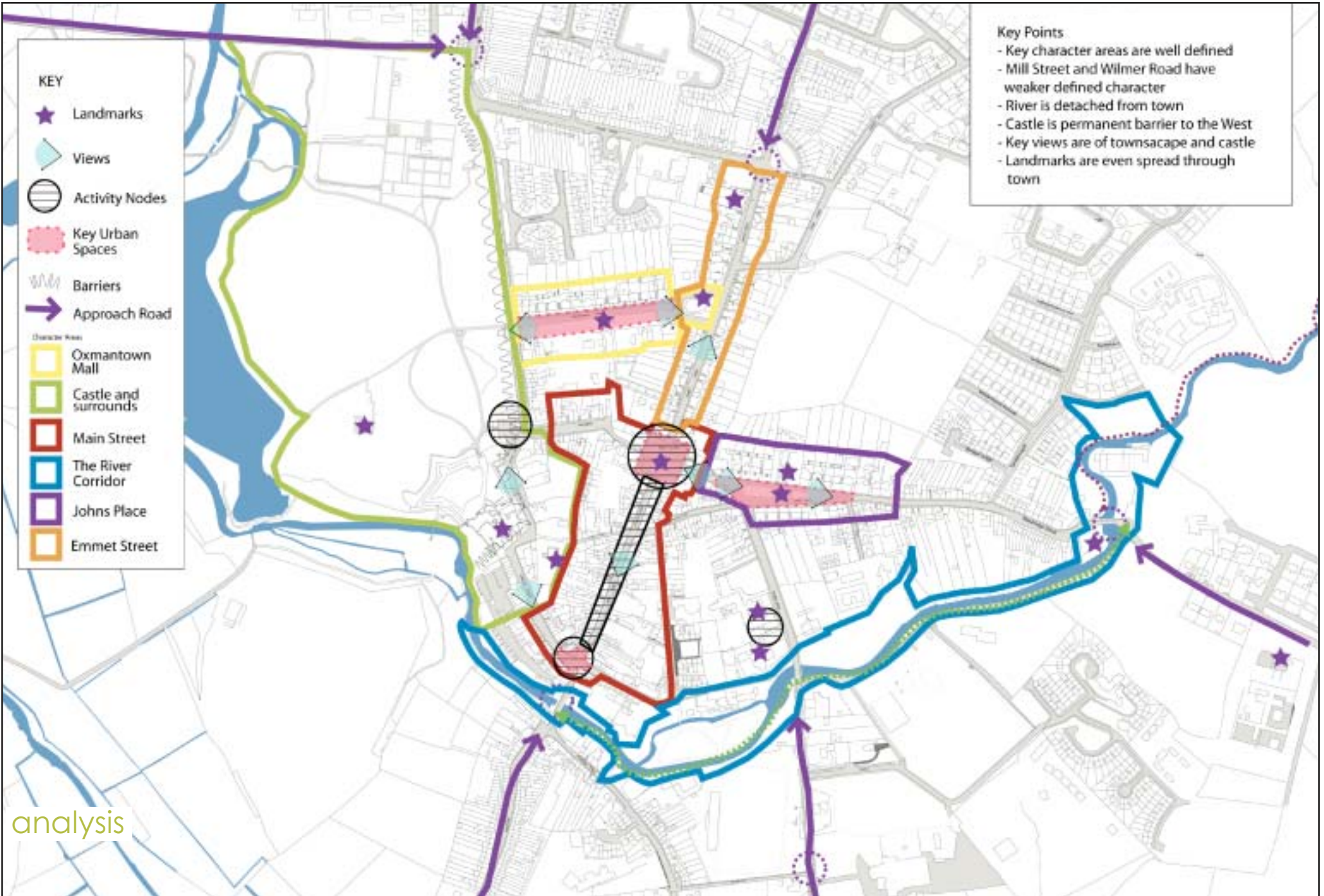
Required upkeep of surfacing and furniture



Scope to improve approaches into Birr



Variable style and quality of shopfronts



Analysis Conclusions

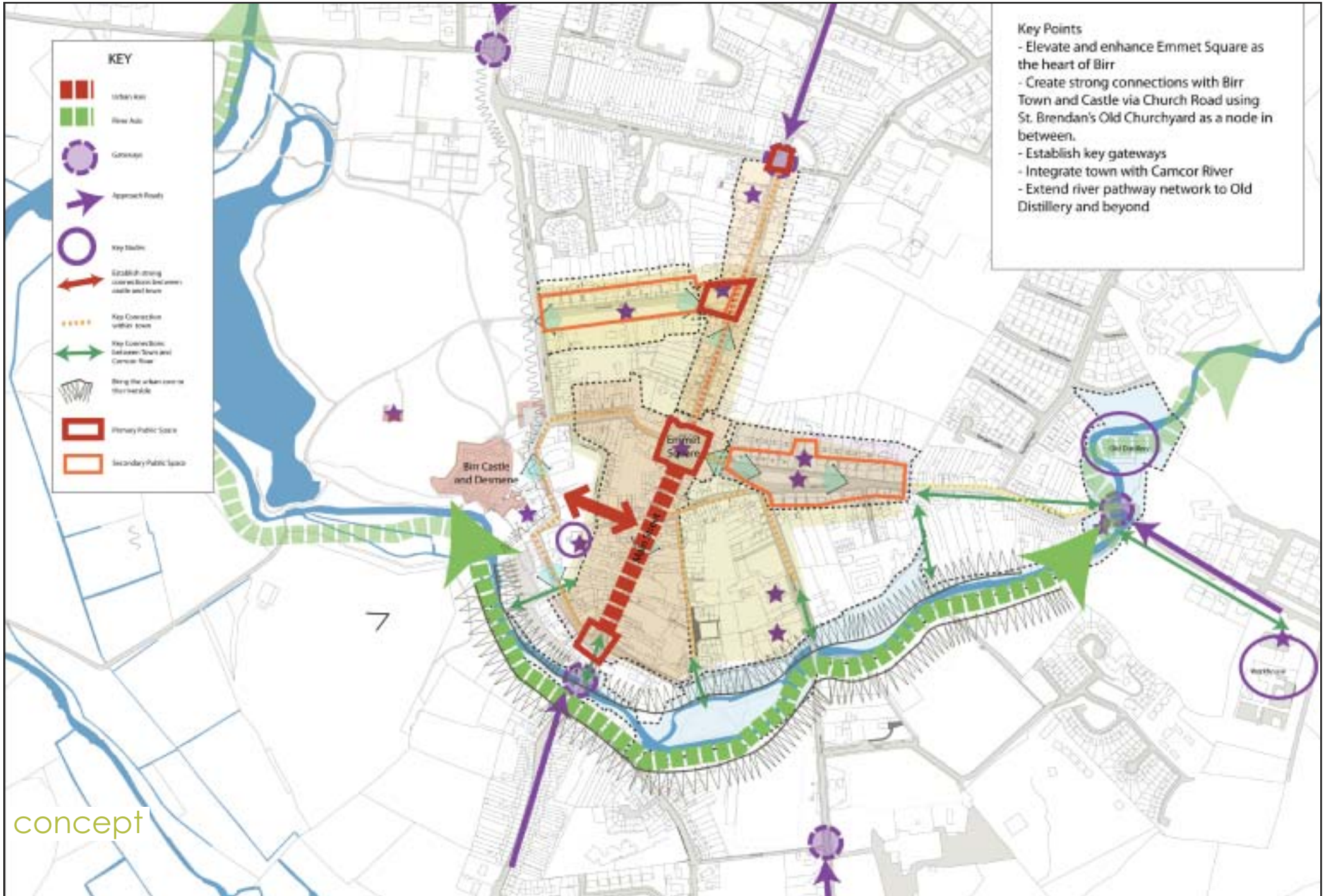
The analysis of Birr's public realm has revealed a range of assets and opportunities, varied in scale and character. Importantly, existing historic buildings and natural features require protection and maintenance. In several instances, this will involve identifying new uses for vacant historic buildings, so that they play a greater role in the life of the town, whilst becoming economically sustainable. The setting of such attractions are also critical, including key views to and from these structures in addition to the town as located by the adjacent plan. Measures such as the thinning of overgrown vegetation, removal of cluttering objects and the control of future development will all help to safeguard and enhance their setting. This is of notable relevance to Birr Castle, where measures are required to strengthen the physical relationship of the castle and the town, encouraging the movement of visitors between these attractions.

Birr town centre comprises a number of different character areas, defined by architectural style, landmark buildings, natural features and views. The strength and interrelationship of each area helps to maintain the quality of Birr, particularly as a place to explore by foot. These areas are shown on the analysis plan and should be reinforced through appropriate improvements to the public realm.

Opportunities for new pedestrian linkages also exist within Birr, most notably along the Camcor River and onwards to outlying residential areas. Maximising the availability of safe routes to walk and cycle will have a direct impact on congestion levels.

Vision, Aims and Objectives

Having extensively analysed Birr as it is today, it is now possible to consider how improvements to the public realm can contribute to its future development and regeneration. The Vision Statement located on the following page defines the overarching role of the public realm plan, followed by a series of aims and objectives setting out priorities that its proposals should seek to address. How these translate to the physical form of Birr are diagrammatically outlined on the adjacent Concept Plan. **27**



Vision

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.

Aims and Objectives:

Enhance environmental quality for the benefit of residents, businesses and visitors

- Provide a safe, attractive and good quality pedestrian environment day and night
- Seek a sustainable balance between transport modes
- Provide good quality spaces for recreation and play
- Ensure accessibility for all members of the community
- Maintain a rich wildlife habitats for the benefit of biodiversity and local people

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 the first impressions of Birr
- Promote and develop Birr's role as a regional tourism centre

Accommodate sustainable future development via high quality infrastructure of 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

strategic considerations

Introduction

- 30** Prior to the development of proposals, it is important to understand how a number of strategic considerations impact on the public realm of Birr. Regional Connectivity, Transport, Tourism, Retail, Sports & Leisure, New Development and Archaeology & Conservation are all closely related to the form and function of Birr’s public realm, both now and in the future.

Regional Connectivity

As noted in the Section “Regional Context”, the physical relationship of Birr with surrounding areas is an important aspect of its economy. The Town’s considerable potential can be further enhanced as follows:

- The economic sustainability of Birr would be enhanced through improving the quality of the physical connections within the region. This should include public transport connections to the surrounding areas and key attractions.
- The potential of Birr as a centre of regional, domestic and international tourism for short-stay and long-stay visits should be exploited.



Sports and Leisure

Birr’s tradition of sporting excellence, particularly with regards to hurling, must be supported through the continued provision of good quality pitches, training areas and facilities for supporters. All outdoor sports facilities must be designed with safety, accessibility and attractiveness in mind, taking into account the physical context of the site. Provision and distribution must be carefully considered so that they can be fully accessed by all residents of the town. Their location must be designated with an awareness of potential impacts of noise, sound and light pollution on residential areas. This has particular relevance to existing areas, such as the Pound Street ball alley, and to future areas such as the proposed skate park. Opportunities for the public realm to support other leisure pursuits, such as music and drama should also be sought.

Transport

Traffic and transport are intrinsically linked to the quality of public realm. As identified by analysis, Birr has some major transport challenges ahead. For the public realm to fully realise its potential, it is critical that these are comprehensively addressed.

Town centre traffic congestion must be tackled to improve the quality of public realm, particularly for pedestrians. The construction of a town by-pass, as discussed in the Local Urban Transport Strategy, is fully supported by this Plan. In particular, heavy and fast moving lorries currently hinder the potential of Birr Town Centre to become the quality of place it deserves to be. In the shorter term, the establishment of alternative routes associated with new development areas should be brought forward.

In addition to private car travel, a higher degree of public transport based movement within the region, particularly between the towns, would improve the economic sustainability of the region and the town itself. Adequate public transport that is easily available and with an appropriate frequency and routes that suit the needs of the population, both of the town and of the region should be given greater consideration in the forthcoming regional development strategy of the Midlands Regional Authority. In anticipation of such an approach, the public realm plan encompasses proposals for the provision of improved access to public transport including buses and taxis. To that extent, the formal provision of a taxi rank in Emmet Square should be pursued.

Cycling is another key form of sustainable transport and great scope exists to improve Birr to accommodate greater bicycle use for travel and leisure purposes.



Car parking must be provided to sustain Birr as a destination for shoppers and tourists. However, as identified through analysis, some areas of central Birr are overly dominated by cars, particularly in the Main Street and Emmet Square areas. A parking strategy must therefore be developed that addresses these issues, so that key parts of the town can become more pedestrian friendly. The capacity of existing car parks (both public and private) should also be examined to ensure that they are operating as efficiently as possible. While large new retail developments offer opportunities for parking slightly further out of town, in the medium term, consideration should be given to the development of existing car parks to increase capacity. This could involve the sensitive use of low multistorey parking, no more than three levels in height, partially submerged and well landscaped. In the longer term, the potential for new car parking areas close to the town centre must be explored. Areas such as the Glebe / Rectory Lands east of Emmet Street have scope to fulfill this role.

strategic considerations

32 Retail

The public realm plan has been prepared with regard for the following key principles:

- Improvements to the town centre public realm must support and enhance local business environment.
- The quality of the external environment will send a positive message about Birr to investors, shoppers and tourists.
- A co-ordinated approach between public and private sector should be followed to achieve a shared vision.
- The marketing of Birr town centre as a high quality retail destination should also be undertaken.

Through the implementation of the public realm plan the environment within the Town will be enhanced, thereby improving living conditions and thus helping to establish Birr as a desired choice for people to live in and to visit. With a larger resident population, an increasing number of visitors and an enhanced environment, there will be a greater impetus for investment in retail and local businesses within the town. More recently Birr has seen the development of various large scale retail units on the edge of town. These retailers attract large numbers of shoppers to Birr who do not avail of the other facilities and services within the town. A high quality public realm will allow for the integration of the edge of town retail stores and the town centre and traditional retail core. The recent retail developments cater for the more general retail items. Niche retail development should therefore become the focus for further development within the town centre, building upon an existing vibrant indigenous retail sector.



In order to develop a public realm that enhances retail business within the town centre, it is imperative that the Council works with private interests, most notably the indigenous retailers who have invested significantly in the town. It is imperative that there is co-operation and co-ordination between public and private sectors in order to develop a shared vision of a high quality public realm that will have direct economic and social benefits. While the Council will provide leadership it is essential that local businesses' objectives are included within the public realm plan. The implementation of the public realm plan and the development of a convivial and pedestrian town centre will ensure that Birr is well placed to market itself as a high quality retail destination.

Tourism

Birr's location means that it is well situated to welcome tourists, be they passing on tours or travelling to the town as a destination. The town is only a short diversion from the main routes travelled by tourists, from Dublin to Galway and Dublin to Kerry. The wider town and village network, as well as the surrounding rural landscape, provides a potentially rich experience for the visitor looking for a unique natural and cultural environment. The town therefore needs:

- To develop the existing tourism offer through the improved public realm and sensitive development of new attractions.
- To develop opportunities to share the many unique aspects of Birr's history with visitors throughout the extents of the town centre, thus distributing physical and socio-economic activity generated by tourism.
- To ensure that all aspects of the visitor experience must be considered; including way-finding, interpretation and hospitality.



It is an objective of the Public Realm Plan to enhance Birr's ability to cater for a larger share of the region's expanded tourism market. By designing public realm with visitor experiences in mind, the tourism potential of Birr will be enhanced. However, Birr must also be able to offer quality but reasonably priced accommodation, a diverse collection of cafés, bars and restaurants, a variety of entertainment options along with adequate information on the various features of the town and the surrounding area which are of interest.

strategic considerations

Landmarks at Risk

34



Crotty's Church



St. John's Hall



Old Courthouse



Old Library



Old Mill Building



Old Distillery



Workhouse



Castle Stables

Archaeology and Conservation

The historical significance of Birr leads to the inevitable presence of archaeological remains below ground, particularly in the vicinity of the Castle. Careful excavation prior to any development in the town centre is therefore essential. Whilst sometimes viewed as an inconvenience, the process of archaeological excavation should be seen as an opportunity to celebrate the historic significance of Birr. Where practical, members of the public including school children, should be given the opportunity to learn about the works as they happen.

The conservation of Birr's historical assets must remain a high priority for the town. Landmarks such as the Emmet Square column or the former Distillery are in need of short-term action to safeguard them for future generations. This will maintain and enhance the unique identity that is synonymous with Birr and the foundation upon which it can be developed. There are very few, if any examples of buildings in Birr that should be fully preserved in their current condition, effectively 'mothballing' them as a timepiece. A far more positive approach is the identification of new uses for old buildings, thus breathing new life into them and making them economically sustainable. Birr has led by example in this field, with projects such as the old brewery, Birr Technology Centre and a particularly fine restoration of Pugin's convent into Birr Civic Offices. The adjacent page illustrates a number of key buildings in Birr for which new uses must be found.

Planning and New Development

The character and environmental quality of Birr will be greatly affected by the design and planning of new development. Care must be taken to protect the setting of the historic town, thus avoiding new development becoming detrimental, albeit inadvertently. With plans to extend Birr over the medium to long term, an opportunity exists to build new public realm of the highest quality. Accordingly, a series of design principles have been developed to help inform both planners and developers alike (located in the Appendix of this document). If followed, they will help to establish new streets, parks and spaces that make a positive contribution to Birr. It should not be considered unreasonable to imagine new areas of housing in Birr that future generations may see fit to conserve themselves.



Old Mill Building



Sympathetically designed new development



public realm plan

Introduction

In order to achieve and deliver the vision set forth in the Public Realm Plan, the Plan has been organised into specific initiatives and projects. These projects vary in size and scope but all work together to enhance the quality and experience within the town.

A total of 27 projects have been proposed with the intention that each project can be delivered individually based on their importance, complexity and availability of funding. However, all projects will require further consultation and detailed design prior to delivery.

Streetscapes		Other Projects	
1	Main Street	15	Old Church and Graveyard
2	Oxmantown Mall	16	Camcor River Park
2a	Church setting	17	Gateways and Approaches
3	Church Street	18	Neighbourhood Spaces
4	Castle Street	19	Frontage Improvements
5	Greene Street	20	Street and Directional Signage
6	William Street / Rosse Row	21	Advertising Signage
7	Mill Street	22	Historic & Cultural Interpretation Strategy
8	Emmet Street	23	Town Trail
9	Johns Place	24	General Lighting
10	Connaught Street	25	Feature Lighting
11	Wilmer Road	26	Cycle Network
12	Brendan Street / Chapel Lane	27	Floral Displays
Squares			
13	Emmet Square		
13a	Column Restoration		
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Streetscapes

Design Principles

38 Much of Birr's public realm is made up of streets, ranging from busy town centre thoroughfares to quiet, residential cul-de-sacs. The quality of these environments is therefore important to the overall experience of the town, be it for residents, businesses or tourists. The Public Realm Plan for Birr proposes a series of streetscape projects. These build upon recent works carried out by the Town Council and will have a significant impact on raising the overall quality of the town's public realm.

Successful streets strike a balance between the needs of all users. In Birr this includes cars, lorries, buses, cyclists and of course, pedestrians. The weighting of this balance should depend on the role of the specific street in question and the types of uses that exist along its length. The Public Realm Plan looks at how this can be achieved. Through analysis, it is observed that this balance requires readjustment in some instances where vehicles dominate over pedestrians. It does not, however, propose full 24 hour pedestrianisation on the basis that Birr is unlikely to have sufficient pedestrian activity levels, particularly in the evenings, to support such a move.

Streets also play an important role as the setting for buildings and the means of connection between them. In a historic town such as Birr, an opportunity exists to raise the quality of surfacing materials to reflect that of adjacent buildings. Accordingly, a materials palette is provided for this purpose.

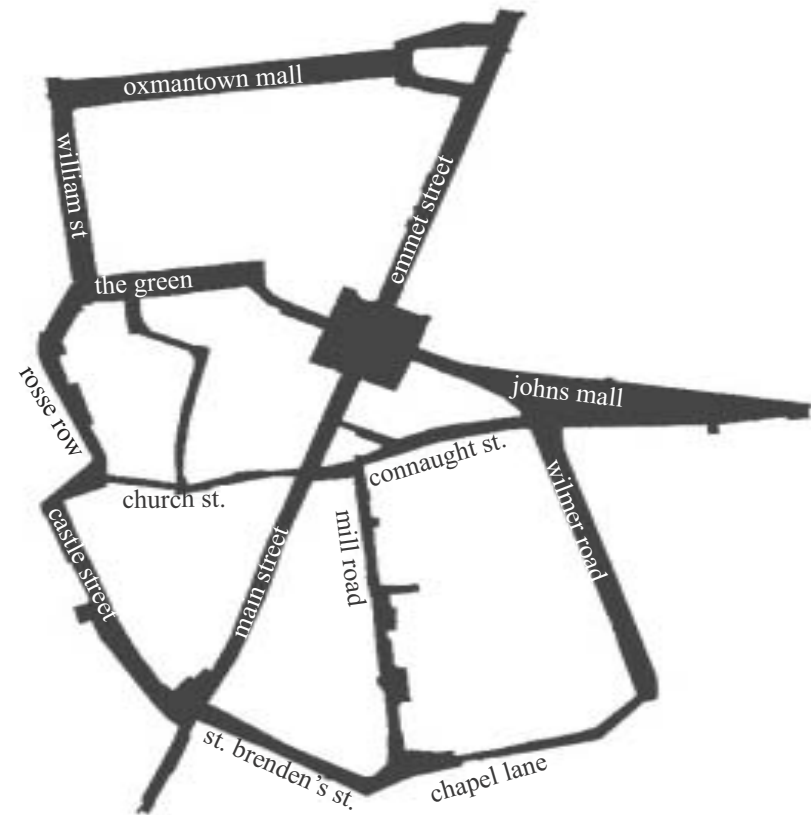


Example of a surface shared by pedestrians and vehicles

Pedestrian areas, particularly those in confined spaces, should be kept as free as possible from street clutter, thus facilitating movement and access. This is of great importance to those with mobility impairments and users of push buggies and wheelchairs.

For such shoppers, this can be a influential factor in their choice of shopping destination, making free flowing and safe pedestrian areas of competitive importance to Birr. The location of streetscape elements such as bins, bollards, benches, signs, lighting columns, and telephone junction boxes must therefore be carefully planned with street clutter minimised through the use of wall mounted fittings and combined use poles. Many shops and cafes use their pavements for display advertising, goods or in summer, for tables and chairs. Such activity, within reason, should be encouraged where sufficient space exists to enable pedestrians to pass by safely. Where this is not possible, the possibility of widening footpaths should be examined.

The public realm must be constructed and maintained to a high standard to ensure its sustainability over the long term. Many good examples of streets in historic settings have had the same stone flagstones in place for hundreds of years. Best practice construction techniques must therefore be observed when using materials such as natural stone, including the correct specification of foundations and sealants. A management plan for all areas of public realm should be put in place to ensure that the quality of public realm is maintained to a high standard, in line with realistic budgetary parameters.



Location of streets where high quality treatment should be delivered

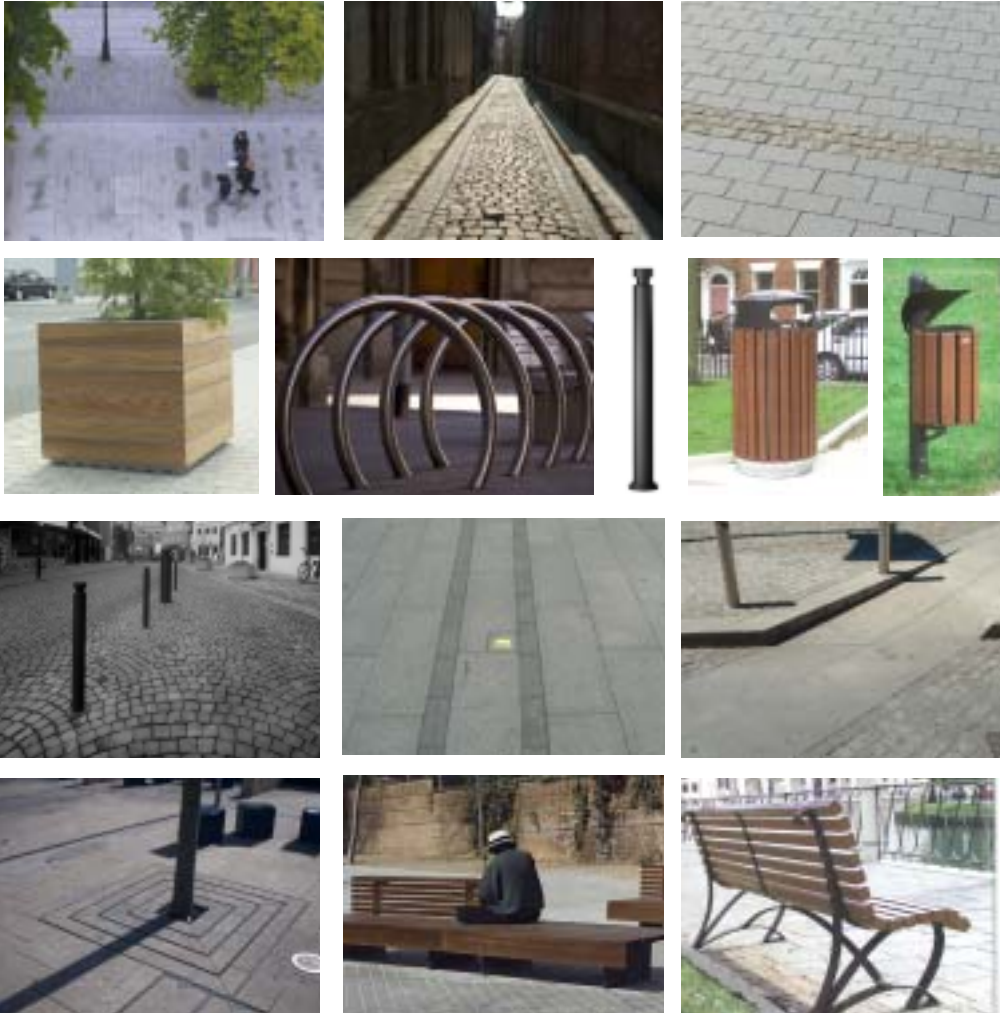


The quality of the public realm is largely connected to the choice and use of different materials, including paving, road surfaces and street furniture. Key to successful public realm is a consistent use of a limited palette of materials, rather than an adhoc selection of many types used across the town. To that extent, materials used in Birr are relatively consistent and recent works, including the use of concrete pavers, should be commended for their design and workmanship.

As discussed, the quality of Birr’s architecture should over time be matched by that of the public realm. It is therefore advocated that natural stone paving be gradually introduced to Birr, building on its existing limited use at Birr Civic Offices. Whilst more expensive than concrete alternatives, stone will last much longer and look much better with age. Therefore return from initial investment will be achieved through the sustainability of this material over other, short term solutions that require regular replacement.

The adjacent material palette recommends the use of Irish Blue Limestone for paved areas in central locations. This locally sourced stone is ideally suited to paving, with a distinctive colour and finish. This should also be complemented with the use of a light to medium grey granite, providing contrast where required. Granite stone setts and cobbles should be used on historic streets that are rarely subjected to heavy vehicles. Otherwise the consistent use of black tarmacadam should be continued.

Street furniture is selected to be simple rather than ornate and contemporary rather than mock heritage. The use of timber clad seats and bins as shown, helps to soften their visual impact more appropriate for the setting of a small town rather than a city. In high impact areas such as Emmet Square, bespoke seating should be designed contributing to the uniqueness and quality of the area.





Street trees have an important role to play in an urban environment, where they mitigate against air and noise pollution, provide habitat for wildlife and serve to add visual interest throughout the year. Some fine examples of the urban use of trees can be found in Birr, most notably on Oxmantown Mall and John's Place. However, some streets are not suitable for street tree use due to their limited width and / or historical character. The plan provided in the Appendix (p103), shows that Greene Street and the majority of Birr's approach roads are suitable for tree planting.

The selection of tree species must be carefully carried out in relation to its ability to flourish in local conditions, its size and the appropriateness of its overall form and habit. In Birr, preference should be given to the use of native tree species where possible, due to their greater contribution to the local ecosystem. However, in built up areas, particular where precedent exists, the use of more exotic species should not be precluded.

For areas of sufficient space to support larger trees *Quercus rubra* and *Acer campestre* would be appropriate, both well known for spectacular autumn colour. *Tilia cordata* 'Greenspire' is another species specially cultivated for its narrow form, making it ideal for use on streets. Smaller trees for use in Birr should include *Sorbus aucuparia* (Rowan) and *Betula pendula* (Silver Birch).

Trees also can be selected to tell part of the story of Birr. For instance, *Tilia henryana* was named after the Irish plantsman and sinologist, Augustine Henry, who discovered it in 1888. *Fraxinus excelsior* is appropriate in the vicinity of the Birr GAA Club, due to its use in making hurleys. And *Platanus orientalis*, magnificent specimens of which grow at John's Place, were brought by the Earl of Rosse to Birr from the Holy Lands.



Tilia henryana



Tilia cordata 'Greenspire'



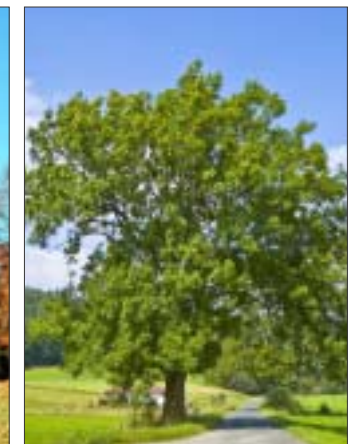
Acer campestre



Platanus orientalis



Quercus rubra



Fraxinus excelsior



ARMY AND NAVY STORE

Christmas

THE DAY
OF THE
WESS

R

COFFEE

COFFEE

Kodak

MAGARIS
Cafe

Rooms For Rent
(En-suite)
Dun Laoghaire
07-912 3947
06-258 2186
Vacancy



Main Street

improved circulation
natural stone paving
removal of clutter
high quality street furniture

Main Street forms the principal commercial spine of Birr town centre and must therefore look and function as well as possible in support of business that takes place there. The street is home to a number of successful independent shops that help to make Birr a popular retail destination, offering something different to other nearby centres. Potential exists for Birr to further develop this unique offer, by encouraging new, high quality boutique style shops to establish in the town.

At present, the street is very heavily trafficked, with many customers parking directly outside their destination. Whilst the convenience of this arrangement is undisputed, it greatly compromises the quality of Main Street for pedestrians, resulting in a street that is heavily dominated by cars.

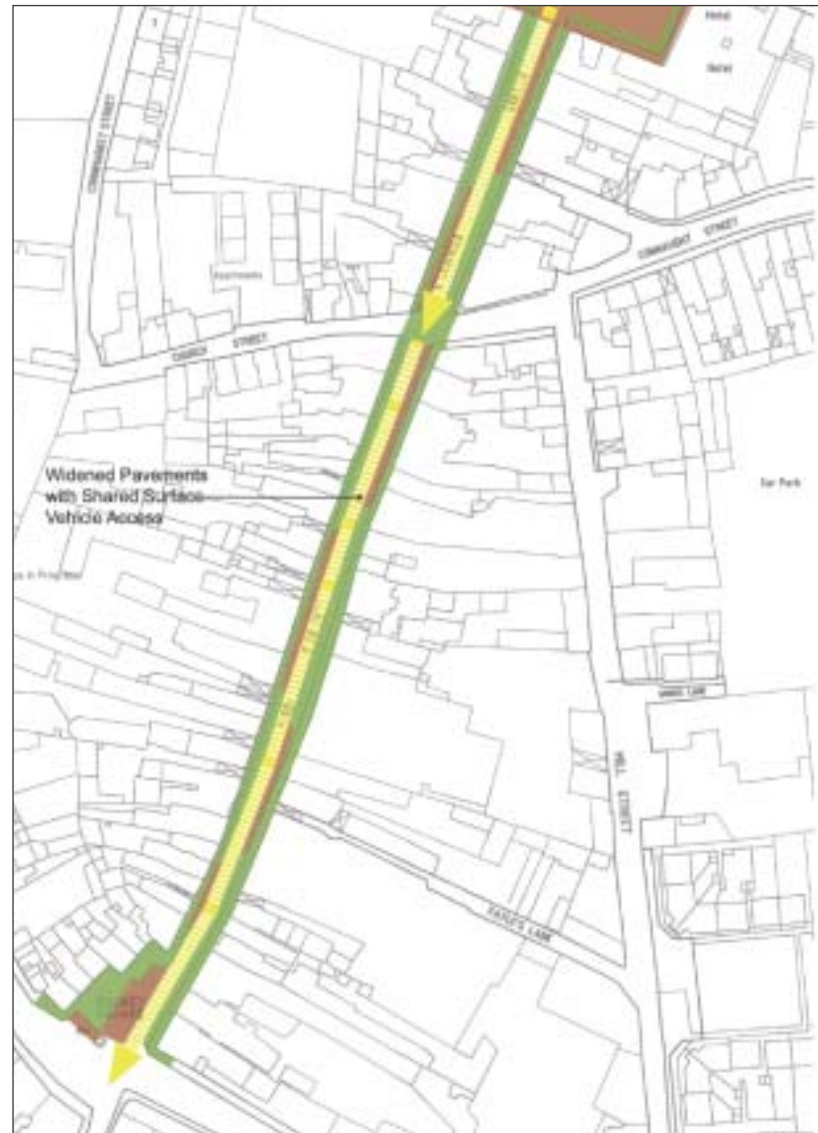
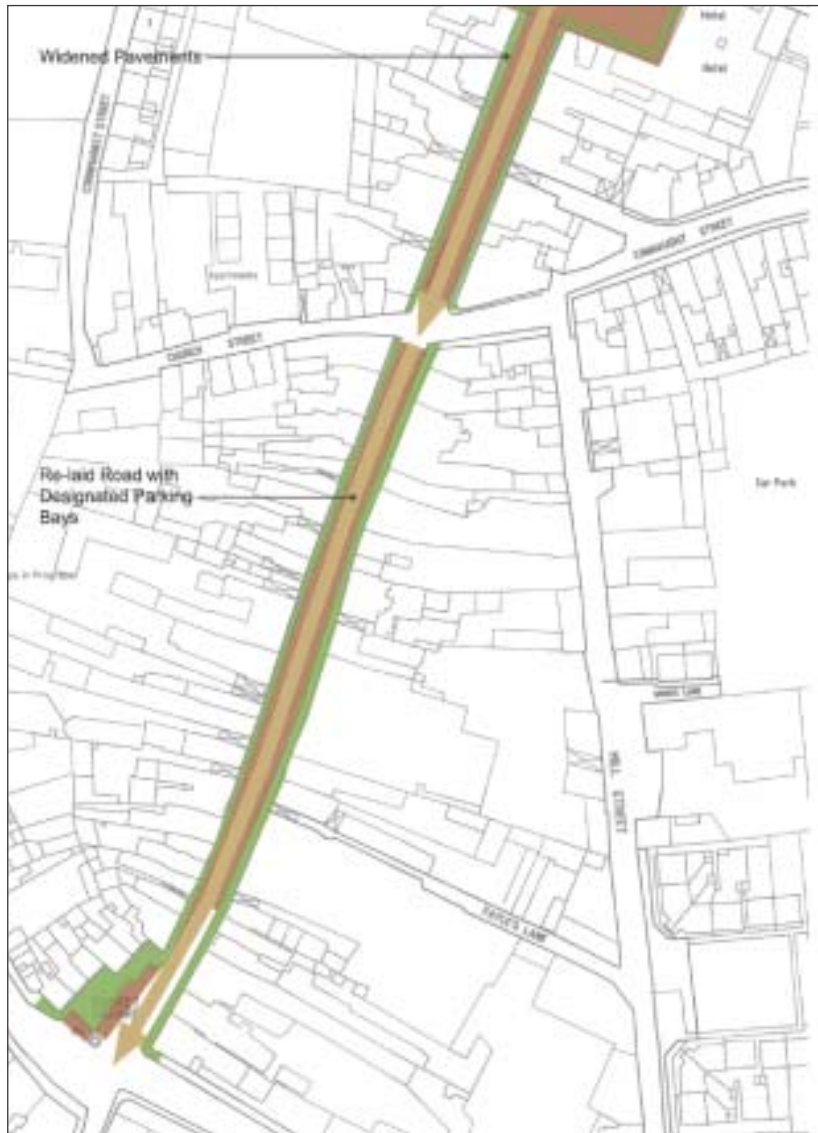
The Public Realm Plan proposes the exploration of alternative layouts for Main Street. These would involve the relocation of some car parking spaces to other areas nearby, thus enabling greater provision of safe, clutter free space for pedestrians. The result would be a much more pleasurable shopping experience, conducive to people spending longer periods of time on the street and in its shops. This, combined with the improved visibility of shop windows, would bring direct economic benefits to the town, in addition to making it more attractive.

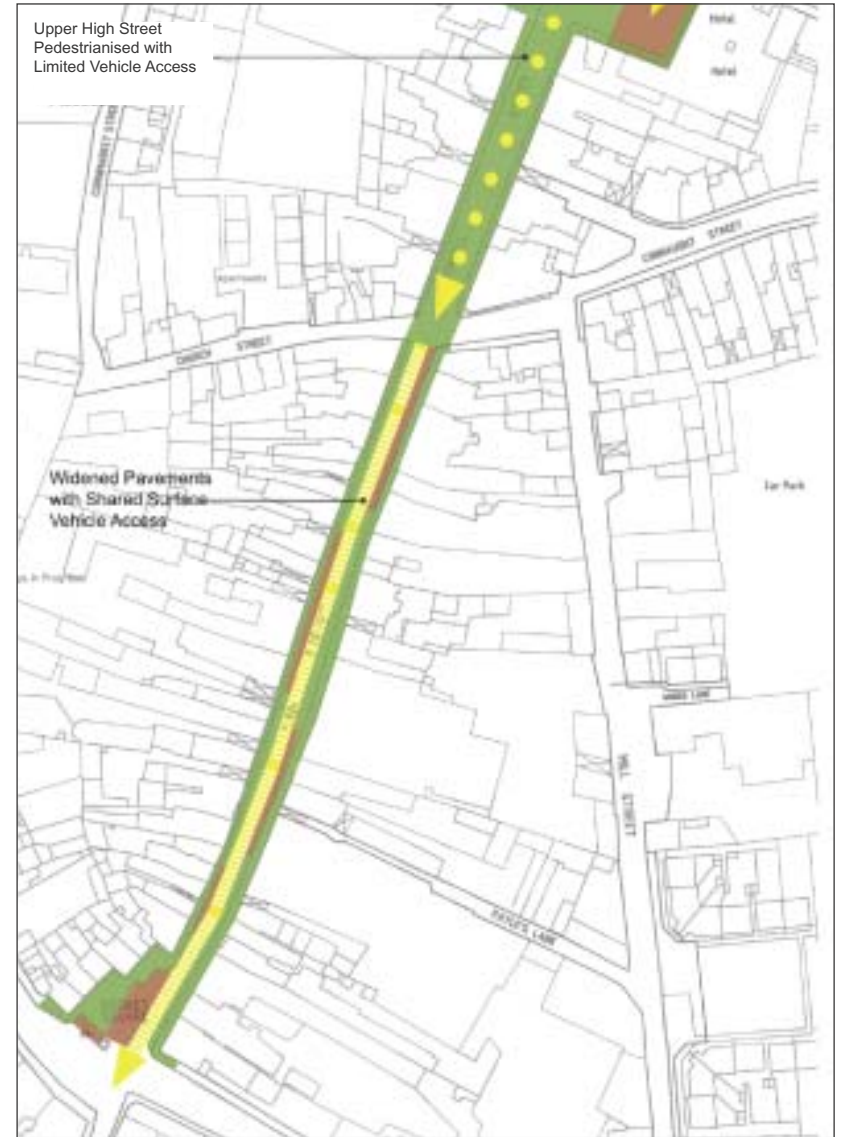
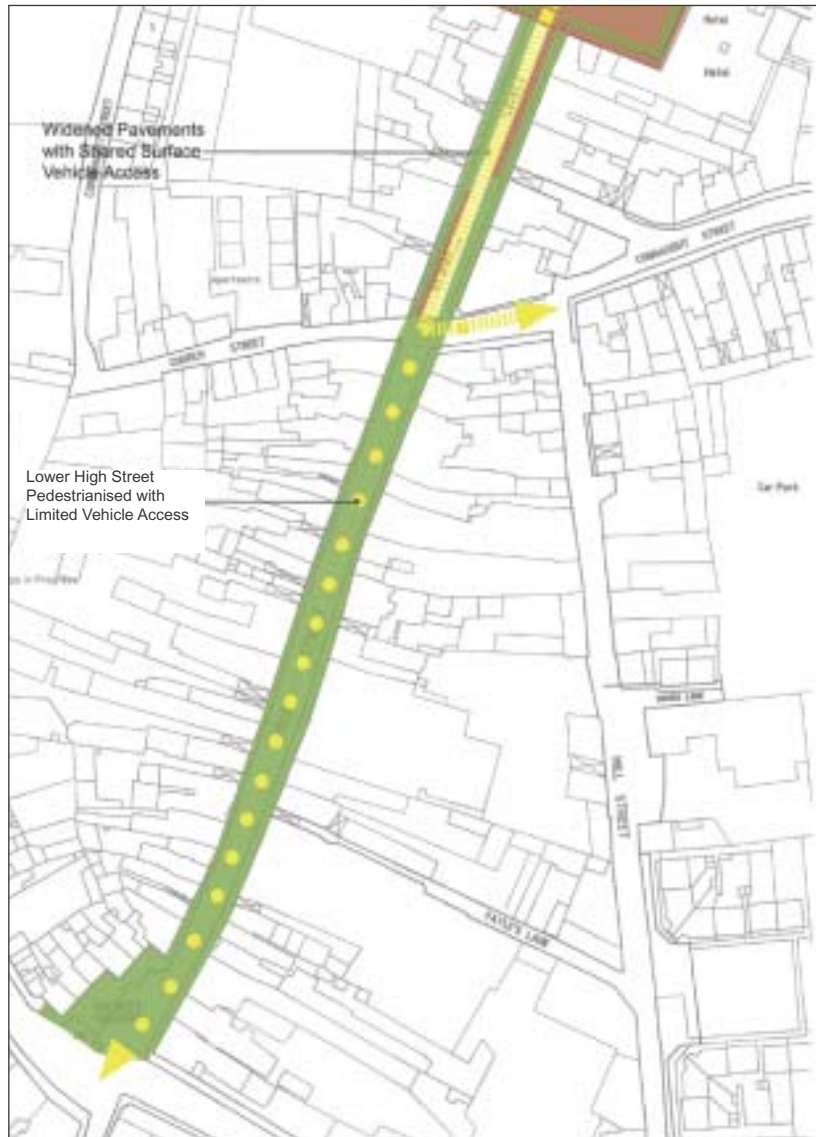
The following pages illustrate a number of layout options for further consideration. Implementation of any such changes must be done in close consultation with business owners on the street.



Main Street Proposals

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Oxmantown Mall



Oxmantown Mall is one of the finest examples of an Irish Georgian street, consisting of a formal vista towards St. Brendan's Church of Ireland and an elegant avenue of mature trees.

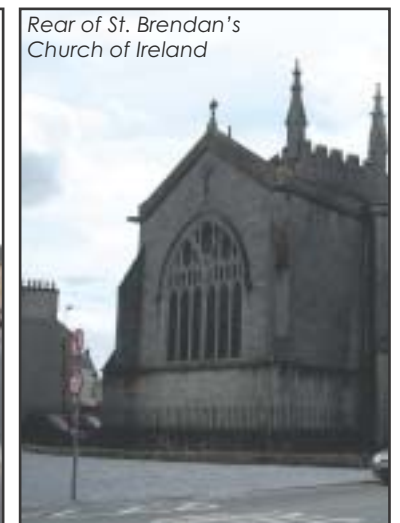
Whilst the quality of the Mall's architecture is clearly apparent, considerable scope exists to bring the quality of its public realm up to an equal standard. This would involve the introduction of large, natural stone flags onto pavements and stone setts or cobbles onto the carriageway.

Such materials are more expensive than concrete or asphalt alternatives. However, with professional detailed design and a best practice approach to construction and maintenance, such investment would result in a high class and long lasting finish for Oxmantown Mall.

A key element of proposals for the Mall is improvement to the setting of St Brendan's Church. This would involve the transformation of the area into a new urban square as shown by the adjacent drawing. A new area of paving to the front of the church would create a safe drop-off and gathering zone, of particular benefit during weddings, funerals and other services. Existing railings would be retained, whilst stone paving, areas of lawn and public art introduced.



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enhanced setting
limestone flagstones
safer spaces





Church Street

stone setts
improved lighting



51

This narrow and attractively proportioned street provides important pedestrian linkage between Birr Castle and the town centre. It is also the location of residences and the old church and graveyard.

It is proposed that an upgrade to surfacing and lighting of this charming street is needed. Not only would this improve its safety and attractiveness for local residents, it would also help to encourage the further use of Church Street by visitors to the Castle.

The simple approach to its design is proposed with the use of stone setts. The narrow width of this street means that street furniture and other potentially obstructive objects should be kept to a minimum.

Lighting should be in accordance with the lighting strategy proposed by this Plan. An enhanced version of existing wall mounted lights, or cantenary lighting suspended above the street as shown, would help to sensitively light this street without impacting on space below. Scope also exists to attractively light stone walls with up-lighters set into the paving below.

This project should be undertaken in conjunction with the opening and continued maintenance of the church and graveyard, as well as the interpretive signage strategy. To that extent, modifications to the existing interpretive signage panel may be necessary to tie it with new signage proposed for the town.

Due its status as a zone of archaeological potential, the input of an archaeologist before and during any construction in this location must be sought.



Sketch of Church Street proposals



BIRR CASTLE
DE MESNE
OPEN DAILY
ENTRANCE 200m

FREE - ALL DAY



Castle Street

expanded footways

traffic calming

strengthened visual connection
between castle and town



Castle Street is one of Birr's oldest streets, leading to the original castle entrance. However, its quality is relatively low, characterised by a number of unattractive building frontages and narrow footpaths. The redevelopment of properties along Castle Street must positively contribute to its overall character, including Crotty's Church and the former stables. Blank stretches of frontage should also be addressed through redevelopment where possible. Footpaths on Castle Street have scope to be widened in areas, along with resurfacing with high quality materials. The feasibility of relocating the prominent telephone mast near Market Square should also be investigated.

The point at which Castle Streets meets Birr Castle Walls has been identified through both analysis and consultation as a high profile area in need of improvement. Dense vegetation and damaged railings detract from views to the Castle. Sharp bends in this area also lead to concerns over safety for motorists and pedestrians.

The Public Realm Plan has explored a number of options for this area as shown on the following pages. The most effective means of improving safety will be to slow vehicles as they pass along the street. Therefore consideration should be given to traffic calming measures, including ramps, shared surfacing and changes of material.

Increased visual connectivity between the Castle and the town will help to strengthen the physical relationship of these two principal attractions. It is therefore proposed that vegetation is greatly thinned to expose the castle walls. Consideration could also be given to the partial removal of the earthen banks, thus revealing larger sections of wall. Existing cast iron railings should be either replaced in full, or possibly substituted for a low stone wall. Signage in the area should also be greatly minimised to reduce its visual impact.



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Design Options

54



Option A. Reduce vegetation to expose walls and improve views, introduce traffic calming to slow vehicles and reinstate railings.



Option B. Reduce vegetation to expose walls and improve views, introduce traffic calming to slow vehicles and replace railings with low stone wall.



Option C. Reduce vegetation to expose walls and improve views, introduce traffic calming to slow vehicles and remove railings.



Option D. Reduce embankment and vegetation to expose walls and improve views, introduce traffic calming to slow vehicles and remove railings.

Town centre streetscapes

improved walking conditions
removal of clutter & obstacles

Greene Street (The Green)

- 56** This historic street provides linkage between Birr Castle and the town centre, as well as the location for residences and a number of businesses. The current width of existing road space gives rise to the potential of increased pedestrian footpaths. Greene Street also has potential to accommodate greater levels of on-street car parking, thus contributing to the alleviation of congestion in central areas. The street is one of relatively few in Birr Town Centre suitable for street tree planting. In time, resurfacing with high quality materials should also be considered.



William Street / Rosse Row

William St and Rosse Row are situated along the length of Birr Castle's eastern walls. These streets form important components of the castle setting and the unique character of Birr. Rosse Row has the potential to accommodate widened footpaths and cycle lanes, thus providing safe connections to the castle and school to the north. Clearer road markings at the junction with Greene Street are also required. William Street in contrast is narrow, with two sharp bends making it dangerous for pedestrians and motorists alike. This street requires traffic calming, as per Castle Street proposals. A low earthen bank reintroduced to the base of the wall would also aid safety.



balanced pedestrian & vehicular space

street tree planting

Mill Street

Mill Street plays an important role as an access route to town centre businesses and public car parking. The efficiency of circulation must therefore be maintained. Opportunities to introduce footpaths on both sides of the street should be explored, potentially through widening associated with redevelopment or the introduction of a one-way system. Whilst used as an access route, the need to improve the environmental quality of this street should not be overlooked. In particular, the historic mill building should be retained and renovated as an important remnant of Birr's industrial heritage. Uses that enable members of the public to enjoy this building should be encouraged.



Emmet Street

Emmet Street forms part of the central spine of Birr town centre, currently accommodating high levels of through traffic. The needs of all users along this street must be balanced, with improved crossing facilities for pedestrians and clearly designated on-street car parking, both short-term requirements. Surfacing and street furniture should be improved, taking into consideration the street's Georgian character. The programme of undergrounding overhead cables should also be continued in this area. **57**



John's Place

- 58** John's Place is a distinctive urban space with fine Georgian architecture and mature trees along its central areas. One of Birr's most prominent and attractive streets, the quality of pedestrian areas should be improved with the use of high quality paving materials, similar in style to proposals for Oxmantown Mall. Historic street furniture, such as lighting columns and railings should be sympathetically restored. This should be accompanied with the removal and / or replacement of inappropriate signage and street furniture that dominate its western end.



Connaught Street

This important and busy street provides connection to Main Street and John's Mall with several businesses and residences located along its length. Recent streetscape works have improved the way in which Connaught Street looks and functions, giving greater space for pedestrians. Medium to long term improvements would include the introduction of high quality materials to footpaths and potential road surfaces. Any reconfiguration of Main Street including traffic flows, may have an impact upon Connaught Street, requiring this relationship to be fully understood.



Wilmer Road

Wilmer Road is a key arrival route to Birr town centre from the south, as well as home to important features such as St. Brendan's Catholic Church and Birr Civic Offices. Opportunities exist for the accommodation of bus laybys in this area, thus relieving the negative impact of the bus movements upon congestion on Emmet Square. Pedestrian footpaths along Wilmer Road should be upgraded, accompanied by the provision of crossing points to key public buildings. Opportunity exists to improve the arrival experience along this road with the potential use of trees and gateway markers.



St. Brendan's Street / Chapel Lane

These two relatively narrow streets form an important part of Birr town centre's street network, including access to the Birr Technology Centre, Camcor River Park and the nearby primary school. Access to these facilities must be maintained and enhanced where possible, through the provision of clearly defined vehicular and pedestrian areas. Extension of Camcor River Park proposed by this plan would increase activity levels on these streets. Therefore, opportunities to upgrade surface treatments and improve lighting should also be considered.

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Emmet Square

high quality civic space
 natural stone paving
 traffic calming
 street furniture & trees

Emmet Square is the principal urban space of Birr, characterised by its formal geometry, strong facades and the stone column located at its centre. At present, the space is dominated by car parking and through traffic, including large lorries that travel at high speed, putting pedestrian safety at risk. An approximated measurement of the square revealed that 80% of its area is given over to vehicles, leaving only 20% for people.

Such is the importance and beauty of this urban space, it is strongly recommended that traffic volumes and parking levels are reduced. The construction of a town bypass should be pursued in the interest of removing heavy vehicles and other through traffic from the town centre and specifically Emmet Square. By doing so, a number of potential reconfigurations of the space could be considered.

The plans below show five potential layout options for Emmet Square. Plan A would involve the relocation of parking from the square's northwest corner, providing pedestrian space for seating in its sunniest spot. Plan B shows reorganised traffic flows connecting Greene Street to Main Street, therefore increasing pedestrian space at the centre of the square. Plan C shows traffic calming of the square's through route and the potential closure of vehicular connections to Greene Street. This would reduce traffic movements and enable the square's northern half to become more pedestrian friendly. Plan D shows an extended version of C, with parking concentrated on the square's western side, providing good quality connections to Main Street. Plan E further reduces parking in favour of expansive pedestrian areas.

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These options and others require further development and consultation with landowners and members of the public. However, they serve to illustrate the potential of Emmet Square to be dominated by people instead of cars. This would allow new uses to be introduced, such as increased seating, market stalls, bicycle hire and street theatre.







stone restoration
enhanced setting

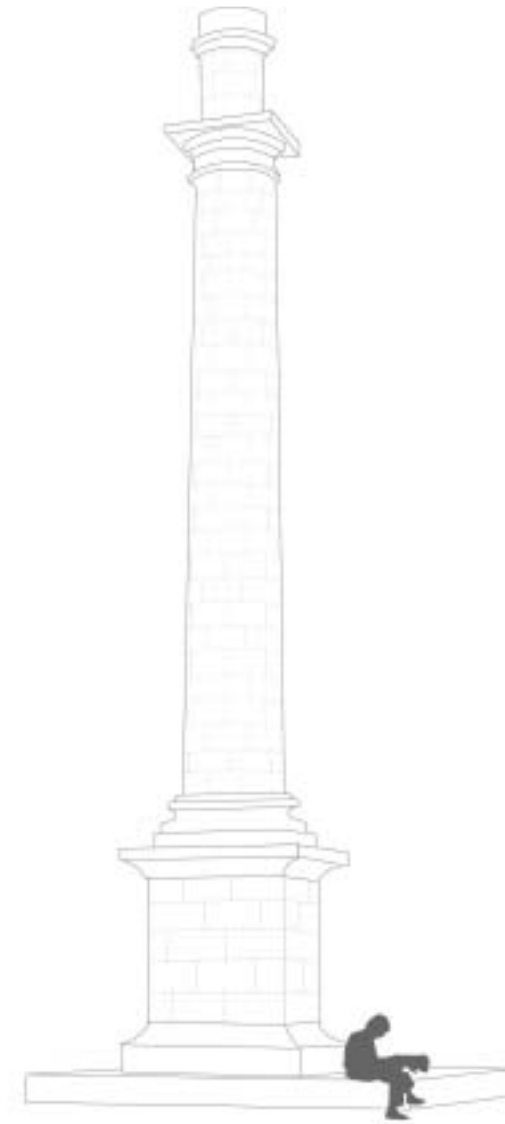
Column Restoration DRAFT

The stone column located in Emmet Square marks the centre of Birr in dramatic fashion and is widely regarded as one of the finest examples of its kind in Ireland.

As part of wider proposals to improve Emmet Square, the Public Realm Plan proposes that the conservation of this column be viewed as an urgent priority for the town. Much of its stonework is currently in poor condition, therefore requiring investment over the short term to restore its structural integrity and aesthetic value. In doing so, the removal of inappropriate metalwork embedded into the column should also be undertaken.

Historic photographs show that the column had cast iron railings at its base. These are thought to have been added after its construction, with a form of water feature possibly the original intention. Neither water nor railings exist at present, leading to the potential for the reinstatement of either as part of improvements to the square. However, maintenance issues presented by both scenarios may lead to a simpler seating arrangement being deemed more appropriate, as shown opposite.

The column was also originally topped with a statute of the Duke of Cumberland, removed in 1915. To this day, its architectural scale and proportions are affected by this missing adornment. Dialogue regarding the suitability of a replacement statue has taken place at several points in Birr's recent history. However, issues surrounding the structural capabilities of the column to support a statue make this now infeasible. Efforts should therefore be focused on restoration of the existing column and the communication of its architectural and historic significance.





KONG LAM

Chinese Restaurant

Scissors

寄林館茶

THE GREAT DOCK

LONDON

1601473



Market Square

natural stone paving
removal of clutter
monument restoration
improved lighting

The Market Square is an attractive urban space located at the south end of Main Street. Despite its relatively small size, it currently accommodates car parking bays, footpaths, a road intersection and the Manchester martyrs monument.

Improvement to this area will be directly influenced by the delivery of changes to Main Street, with the possible reductions of on-street car parking in the area. Such measures would add to the quality of this square, improving the quality of environment for pedestrians. However, scope exists to retain some parking provision in a location suitable for disabled drivers.

Recently laid concrete surfacing is of good condition and will last for a number of years to come. Longer term objectives for the square should include the introduction of higher quality materials, including natural stone surfacing.

The historic Martyrs monument should be maintained and restored in its current location. Scope exists to light the monument in a sympathetic fashion using LEDs and spotlighting where appropriate. Interpretation panels communicating the significance of the monument should also be provided.







sensitive public access Old Church and Graveyard

historic interpretation

gravel paths

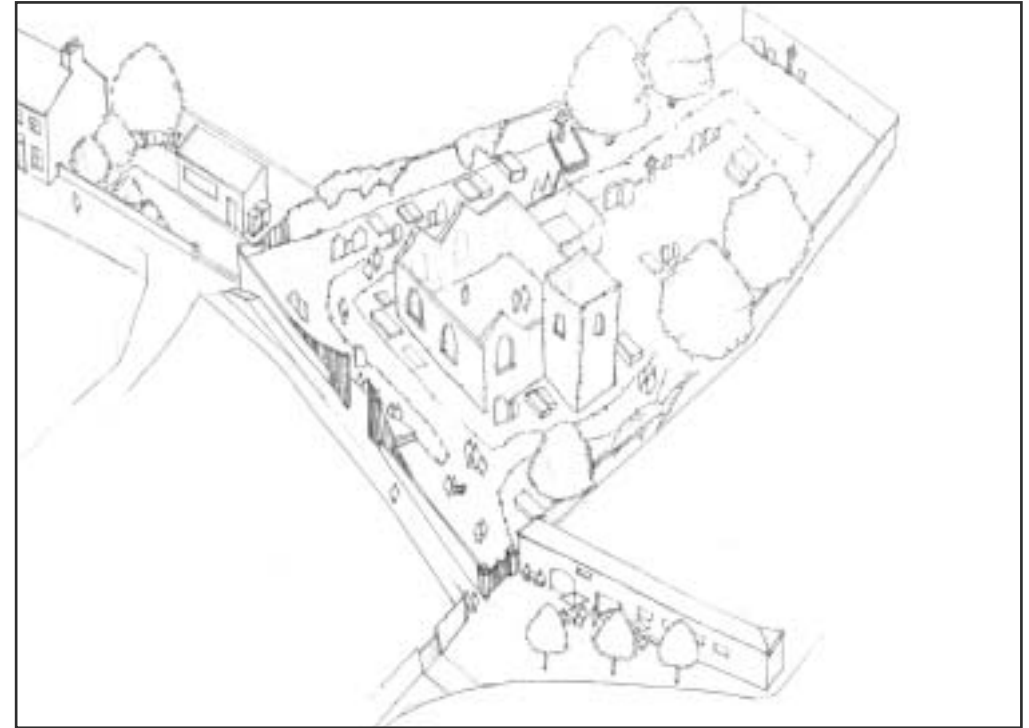
feature wall

This historic location is thought to be the origin of Birr as a monastic settlement. It is therefore of historical importance, necessitating a sensitive approach to any redevelopment in the area. It is proposed that increased public access and interpretation of the church ruins and graveyard are established, to enhance the role of this site as a tourism attraction and educational resource.

Sensitive improvements to the graveyard are required to improve pedestrian access and overall visual appeal, whilst respecting the site's core role as a resting place. This would include a network of upgraded gravel paths, seating and lighting. Accompanying interpretive panels should also be positioned to communicate the significance of this site to visitors. The existing panel may require modification to tie it in with the design of others proposed for the town.

Pedestrian access from Church Street to William Street should be maintained and enhanced thus encouraging movement between Birr Castle and the town centre. The boundary wall located at the graveyard's north-eastern point has potential to be turned into a public art feature, with decorative inscriptions, uplighting and cladding.

Potential exists for the medium to long term extension of this open space to the south towards Castle Street. This would entail relocation of council depot facilities and the introduction of steps to overcome changes in level.



Creative artwork can be used to help tell the story of this site and make the wall along Church Street more attractive



Camcor River Park



major park expansion
enhanced wildlife habitat
new paths and bridges
green space

The Camcor River that flows through the town of Birr is an attractive natural feature with great ecological, recreational and aesthetic value. The two public parks along its length have many qualities and provide much needed green open space in the centre of the town.

The Public Realm Plan for Birr proposes a major expansion of these spaces, to form a river park along the entirety of the river's passage through the town. This would establish a green corridor, protected from adverse development for the benefit of wildlife, residents and visitors.

The primary objective would be to secure a continuous foot and cycle path along the full length of the river, connecting Birr Castle Demense in the west to Syngefield Estate in the east. Potential also exists to extend the park further in time, so to connect nearby settlements and natural features at a regional level.

Access to the park from adjacent neighbourhoods should be maximised, so that it becomes a safe route for pedestrians to the town centre, leisure facilities and schools. All new development should be required to front onto the park where possible, thus increasing 'natural surveillance' from buildings, helping to keep the park safe and lively through the day and evenings.

The design of the park should be undertaken as a comprehensive Landscape Architectural scheme, rather than a piecemeal approach. This would enable potential linkages to be identified and the character and functions of different sections of the park to be simultaneously developed. The formation of a 'Friends of Camcor Park' group should also be encouraged, positively engaging local people in its design and aftercare.





camcor river park

Forme



r Distillery

Birr Workhouse

Syngefield Estate



LIFE SAVING
SAFETY HELIX
PITCHES
(0) 777
123456





welcome to birr street trees & planting lighting gateway artworks

The arrival experience into Birr is of great importance, particularly given the town's role as a tourism destination. Relatively recent interventions such as street tree planting have had a positive impact. However, considerable scope exists to further improve Birr's approach roads and gateway locations. The objective should be to make first impressions of Birr as positive as possible.

A wide range of measures are required to improve approaches into the town, involving land in both public and private ownership.

- Signage should be kept to a minimum, so that a simple message is conveyed upon arrival. At present, a plethora of signs compete for attention on many of Birr's approach roads, creating an unattractive and cluttered appearance.
- Further planting of street trees should be introduced where possible. These help to contain the visual experience on arrival, whilst screening unsightly buildings or wasteground. The planting of street trees and any associated planting must be adequately maintained at all times.
- Boundary fences and walls should be kept in good condition, particularly in high profile locations. This will require the participation of private landowners, working in partnership with the town and county Councils.
- A number of gateway locations have been identified within the Public Realm Plan. These should be the focus of public realm improvements, including planting, surface treatments, lighting and site specific artworks that welcome people into Birr.



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Examples of site specific gateway features designed to have cultural relevance to their locations





Neighbourhood Spaces

community led design
revitalised green space
cherished places

Existing residential areas in Birr feature a number of small open spaces that vary in quality and character. These spaces are primarily provided by house builders to satisfy open space requirements and most commonly consist of grassland with occasional trees.

A coordinated strategy is proposed to review the function and design of these spaces. Such a process would involve working closely with adjacent residents to establish the role of these spaces and potential for future use.

This process should become a creative and rewarding exercise for all concerned. For example, small areas of underused grass could be transformed into play areas, wildlife gardens, woodlands, allotments or communal barbecue areas. The participation of all residents, young and old, would help to ensure that design proposals accurately reflect the needs of the specific community in question.





INVESTMENT
PROPERTY
FOR SALE
ENRIGHT
Estate Agents

FOR SALE

36 THE ARCADE DOOLIN THE ARCADE 37

LINDA

FAMILY CARROLLS

16-4067

MAZDA

PRICE

historic accuracy
sensitivity to context
scale & proportion
style, materials & colour

Frontage Improvements

The design and condition of building frontages has a direct influence on the character and quality of the adjacent public realm. In places, materials, fixtures, colours or textures that are inappropriate to the building upon which they are located, negatively impact upon the wider area. This impact is increased by buildings in prominent locations, be they at road junctions or on areas of high ground. Whilst the majority of buildings in the town centre are in private ownership, it is important for Birr that mechanisms are found to bring about improvements to such frontages.

The Public Realm plan has mapped town centre frontages, highlighting those that display elements that are detrimental to the quality and character of adjacent public realm. A range of issues are identified, including inappropriate window types and ornamentation; superfluous metal fixtures and fittings; garish colours or wall textures; general poor maintenance and upkeep.

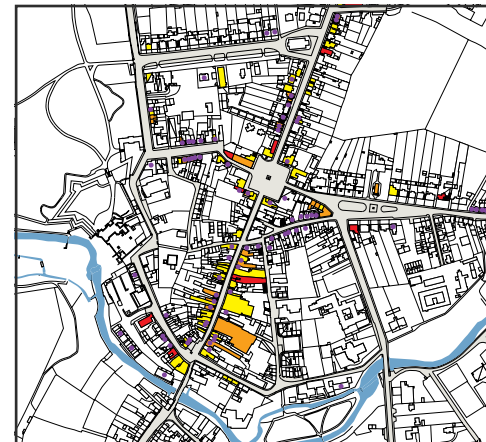
Being of particular prominence in the town centre, the quality of shopfronts impacts greatly upon the public realm of Birr. The town has some excellent historic frontages that require preservation and protection. However others are of lesser quality and require attention over the short to medium term.

It is recommended that these buildings become the subject of localised improvements, with a prioritisation on those of particularly negative impact and / or in high profile locations. This will require the establishment of close working relationships between landowners, Birr Town Council and other stakeholders.

The appendix of this report details the survey of town centre frontages.



77



Street & Directional Signage

review of existing signage

clarity & consistency

78 The provision of street signage is an important component in aiding the way by which people find their way around Birr. It is also a key link with the history of the town through placenames. It is therefore proposed that a uniform signage design, based on historic precedent as shown, should be mounted on all town centre streets. Exceptions should only be made where other historic signs exist that are integral to the character of the street. A more contemporary version of the street sign should also be consistently applied to suburban areas beyond the historic centre of Birr.



Directional signage is necessary to assist both motorists and pedestrians in navigating their way around and through Birr. Present provision is varied, lacking an overall clarity and consistency, particularly for pedestrians. In some areas, an over provision of signage negatively impacts upon the general character of their location. The Public Realm Plan proposes a review of all directional signage in Birr, with the objective of removal of all non-essential signs and the introduction of a suite of carefully designed and positioned pedestrian finger posts, as part as of a wider strategy. These will be used at a limited number of key locations, helping tourists, shoppers and other visitors to move between central points of Birr. Importantly, these must not be allowed to add to clutter and over provision currently experienced in some areas.



reduction & redesign management & control

The environmental quality of areas in Birr is negatively impacted upon by extensive advertising signage. This can be seen on retail streets, at key road junctions and most notably, along the main approach roads into town. The resultant effect is one of visual clutter that lowers the perception of quality, detracts from views of the general street scene and in turn, reduces the impact of messages that the signs aim to convey. Increased control on the use of advertising signage in Birr by both the public and private sectors is therefore required.

An audit of all signage should be undertaken to assess the distribution, impact and role of signs in Birr. This should then be followed by a process of rationalisation, with the removal of unnecessary signs, the relocation of inappropriately located signs and in some cases, the redesign of signage to improve the way in which it looks and contributes to its urban context.

It is recommended that any new signage proposed for the public realm of Birr be controlled through a process of permissions. This will determine the necessity of signs and agree the timescale of temporary signs and notices. It is only by such direct management and enforcement that their overall impact on Birr can be reduced.

With regards to shop signage, clear guidelines should be provided to retail operators as required. This will advise on the suitable scale, size and colours of signage specific to their building. Similarly, through the proposed frontage improvement programme, the replacement of inappropriate shop signage should be sought, in close conjunction with its owners.



Historic and Cultural Interpretation Strategy

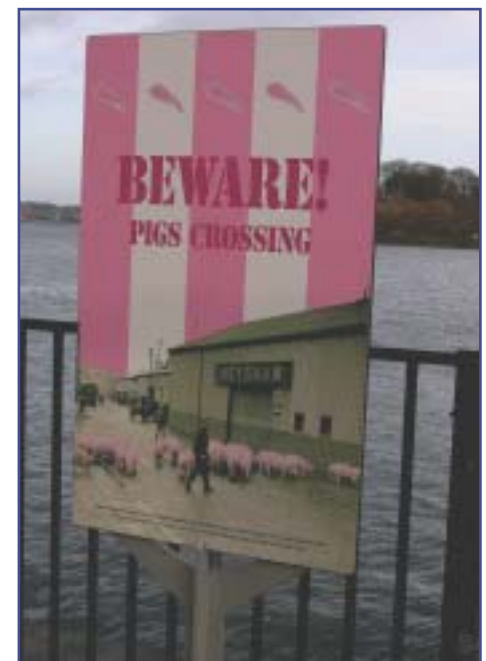
imaginative communication
history & culture

80 Finding the means by which to imaginatively communicate the rich history and culture of Birr will be a key component of its role as a leading tourist destination. Not only does this bring benefits to the visitor experience, but it also forms an important part of the town's educational resource, with interest to schools and local people.

An interpretive strategy for Birr will identify the key objectives for interpretation, followed by the range of appropriate communicative tools to be employed. This decision must be taken with a number of factors in mind, including the range of target audiences, the types of information to be conveyed and the available venues for such interpretation and resources, both human and financial. Tools can include various forms of literature, information panels, public art, websites, podcasts, tours and events.

The wonderful yet vast extent of historical stories associated with Birr must be carefully organised, so that their communication does not become confused or inappropriately detailed for specific target audiences. The formulation of a strategy will therefore involve the 'sieving' of all historic information to arrive at a set of key 'stories' to be shared with visitors to the town. Of course, this must not lead to a 'dumbing down' of the town's history, with facilities for more extensive and detailed research remaining easily accessible.

Scope exists in Birr to spread the geographic location at which different stories are told. At present, a concentration exists at Birr Castle, whilst other parts of the town, such as John's Place, play relatively little role in communicating the town's history. It is therefore proposed that efforts are made to appropriately spread the communication of these stories around the extents of the town, so that visitors are encouraged to explore Birr in its entirety.



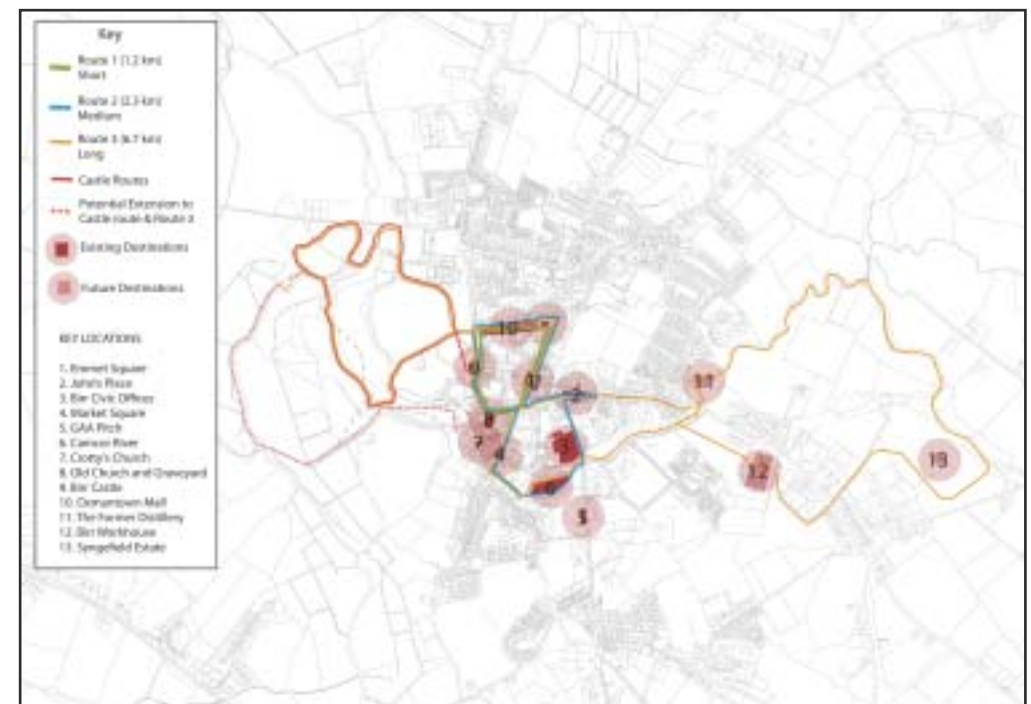
interpretation panels key locations

A core component of the Interpretative Strategy for Birr will be a Town Trail through the centre. It is proposed that the Town Trail consist of a series of walking routes, with 'stations' at key attractions as identified by the adjacent plan. Walking routes would vary from approximately 1 to 7 kilometers in length, giving visitors a choice in relation to the amount of time available. At each station along the trail, an information panel would be provided to share the significance of that location with visitors. Opportunities exist to communicate stories, folklore and anecdotes in an informative and entertaining manner, creatively using a combination of text and graphics.

Key locations for Interpretative Panels would be:

Emmet Square, John's Place, Birr Civic Offices, Market Square, GAA Pitch, Camcor River, Crotty's Church, Old Church and Graveyard, Birr Castle, Oxmantown Mall, The Former Distillery, Birr Workhouse and Syngfield Estate.

A larger version of the adjacent plan is available in the Appendix (p102).



General Lighting Strategy

safety & attractiveness

consistency & appropriateness

82 The provision of street lighting in Birr must be maintained and enhanced where necessary to ensure that the public realm is adequately lit. By doing so, real and perceived levels of safety will be positively influenced, thus encouraging pedestrian activity over longer periods of time, including summer evenings and winter mornings and afternoons.

The use of white light as opposed to yellow sodium light is recommended, to improve visibility and overall aesthetic quality.

The design of light columns and fixtures should be consistent and appropriate to context. The recently implemented fixtures in the town centre have made a positive impact upon the town, introducing a welcome level of consistency. These fittings should be complemented by a limited range of others, so that the lighting of pedestrian areas, parks and footpaths, for example, can be achieved using appropriate fittings.

As per the guidance on streetscape design, wall mounted or cantenary lighting systems should be used in confined spaces, removing the need for columns that add to clutter at the ground level.

In some areas, such as sports fields, it may be appropriate to maintain reduced levels of lighting, discouraging misuse of these areas at night.



Wall lighting creates a subtle lit environment free from clutter



Example of street lighting fixed to building to reduce street clutter



Existing lantern and bracket used in Birr. This style should be continued through the town



Cantenary lighting with similar lantern style works in narrow streets and reduces clutter



Solar powered street light to be used in newer developments

Feature Lighting Strategy

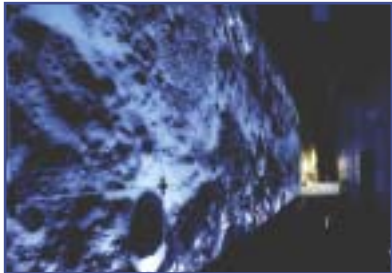
enhanced night time setting
landmarks and features
minimised light pollution

Birr's quality as a place to visit, work and live can be further enhanced with the creative use of lighting. Potential exists to improve the way in which landmarks and attractions in Birr are lit, thus accentuating their physical presence during hours of darkness and increasing their value as tourist attractions. Lighting should be sensitively designed to complement the character and setting of landmarks, be they buildings, monuments or natural features.

Lighting can also be used effectively for events and displays, put to use effectively for Son et Lumiere (Sound and Light) shows as seen in many French historic towns. Potential exists to hold such events in Birr, making use of its fine architecture and monuments as a theatrical setting.

Given the importance of astronomical activity in Birr, particular regard must be given to the potential effects of light pollution. The provision of general and feature lighting must therefore be designed in a manner that keeps light pollution to an absolute minimum. The services of specialist lighting designers should be employed for Birr, so that such systems can be designed and specified in a creative and non restrictive manner.

The use of low energy, environmentally efficient fittings should also be encouraged.



Colourful wall lighting



Subtle up lighting



Lighting displays



Light pollution in Ireland

Cycle network

bringing safe cycling back to birr

connecting homes to facilities

cycle based tourism

84 The use of bicycles in Birr has reduced in line with increased volumes of heavy vehicular traffic. This is particularly relevant to younger members of the population, who until recently would have cycled to and from school.

It is therefore proposed that a comprehensive cycle network be introduced to Birr, formally designating appropriate routes for bicycle use. Established in tandem with efforts to relieve vehicular congestion and reduce speeds via traffic calming, the bicycle should be promoted as a viable and safe alternative to car travel.

The adjacent plan illustrates a strategy based on three different types of route. Red routes occur on wider stretches of road, where designated cycle lanes could be potentially provided. Yellow routes are quiet roads, predominantly in residential areas. These are particularly suited to young cyclists, providing safe environments with lesser volumes of traffic. Finally green routes are designated for cycling away from roads. The principal route would be the newly expanded river park, enabling the provision of extensive cycle paths for travelling as well as recreation.

Accompanying such a strategy must also be the provision of adequate bicycle parking facilities. Racks should be provided as part of the comprehensive improvement of streets and public spaces, appropriately located in relation to key destinations.

Cycling also has great potential to contribute to the visitor experience of Birr, both at regional and local level. Proximity to the River Shannon and the Slieve Bloom Mountains, make Birr well suited as a base for cycle holidays. Meanwhile, reduced vehicular levels in Birr will in time create an environment ideal for exploring Birr on bike, with scope for a bicycle hire business to flourish.



Enhanced Floral Displays

seasonal colour & interest
planters, baskets & boxes
swathes of colour

Floral displays help to add colour and seasonal interest within urban environments which can often be dominated by hard surfaces and buildings. The location and design of displays should be planned to be appropriate to context, whilst maximising impact. Care should be taken however to avoid the over provision of elaborate structures that add to visual clutter but can become a maintenance burden. Formal planters, that can be moved as necessary, are useful ways in which to introduce floral displays to the public realm. These should only be positioned, however, in areas where there is sufficient space for pedestrian circulation.

Traditional drifts of flower beds in grass areas are also appropriate to Birr, with scope to research historical precedent with the use of designs and species types. A combination of annuals and bulbs will help to provide seasonal interest and a sense of anticipation at different times of the year.

Hanging baskets should be used in moderation, where their visual impact will be most effective. Colourful shopfronts and facades, for example, can 'compete for attention' with hanging baskets, thus reducing their impact and adding to visual clutter or noise. However, streets with blank or interrupted facades or buildings that are muted in colour can benefit greatly. The maintenance commitment required for baskets must also be taken into consideration. Window boxes are an effective means by which to add seasonal colour and interest to vertical elements of the public realm. By working in partnership with home and business owners, the provision of window boxes and communal planting can become a rewarding exercise for all involved.

Renewed participation of Birr in the European horticulture competition 'Entente Florale' should be encouraged, harnessing the expertise present within the town.



Flower Species

Species selection should be based on suitability to conditions, local availability, colour and form. Historical relevance and ecological value should also be considered.

Some suggested species are:

- Campanula 'Carpatica Blue'*
- Geranium 'Johnson's Blue'*
- Geranium 'Belleville' Trailing*
- Lobelia 'Trail Away'*
- Pansy 'Waterfall'*
- Fuchsia 'Deep Purple' Giant*
- Tulipa 'Red Riding Hood'*

delivery

- 86** Having established the extent and content of public realm proposals for Birr, it is vital to fully understand how and when they can be delivered. Clearly, substantial works and investment are put forward by this plan, all of which could not be delivered simultaneously in the short or medium term. It is therefore necessary to **prioritise** proposals, ranking them by impact and potential timeframe, so that delivery can be managed accordingly.

The adjacent Action Plan outlines the prioritisation for each public realm proposal. It also indicates a timeframe likely for delivery of the project and identifies key stakeholders in relation to each project. This Action Plan should be viewed as a **‘live document’**, requiring regular updating in line with progress, availability of funding and opportunities that may arise for development.

The scale and complexity of certain projects means that delivery cannot take place over the short term. It is therefore important that whilst such projects are being prepared, alternative **short term deliverables** are taken forward. In this instance, improvements to The Column, the setting of the Castle Walls and delivery of a Town Trail are amongst potential early projects for delivery.

For each of these projects, the importance of **quality** must be underlined. Not only in the materials used, but in the standards of design, construction techniques and maintenance once complete. Should funds be insufficient for delivery of a project to a high enough standard, it is advised that it be either phased or delayed until this is possible.

	Project Name	Priority High Medium Low	Timeframe Short Medium Long	Indicative Cost Approximated figures only Shown in Euros (2009) Excl. Fees and VAT	Stakeholders See Key
	High Quality Streetscapes				
1	Main Street	H	M	900,000	OCC, BTC, CC, SD
2	Oxmantown Mall	M	M	162,000	OCC, BTC, BGS, SD, Res, HC
2a	Church setting	H	M	63,000	OCC, BTC, BGS, COI, SD
3	Church Street	H	S	180,000	OCC, BTC, SD, Res, HS,
4	Castle Street	H	M	252,000	OCC, BTC, SD, Res, BCD,
5	Greene Street	M	M	162,000	OCC, BTC, CC, SD, Res,
6	Rosse Row / William Street	H	M	360,000	OCC, BTC, CC, SD, Res,
7	Mill Street	M	M	200,000	OCC, BTC, CC, SD, Res,
8	Emmet Street	M	M	180,000	OCC, BTC, CC, BGS, HS, SD, Res, NRA
9	Johns Place	M	M	270,000	OCC, BTC, BGS, SD, HS, Res, HC,
10	Connaught Street	L	M	135,000	OCC, BTC, CC, SD, Res,
11	Wilmer Road	M	M	99,000	OCC, BTC, NRA, SD, Res,
12	St. Brendans Street/ Chapel Lane	M	M	126,000	OCC, BTC, SD, Res,

The importance of consultation and participation with the **people of Birr** should also be stressed. Genuine consultation is an investment that can reap significant returns for all involved, bestowing a sense of shared ownership and pride in projects that are delivered.

Responsibility for delivery of the public realm plan must rest with many parties, including those from the public and private sectors. In some cases, **partnership** between different organisations will be necessary, particularly on large scale ventures involving multiple land ownerships.

A Public Realm **Steering Group**, drawn from the public, private and community sectors, should be established to oversee delivery of this plan. This group will continue the project prioritisation process, identify and pursue funding sources, monitor delivery and continue regular community information and engagement.

Key to Stakeholders (Alphabetical)

BCD - Birr Castle Demesne
 BGS - Birr Georgian Society
 BTC - Birr Town Council
 BTTC - Birr Tidy Towns Committee
 CC - Chamber of Commerce
 FI - Fáilte Ireland
 HC - Heritage Council
 HS - Birr Historical Society
 NRA - National Roads Authority
 OCC - Offaly County Council
 Res - Residents
 SD - Shannon Development

	Project Name	Priority	Timefame	Indicative Cost	Stakeholders
		High Medium Low	Short Medium Long	Approximated figures only Shown in Euros (2009) Excl. Fees and VAT	See Key
	Squares				
13.	Emmet Square	H	M / L	1.8M	OCC, BTC, CC, BGS, HS, NRA, SD, HC
13a	Column Restoration	H	S	200,000	OCC, BTC, SD, HS
14.	Market Square	M	M	360,000	OCC, BTC, SD, HS
	Other Projects				
15	Old Church and Graveyard	H	H / M	126,000	OCC, BTC, COI, SD, BCD, HC
16	Camcor River Park (3.5km)	M	M / L	2.7M	OCC, BTC, BTTC, SD, HC,
17	Gateways and Approaches	H	S	variable	OCC, BTC, SD, NRA,
18	Neighbourhood spaces	M	M / L	variable	OCC, BTC, BTTC, SD, Res,
19	Frontage Improvement	H	S / M	variable	OCC, BTC, SD, CC
20.	Street & Directional signage	H	S	variable	OCC, BTC, NRA, SD,
21	Advertising signage	H	S	variable	OCC, BTC, SD, CC,
22	Historic & Cultural Interp	H	S / M	variable	OCC, BTC, HS, SD, BGS, BCD, FI
23	Town Trail	H	S	variable	OCC, BTC, HS, BGS, SD, BCD, FI
24	General Lighting	M	M	variable	OCC, BTC, SD,
25	Feature Lighting	M	M	variable	OCC, BTC, SD,
26	Cycle Network	H	S / M	variable	OCC, BTC, SD, HS,



conclusions

The Public Realm Plan for Birr has demonstrated how the streets and public spaces of this historic town can be greatly improved for the benefit of all who live, work and visit there. Birr is a special place, deserving of a quality of public realm at least equal to that of its architecture. Despite uncertain economic times, this plan is unapologetically ambitious. It has identified how over time, wise infrastructural investment can position Birr as a unique shopping destination for the region and one of Ireland's leading tourism centres.

Achieving this vision will not happen overnight and unforeseen changes will undoubtedly influence its delivery. However, a thorough and strategically founded plan is now in place, around which all parties from the public, private and community sectors can focus. As it is founded on strategic principles, scope also exists to add new public realm projects to the plan as opportunities arise.

In addition, a series of projects for delivery over the short term have been identified. With continued collaboration with the people of Birr, work on these can now take place, thus initiating the exciting process of transformation and catalysing future regeneration of the town.

Birr has long been recognised as an innovative and inspirational place, of influence far beyond its county borders. The opportunity now exists to take Birr confidently forward, welcoming visitors from afar and continuing to raise the quality of life for all who live there.

1 POLICY CONTEXT

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Birr is renowned for its exemplary Georgian built heritage; in 1992 it was the first officially designated heritage town in Ireland. Birr also has extensive natural heritage assets, especially within the grounds of Birr Castle. Overall, Birr is a picturesque, culturally rich regional town, located in one of the most agriculturally productive and less explored or exploited regions of Ireland. By maximising the town's potential and accentuating its assets, an effectively implemented Public Realm Strategy could increase its attractiveness and raise its importance locally and regionally as a growth centre as well as nationally and internationally as a tourism destination.

The Public Realm Strategy will detail an approach to conserving and protecting Birr's valuable heritage while also planning for growth and development. Ultimately, the Public Realm Strategy provides the local community with a framework for the development of economic and cultural opportunities and will help the town develop its potential in a sustainable manner. Essentially, the objectives are to:

- € develop the town as an attractive and convivial living environment;
- € develop the tourism potential within and around the town; and
- € attract inward investment.

In order to do so it is imperative that an understanding of existing policies, plans and programmes for Birr is obtained. The following sections highlight particular policies and strategies and their implications for the public realm in Birr. At a national level, the *National Development Plan 2007 – 2013* details the key development objectives while the *National Spatial Strategy 2002 – 2020*, establishes a strategic physical planning framework at national level for the coming years. The plans for Birr must be in accordance with the *National Spatial Strategy 2002 – 2020*. The *Regional Planning Guidelines* translate the overall national approach into policies and effective planning strategies at regional level. *Regional Planning Guidelines*, with statutory recognition, are the instruments that implement the *NSS* at regional and local level. Plans for Birr must also be in accordance with the statutory development plan. While the *Development Plan for Birr and Environs 2004 – 2010* is the relevant development plan, consideration is also paid to the *Offaly County Development Plan 2003 – 2009* and the *Draft Offaly County Development Plan 2009 – 2015* due to the interconnectedness of both town and county. These policy documents will direct the Public Realm Strategy. However, the Public Realm Strategy will also be shaped by the numerous other policies and strategies relevant to Birr, its environs and the public realm.

1.2 NATIONAL LEVEL

National Development Plan 2007 – 2013: Transforming Ireland – A better quality of life for all (adopted January 2007)

The *National Development Plan (NDP)* is the Government's plan for investment over the period 2007 – 2013. The priorities and approach set out in the NDP are in accordance with the objectives of *Towards 2016 – Ten Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement (2006 – 2015)* (adopted June 2006) and the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007 – 2016* (adopted February 2007). The commitment to prepare a *National Spatial Strategy*, establishing a coherent national development planning framework, was included in the previous *National Development Plan 2000 – 2006* (adopted November 2000). Investment under the NDP must be in accordance with the *National Spatial Strategy*.

The Birr Public Realm Strategy is consistent with the NDP high level objectives of balanced regional development (i.e. regions achieving their full potential), addressing economic and social infrastructure deficits, supporting enterprise and innovation and supporting agriculture and the rural economy. One of the NDP's key objectives is to improve the balance between the regions in terms of economic and social development.

The various sub-programmes for funding under the NDP, relevant to Birr, include:

- € Leader/Rural Economy Sub-Programme (€461 million) - Promoting the diversification of the rural economy through supporting and promoting new rural micro-enterprises and agri-tourism as well as enhancing villages and small towns and conserving areas of high cultural and natural value;
- € CLÁR (€141 million) – Supporting the regeneration of rural areas suffering from population decline;
- € Built Heritage Sub-Programme (€373 million) – Conservation and protection of Ireland's architectural and archaeological heritage; and
- € Tourism Programme Product Development and Infrastructure Sub Programme (€317 million).

Under the NDP a fund to develop tourism infrastructure (covering issues such as access, signposting, walking and cycling route development) and a further fund to support major new festivals and cultural events will be available in the future. Currently, the National Development Plan supports the development of a range of sporting facilities in rural areas that together within initiatives in the arts and culture seek to build stronger communities.

Under the Rural Social and Economic Development Programme villages and small towns are to receive funding for infrastructural development. The

improvements will be focused on the development of infrastructure in order to enhance the environmental, amenity and structural aspects (e.g. roads, paths, bridges, etc.) of rural communities.

Under the Priority IV Social Infrastructure, Sports, Culture, Heritage and Community Infrastructure Programme €3.6 billion will be invested through the NDP into sports, culture and heritage infrastructure. This includes cultural facilities and a range of programmes to ensure the preservation, protection and display of natural, cultural, architectural and archaeological heritage. The NDP recognises that such infrastructural facilities provide attractive recreational spaces, are important for improving the attractiveness of places as places to live and are important tourism attractions.

Under the NDP's Community Infrastructure Sub-Programme (€895 million) improvements are to be made to the fabric of the built environment. Improvements to the built environment are seen to support social and economic development, enhance the attractiveness of urban areas as places to live and work, promote environmentally sustainable development and support the development of tourism. Specifically, with regards to the public realm, the NDP states that investment in urban renewal will have a strategic and highly visible impact, reinforcing the sense of place, identity and attractiveness. The NDP states that:

"Accordingly, in allocating funding, priority will be accorded to projects encompassing and demonstrating good urban design, innovation, appropriate scale and cost effectiveness. Projects will, therefore, be required to compete for funding under the new investment programme. A range of criteria will be developed to ensure a minimum project standard is assured before funding is allocated." (NDP, 2007, page 228).

Even though Birr is not a Hub or Gateway town it is still eligible for significant strategic investment. According to the NDP:

"...support will also be available for county and other towns. Funding will also be available to support renewal and remediation works in small towns and villages, with an element of competitive assessment." (NDP, 2007, page 228).

National Spatial Strategy 2002 – 2020: People, Places and Potential (adopted November 2002)

The *National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020* (NSS), supported through the NDP, provides a framework to guide future policies, programmes and investment across the State, so as to achieve balanced and sustainable development throughout the country. As such it underpins State and Local Authority financing of development projects, for example, in transport, tourism and urban regeneration. It is the objective of the NSS to realise the potential of each region to contribute towards the sustainable economic, social and environmental performance of the State.

The NSS provides the spatial framework for developing a better quality of life for everyone, a strong, competitive economic position and an environment of the highest quality.

The NSS promotes the development of the small to medium sized towns. It supports the identification and prioritisation of policies which, when put into place, will generate and attract investment. The NSS recognises that the environmental quality of rural environments, a 'green image', is attractive for tourism and investment, that its protection is imperative and that cultural identities are very important for supporting the rural economy.

Birr is a changing rural area, where the population and agricultural employment is in decline. The NSS categorises Birr's rural hinterland as an area with a strong potential for diversification and advocates policies that promote diversification in enterprise, local services and tourism. The NSS advocates that rural areas should be protected and that local potential is developed. In order to restructure the rural economy the NSS recommends the use of local knowledge, resources and legal powers under planning and derelict sites legislation to encourage and facilitate development.

The NSS recognises that Birr benefits from a large rural hinterland, which looks to the town to provide a good range of services, which in turn attracts people and investment to the town. The function of the town as a service hub acts a catalyst for its diversification. The NSS seeks to strengthen rural towns through settlement and planning policies, which would allow them to develop as centres for employment and services. The NSS recognises that small towns and villages need investment in essential services and should be improved through urban and village renewal schemes and rely on high quality urban design.

The NSS specifically refers to Birr as a town which could be enhanced through physical and townscape improvements, water services, facilities for smaller enterprises and enhancements to roads and bus networks. This, it maintains, will provide an attractive environment for residential, employment, retailing and service functions. The NSS acknowledges Birr's significant potential to become a tourism centre. It is anticipated that the tourism potential of Birr will be further realised as transport infrastructure and accessibility is improved.

The NSS recommends the renewal and consolidation of the existing urban form; careful, sensitive and efficient use of land with the aim of reducing dereliction and under-utilisation. Sensitive conservation, the use of heritage buildings and improving the physical quality of public areas such as footpaths, amenity areas, can make an important contribution to the quality of life in Birr and its attractiveness as a tourist destination.

The NSS indicates that because of its built heritage and links to the Mid-West Regional, Birr has the potential to become a significant tourism centre and also one which further develops small enterprises in a high quality environment.

1.3

REGIONAL LEVEL

Midland Regional Authority Regional Planning Guidelines (adopted May 2004)

Regional planning guidelines, acting as planning frameworks, are required under the 2000 Planning and Development Act. Integral to meeting the Regional Planning Guidelines' objectives of developing successfully, sustainably and equitably is the development of the full potential of rural areas. This should be in a manner that is compatible with strengthening urban areas and fostering distinctive lifestyles rooted in high quality living environments, rich in heritage and landscape value. The Guidelines aim to develop a well-defined urban system, building on the strengths of existing settlements, supporting the continued vitality of rural areas and providing for the development of the region in a balanced manner. The Guidelines set a target population for the region of 325,000 by 2020.

The Guidelines recognise that the significant towns in the region, including Birr, need to be supported as engines of local growth and linked to the gateways (Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore). The Guidelines advocate that a strengthened network of towns and villages will not only support the gateways but will also revitalise the surrounding rural areas.

In order to help establish a regional identity the Guidelines recommend that the tourism industry in the region is developed to create employment and sustain local communities. It seeks to maximise the assets of the existing built and natural environment and the use of urban land resources and the development of brownfield sites.

The Guidelines recognise that in order to promote a distinct identity for towns such as Birr, they should take advantage of their natural and built heritage. In doing so, the towns will drive the economic, social and physical development of the region. The development and enhancement of the towns of the region is extremely important to support increased employment, particularly in the manufacturing and services sector.

Two goals of the Guidelines support the development of the public realm in towns:

- € Goal 7: To develop and market a distinct and unique image and identity for the region that will attract investment and economic activity to the region (page 27); and

- € Goal 8: To strengthen and sustain rural communities, complement urban centres, and contribute to the distinct identity of the region (page 28).

Birr is characterised by the Guidelines as a *Key Service Town*, which needs to act as an important driver of the local economy and provide vital economic, administrative and social functions. Birr and its hinterland are recognised as having a high potential for the development of a dedicated amenity and leisure industry. The Guidelines recognise that Birr, with its substantial built heritage and strong links throughout the region, is a key growth centre. The Guidelines strongly support the development of the heritage and amenity potential of Birr.

A large proportion of the regions population growth and development over the coming years will be concentrated in Birr. The Guidelines forecast that approximately 2,000 houses will be required in Birr over the period 2004-2020. The provision of infrastructure and social facilities will need to match this growth. The Guidelines acknowledges that in specific locations, urban renewal programmes can have a significant impact on boosting local and regional economies.

The Regional Planning Guidelines recommend:

- € targeted growth in Birr, building on inter-regional links and heritage assets;
- € development, promotion and expansion of focused and local industrial parks / enterprise centres to serve indigenous industries; and
- € comprehensive marketing and promotion of the leisure, amenity and tourist industry based on existing natural, cultural and historical resources (page 50).

Tourism Strategy for the Shannon Region 2008 – 2013 Discussion Paper (February 2008)

The discussion paper was published for consideration by relevant stakeholders in order to encourage input into the Shannon Region's tourism strategy. The Town of Birr falls within the remit of Shannon Development and hence its tourism sector is influenced by the tourism strategy adopted by Shannon Development.

The discussion paper recognises the importance of tourism as an indigenous industry, directly employing 150,000 persons nationally and generating approximately €4.6 billion in foreign revenues. Currently, the regional tourism industry is a cause for concern. Tourism activity is currently concentrated in the traditional tourism centres such as Kerry, Connemara, Dublin, etc.

Ireland's tourism product is centred on the three pillars of people, place and culture. All three pillars are supported through an enhanced public realm. This gives people a convivial place to interact, the opportunity to develop a sense of place amenable to tourists and the potential to develop and promote cultural events within the public realm. To date, Birr has been a recipient of investment from Shannon Development due to its designation as a Heritage Town.

Between 2002 and 2006 the Shannon Development region saw an increase of 26% in overseas visitors. Most visitors engage in activities of historical and cultural interest. The paper recognises that in order to ensure a continued high quality tourist offer, value-for-money and visitor satisfaction the intrinsic attractiveness of existing tourist destinations need to be continuously upgraded and new areas developed to integrate with the existing established attractions.

One of the major initiatives being actively promoted by Shannon Development is the West Offaly tourism development cluster. This is a cluster of five complementary Tourism Projects in Birr and other towns including, Banagher and Shannon Harbour. In 2006 there were 2,700 calls to the tourist information office in Birr and Birr Castle had around 35,632 visitors.

Birr is well placed to maximise its tourist potential and attract visitors away from the main tourism centres. Its potential lies in the town's wealth of historical and cultural features. The provision of a high quality public realm will enhance visitor's experience of the town and is an important part of its tourist offer.

Tourism Strategy for the Shannon Region 2008 – 2010 (adopted August 2008)

The Tourism Strategy for the Shannon Region, which follows on from the *Tourism Strategy for the Shannon Region 2008 – 2013 Discussion Paper*, provides a framework for the development of tourism within the region. The strategy expects international visitor numbers to increase by 10% between 2006 and 2010 and domestic visitor numbers to increase by 20% over the same period. The strategy recognises that there are disparities in tourism across the country and the levels of growth between Dublin and the remainder of the country. In order to bridge this disparity there needs to be a greater distribution of tourism investment across all regions, developing the potential in areas rich in nature and heritage.

Under this plan Birr is to receive a seasonal tourist office and an internet information kiosk. Of direct relevance to Birr the Strategy recommends:

- € the establishment of Birr as the main tourism hub within the Midlands;

- € developing new banqueting/entertainment projects at Birr Castle. Their feasibility must be established before promoting their implementation;
- € developing and enhancing tourism facilities at Birr Castle and obtain international recognition; and
- € enhance the streetscape of the town (page 18).

1.4

LOCAL LEVEL

Development Plan for Birr and Environs 2004 – 2010 (adopted 2004)

The overall aim of the Development Plan is to:

“set out a framework for the physical development of the town of Birr and Environs, so that growth may take place in a sensitive, co-ordinated and orderly manner, while at the same time conserving the town's Georgian character and intrinsic heritage value.” (page 2).

The objective of the plan is to encourage sensitive development in appropriate areas and to provide protection to the built heritage of the town, including the townscape, architecture, public spaces and streets. Public services and investment decisions are made within the framework of the Development Plan. The Public Realm Strategy was devised within the framework of the Development Plan.

While most of the goals outlined in the Development Plan support the implementation of a Public Realm Strategy some are of more direct relevance, notably to:

- € preserve and enhance the environmental character of the town including its historic heritage and unique architectural character;
- € ensure that sufficient and suitably located land is allocated to satisfy the needs of different functions of the Town in the future;
- € facilitate the provision of improved amenities within the town and to secure the appropriate re-development and renewal of obsolete areas; and
- € safeguard and enhance the status of Birr as a designated Georgian Heritage Town (pages 8 – 9).

While other goals relating to economic performance and employment are not directly contingent on the public realm, their achievement will be influenced through its improvement.

With regards to open space the Development Plan contains the following policies:

- € AP1 – To develop land for open space and amenity provision where practicable and necessary, to ensure that residents and visitors gain the highest level of benefits possible from the environments of Birr.
- € AP2 – To encourage the provision of private open space such as playing pitches and associated facilities where this can be achieved in accordance with the development strategy for Birr.
- € AP3 – To ensure that all new residential areas make provision for sufficient good quality open space.
- € AP4 – To extend the Camcor Linear Park to the town boundary and to link the Park to the Castle Demesne.
- € AP5 – To link open spaces and amenity developments throughout the town so as to secure integration of provision as far as possible.
- € AP6 – To co-operate with Sporting Organisations who wish to expand or develop facilities (page 44).
- € D1* - Upgrade and extend the town's amenities.
- € D2 – Investigate the possibility of extending Camcor Linear Park to the east as far as Elmgrove Bridge and to incorporate into the Park the old Mass path from Elmgrove Bridge as far as the town boundary and continuance of Riverside open space area.
- € D3 – Provide Pedestrian Link between the Linear Park and the Castle Demesne.
- € D4 – Provide a network of cycle ways, focused on the schools.
- € D5 – Make provisions for open space on the Town Council owned land at Scurragh.
- € D6 – Continue tree planting programme around the town.
- € D7 – Continue landscaping programme in the town's public spaces and squares.
- € D8 – Continue programme of landscaping and improving the entrances to the town along Roscrea Road, Tullamore Road, Banagher Road.

- € D9 – Investigate in conjunction with the appropriate prescribed bodies, the feasibility of establishing a Wetlands Park on Little Brosna Flood Plain.
- € D10 – To make provisions for significant open space at Burkes Hill.
- € D11 The Ice House at Seffin shall be retained as a feature in any development of the area (pages 44 – 55).

A substantial open space will be provided as part of the development of the field at Orchard Lane/Moorpark where the first All Ireland Hurling Final was played. This open space will commemorate the historic nature of this site.

The street layout in Birr is based around a compact historic core, with wide streets, squares and tree lined malls. The character and attractiveness of the town is maintained by the careful control of development within the town centre.

The Development Plan contains policies relevant to the protection and conservation of the historic built environment, notably:

- € BP1 – To preserve and protect Birr built environment and heritage status in terms of streetscapes, individual buildings, public spaces and features of historical, architectural or artistic interest using the powers vested in it by the Planning & Development Act 2000.
- € BP2 – To protect the streetscapes and vistas which are resultant from Birr's present urban form.
- € BP3 – To conserve the townscape of Birr and, in particular to carefully control development in Oxmantown Mall, Emmet Street, Townsend Street, The Green, Emmet Square, John's Place, Compton Row, Newbridge Street, Connaught Street, O'Connell Street, Main Street, Castle Street, Market Street and St. Brendan Street (pages 46 – 47).

With regards to conservation of the built and natural environment the Development Plan contains the following policies:

- € F1* – To protect and preserve Birr's archaeological, historic and architectural heritage.
- € F2* – To preserve and enhance the Natural Environment of the town.
- € F4 – To protect the structures included in the List of Protected Structures List.
- € F6 – Protect buildings which are part of the town's milling and distilling heritage.

- € F7 – Protect monuments listed under Section 12 of the National Monuments (Amendment) Act, 1994, or other designated areas under the National Monuments Acts.
- € F8 – Protect the area of Archaeological Potential of Birr Town. (Ref Urban Archaeological Survey; Bradley).
- € F9 – To preserve carriage arches due to their importance as components of Birr’s streetscape.
- € F10 – Promote the protection and development of nature walks at: (a) Castle Demesne, (b) Mass Path between Clongohill Lane and Sandymount, and (c) Roscrea Road to Riverstown.
- € F11 – Protect the natural environment of the Camcor River and Little Brosna River and their corridors through the town (pages 59 – 60).

According to the Development Plan, Birr is a designated Georgian Heritage Town and an established tourist destination, with over 40,000 people a year visiting the Castle and Demesne. In the surrounding area visitors are attracted to the many sites of interest including the Slieve Bloom Environmental Park, Clonmacnoise Monastic Site, River Shannon and Callows, Lough Boora Parklands and Lough Derg. In order to make the most of the tourism potential the Development Plan stipulates that:

“the Council can take actions to conserve and protect the town’s natural and built heritage, to put amenity developments in place, to co-operate and liaise with organisations involved in tourist service provision, to ensure that adequate information is available to potential visitors generally to co-ordinate the physical development of the town such that its tourist potential is maximised.” (page 53).

The Development Plan contains the following policies in relation to tourism:

- € TP1 – To protect the distinctive Georgian and Historic character of the town in order to provides a sound basis for the development of tourism.
- € TP2 – To co-operate with Shannon Development, Bord Fáilte and other bodies involved in tourism operation and planning and, where appropriate, to facilitate projects which improve the amenities of the town.
- € TP4 – To promote Birr as a tourist destination, especially for over-night stopping tourists (page 53).

With regards to urban renewal the Development Plan contains the following policies:

- € G1* - To facilitate and promote sensitive re-development of underused or derelict Town Centre areas.
- € G3 – Identify and reserve suitable sites for Community/Public use as part of urban renewal schemes.
- € G6 – Seek designation of central areas any future urban renewal initiative as a mechanism for securing restoration and rehabilitation of the built fabric (page 71).

With regards to community infrastructure the Development Plan states in policy J11 that the Council recognises the importance of community centres and playgrounds in the social life of a community. Therefore, it is an objective to encourage and facilitate the development of these in Birr and Environs.

With regards to environmental protection the Development Plan, through policy P7 seeks to provide a civic amenity site within the designated neighbourhood centre at Townparks.

The Public Realm Strategy is in direct accordance with the Development Plan policies and objectives.

Birr Land Use and Transportation Study (Draft Report) (November 2005)

The completion of a Land Use and Transportation Study was a strategic objective committed to in the *Birr Development Plan 2004 – 2010*. The main aim of this study was to assist in the drawing up of proposals to accommodate traffic growth in Birr over the next 20 years and to determine the optimum route for the proposed Birr Bypass. It will also feed into the review of the current development plan and the devising of subsequent plans.

According to the draft *Birr Land Use and Transportation Study* (LUTS) Birr is an important area for tourists, due to its role as a Heritage Town. Its strong sporting tradition is also a key driver in the town’s attractiveness.

“An important principle of the Birr Land Use and Transportation Study is to consolidate the existing built environment and encourage in-depth and infill residential development at higher densities along with improved accessibility within the town.” (page 12).

According to a survey undertaken to inform LUTS, Emmet Square, Burke’s Hill and Main Street in Birr were thought to be in need of improvements and should be made more pedestrian friendly.

The survey also showed that few students travel to school by bicycle. Of the recommendations suggested by students the following are of relevance to the public realm:

- € one-way traffic in Moorepark Street (most frequently mentioned);
- € pedestrian crossing at Railway Road;
- € traffic lights at Railway Road;
- € no parking at Drumbane;
- € zebra crossing at Green Street, at Mill Island and also at Spar on Wilimer Road;
- € cycle lanes;
- € pedestrian crossing at Market Square across Brendan Street;
- € zebra crossing should be placed at the Green near Mercy Primary School;
- € make paths wider;
- € Moorepark needs another path at the bridge;
- € improvements on the road at the Maltings; and
- € parking only on one side of Main Street.

Offaly County Development Plan 2003 – 2009 (adopted 2003)

The County Development Plan states that Birr, as well as other towns in the County can be enhanced through physical and townscape improvements and will provide an attractive environment for residential, employment, retailing and services functions. It also realises that Birr, with its built heritage and good links to the Mid West Region, has the potential to become a significant tourism centre and could further develop small enterprises in a high quality environment.

“The Council recognises the economic, social, cultural and recreational importance of protecting and enhancing the amenities of the County. It is considered that the amenity/recreational attractions of the County will support employment, improve environmental and educational awareness and opportunities, and raise living standards. The Council will co-operate with other bodies to achieve the strategic development of this sector.” (page 76).

In order to rejuvenate the social and economic life of the County’s towns and villages and rehabilitate the built environment the County Council will participate in the EU funded Operation Programme on Local Urban and Village Development. The County Council aims to carry out environmental improvements in the towns and villages of the County with the purpose of conserving their character and enhancing their overall appearance and attractiveness.

Draft Offaly County Development Plan 2009 – 2015 (February 2008)

In order to devise an effective Public Realm Strategy it is necessary to understand emerging policy. The Draft Offaly County Development Plan 2009 – 2015, which builds on the previous plan and develops the policies and objectives of County Offaly further, was available for comment for 10 weeks

from February 18th to April 28th, 2008. It is due to be officially adopted early 2009.

The main goal of the draft Development Plan is to *“Drive forward and encourage the growth of Offaly to its full potential both economically and socially, having regard to environmental constraints, with a focus on quality of life.”* (Ch. 3, page 2).

One of the objectives of the draft Development Plan is to encourage population growth and development in the west and south of the county. Birr, being located in the south-west of the county, is likely to experience population growth. It recognises that the role of the large towns, such as Birr, is to strengthen the settlement pattern across the county and to provide support to the surrounding hinterlands.

With regards to cycling and walking, it is the Council policy, *“where feasible, to require the provision of cycleways and walkways as part of new development.”* (Ch. 10, page 14).

The draft Development Plan lists policies and objectives under various other categories. Under the built heritage chapter it states that the Council will:

“ensure that full consideration is given to the protection of archaeological heritage when undertaking, approving or authorising development in order to avoid unnecessary conflict between development and the protection of the archaeological heritage.” (Ch. 14, page 7).

Similarly, in Chapter 15 – Natural Heritage, the policies and objectives of the Council are centred around the protection of European and National designated sites within the County including Special Protection Areas, Special Areas of Conservation and candidate Special Areas of Conservation, Natural Heritage Areas and Proposed Natural Heritage Areas, Ramsar Sites, Statutory Nature Reserves, Biogenetic Reserves and Wildfowl Sanctuaries. There are various restrictions and rules to be observed when considering developments which may impact on designated natural areas. It also stipulates that more needs to be done to protect and enhance areas of natural heritage outside of the designated areas.

The draft Development Plan also stresses the importance of developing the tourism potential of the county and of supporting the diversification of tourism in an environmental and sustainable manner. It is policy of the Council to investigate the potential of and opportunities for the development of trails, including a mixture of walking, cycling and driving trails. It is also policy of the Council to encourage tourism related developments within existing settlements and in keeping with the character of the settlement.

Bringing the Future into Focus – A Strategy for Economic, Social and Cultural Development (2002-2012), Offaly County Development Board (adopted March 2002)

This Strategy, which applies to the entire County of Offaly, stresses that the principle of sustainable development will be applied to the planning of communities in order to ensure that there will be a range of amenities to meet the needs of the local population and to strengthen and consolidate the urban areas of the county. The County Development Board supports the adoption of County Development Plans that reflect sustainable development principles and gives clear and concise guidance to communities and developers regarding lands use.

Poverty and social exclusion are seen as real barriers to social and economic progress. The Strategy suggests actions to empower communities, to tackle cumulative disadvantage and to provide access to quality education and training. The aims of the Strategy are to boost economic growth, create employment, ensure that educational attainment levels are high and to integrate minority communities and other target groups into the social fabric of Offaly. The Strategy recognises the fact that generally in Offaly there is an ageing population and a steady outflow of young people. This has a detrimental effect on the image of the area as a place to invest.

With particular relevance to the public realm, the Strategy highlights conservation of the natural and built heritage as being of great importance due to its influence and inspiration it provides. It also aims to develop appropriate sports and leisure facilities throughout the county in an effort to encourage balanced lifestyles among the population. *“There is a need to expand the sporting and leisure opportunities available to the people of all age in Offaly”* (page 16).

Urban Renewal Programme 1998 – Integrated Area Plan for Birr (Draft) (February 1998)

In order to secure funding under the Urban Renewal Programme in 1998 an Integrated Area Plan for Birr was devised. While application for this programme closed several years ago funding was still available until recently. The Integrated Area Plan highlighted issues in Birr which needed addressing. The objectives of the Integrated Area Plan were to:

- € enhance and improve its distinctive architectural and civic character;
- € promote quality and high standards in relation to conservation and new design;
- € promote quality in the public realm;
- € extend and improve its tourism potential;
- € strengthen its role as a local commercial, cultural, administrative and employment centre within the region; and
- € develop areas of physical blight and obsolescence (Section 2.2).

The Integrated Area Plan recognises the contribution of the public realm to the overall atmosphere and ambience of a town. The plan recommends projects to develop and open up back areas for appropriate uses, the provision of new pedestrian routes and general improvements to public spaces, and the

creation of new public ways linking important elements in the town, including riverside, the castle and the shopping streets. The plan states that projects contributing to the improvement of the public realm should be encouraged by financial incentives.

Offaly Heritage Plan 2007 – 2011 (adopted February 2007)

The *Offaly Heritage Plan 2007 – 2011* specifies a programme of work to be carried out in the county in order to conserve and enhance its existing heritage. The recommended actions relevant to public realm are to:

- € survey castles of the county (National Monuments Service/Offaly County Council);
- € survey the historic gardens of Offaly with reference to follies present (Offaly County Council);
- € survey the holy wells marked on the OS maps to highlight water levels, quality and associated lore (Geological Survey of Ireland, UCD, Offaly County Council);
- € survey aspects of buildings such as Estate cottages, gate lodges, barns/farm buildings, and vernacular house types (Offaly County Council, Georgian Society, Birr Chapter, OHAS);
- € photograph/GPS and collect history on street furniture, e.g. gates, milestones, plaques, pumps, letterboxes, pillars and monuments (Offaly County Council, Community Groups, Historical Societies);
- € carry out an audit of the built and natural aspects of Offaly County Council property (Offaly County Council);
- € document the number of original/replacement features in Birr and key villages’ architectural core as a benchmark for awareness programme (Offaly County Council);
- € produce a web and printed heritage guidebook for the county, with a flier to promote key sites (Offaly County Council);
- € publish appropriate material on data collected, e.g. gazetteer on the castles of Offaly, geology of the county, stained glass windows, flowers of Offaly, bridges – built and natural heritage (Offaly County Council);
- € continue supporting/hosting Tidy Towns competition and the work of various groups (Offaly County Council, Offaly LEADER+);
- € erect appropriate signage and plaques (Offaly County Council);

- € promote the care of key monuments in the county through the use of existing grant schemes, grant aid and conservation plans (Offaly County Council);
- € develop Eco Walks throughout the county to encourage walking and appreciation of the countryside. Provide map and information on the web. Utilise and upgrade existing walks (Offaly County Council, Coillte, Bord na Móna, landowners and communities); and
- € promote the use of imaginative techniques to connect communities with their heritage – e.g. Sculpture in the Parklands (Offaly County Council) (pages 12 – 15).

1.5

OTHER POLICIES RELEVANT TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PUBLIC REALM IN BIRR

At both national and local level there are various other plans and programmes which contain some policies of relevance to the development of the public realm in Birr. These policies and their relevance to the public realm in Birr are discussed below.

In *Sustainable Development: A Strategy for Ireland* (1997), the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government make some suggestions which would have relevance to the public realm of towns across Ireland, including Birr. It suggests that the growth in transport demand is minimised and is incorporated as a leading consideration in land use planning, suggesting that new developments are planned so as to reduce the need to travel by private vehicles, relying more on pedestrian and cycling. It also indicates that more sustainable urban development will be promoted by:

- € closer coordination between transport and land use planning;
- € the promotion of higher residential densities in appropriate locations;
- € emphasis in the proposed new Guidelines on Development Plans on clear demarcation between urban and rural land use; and
- € Local Agenda 21 initiatives by local authorities.

In order to achieve sustainable urban regeneration, policies should contain, as key elements, the following:

- € integrated strategic economic and social planning;
- € ecological principles;
- € improving accessibility;
- € environmental upgrading;
- € design flexibility;
- € open spaces;
- € mechanisms and resources to overcome critical barriers; and
- € a partnership approach.

The Office for Social Inclusion's *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016* (2007) recommends that every child should have access to quality play, sport, recreation and cultural activities to enrich their experience of childhood.

The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government's *National Climate Change Strategy 2007-2012* (2007) supports the key principles of the *National Spatial Strategy*:

- € maximising access to, and encouraging the use of, public transport, cycling and walking; and
- € developing sustainable urban and rural settlement patterns and communities to reduce distances from employment, services and leisure facilities and to make use of existing and future investments in public services.

The *National Biodiversity Plan* (2002), published by the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands, states that it is essential that actions to conserve biodiversity be taken at the local level and that consideration for biodiversity be incorporated into the preparation and adoption of plans and programmes. The Plan also suggests that a Best Practice Guide for Local Authorities be developed which will highlight issues such as using native species and seed stock in tree planting programmes and the employment of other environmentally beneficial practices, such as the cessation of the use of herbicides.

The *National Heritage Plan* (2002), published by the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands, recommends that relevant authorities seize the opportunities provided by economic development to enhance the protection of heritage. It also states that apart from ensuring that human activities avoid or minimise adverse effects on heritage, in many circumstances such activities provide opportunities to maintain and enhance its status. It is also an objective of the Plan to provide increased access to heritage sites and to contribute to the development of sustainable tourism through investment in visitor services at heritage sites.

The *Offaly County Council's Arts Plan 2007-2011* (2007) states that there will be increased efforts to provide for the installation of art in the public realm. To date the amount of art within the public realm has been lower than that in other counties. It is an objective of Offaly County Council and Birr Town Council to rectify this.

1.6

CONCLUSIONS

Under the NDP there are a number of sub-programmes which Birr would be eligible to draw down funding from, notably the Social Infrastructure, Sports, Culture, Heritage and Community Infrastructure Programme and specifically the Community Infrastructure Sub-Programme. The NDP requires that towns

and villages are developed and connected in order to strengthen and support the hubs and gateways.

The NSS suggests that there should be diversification of enterprise, local services and tourism in the area surrounding Birr, while Birr town itself could be strengthened through settlement and planning policies. It also suggests that Birr could be enhanced by physical and townscape improvements and recognises its potential as a tourism centre.

The *Regional Planning Guidelines*, which recognises Birr as a key service town, anticipates large growth within the town over the coming years. It indicates that a strengthened network of towns and villages will support the gateways and thus revitalise the region. The potential of tourism is also emphasised by the *Regional Planning Guidelines*. It suggests that the unique character of the natural and built heritage of Birr should be used in the development of its tourism potential.

The *Tourism Strategy for the Shannon Region 2008 – 2013* and its *Discussion Paper* show that the tourism potential for the region is underdeveloped and not meeting its potential. They recognise that Birr has a potential to significantly increase its tourism industry. The establishment of Birr as a tourist hub is suggested, as is the development of Birr Castle as a tourism attraction. It also suggests the enhancement of the streetscape of the town.

The *Development Plan for Birr and its Environs 2004 – 2010* lists policies and objectives for Birr which are connected with the public realm. It details policies and strategies concerning the provision of open space, the protection and conservation of the historic built environment, conservation of the built and natural environments, tourism, urban renewal, community infrastructure and environmental protection. The Public Realm Strategy is in accordance with the Development Plan.

While not of direct relevance, the *Offaly County Development Plan 2003 – 2009* and the *Draft Offaly County Development Plan 2009 – 2015* are of importance due to their proximity and interconnectedness with the town. These development plans also advocate enhancement through physical and townscape improvements. They are also aware of the potential for the further development of tourism within the region. These development plans emphasise the conservation of the built and natural heritage of the region.

The *Birr Land Use and Transportation Study* suggests the consolidation of the existing built environment and the use of higher densities in association with improved accessibility. The study also indicates areas of the town where access is difficult and where there should be improvements to the pedestrian situation.

Bringing the Future into Focus stipulates that sustainable development should underpin the planning of communities. In order to alleviate social exclusion real barriers to social and economic progress should be removed. It highlights

the conservation of the natural and built heritage, and suggests that sports and leisure facilities can result in balanced lifestyles among the population.

The *Integrated Area Plan for Birr (draft)* recognised the large potential public realm improvements have. Among other things it suggests that back areas should be opened up in order to improve access and to grow the pedestrian and cycling network.

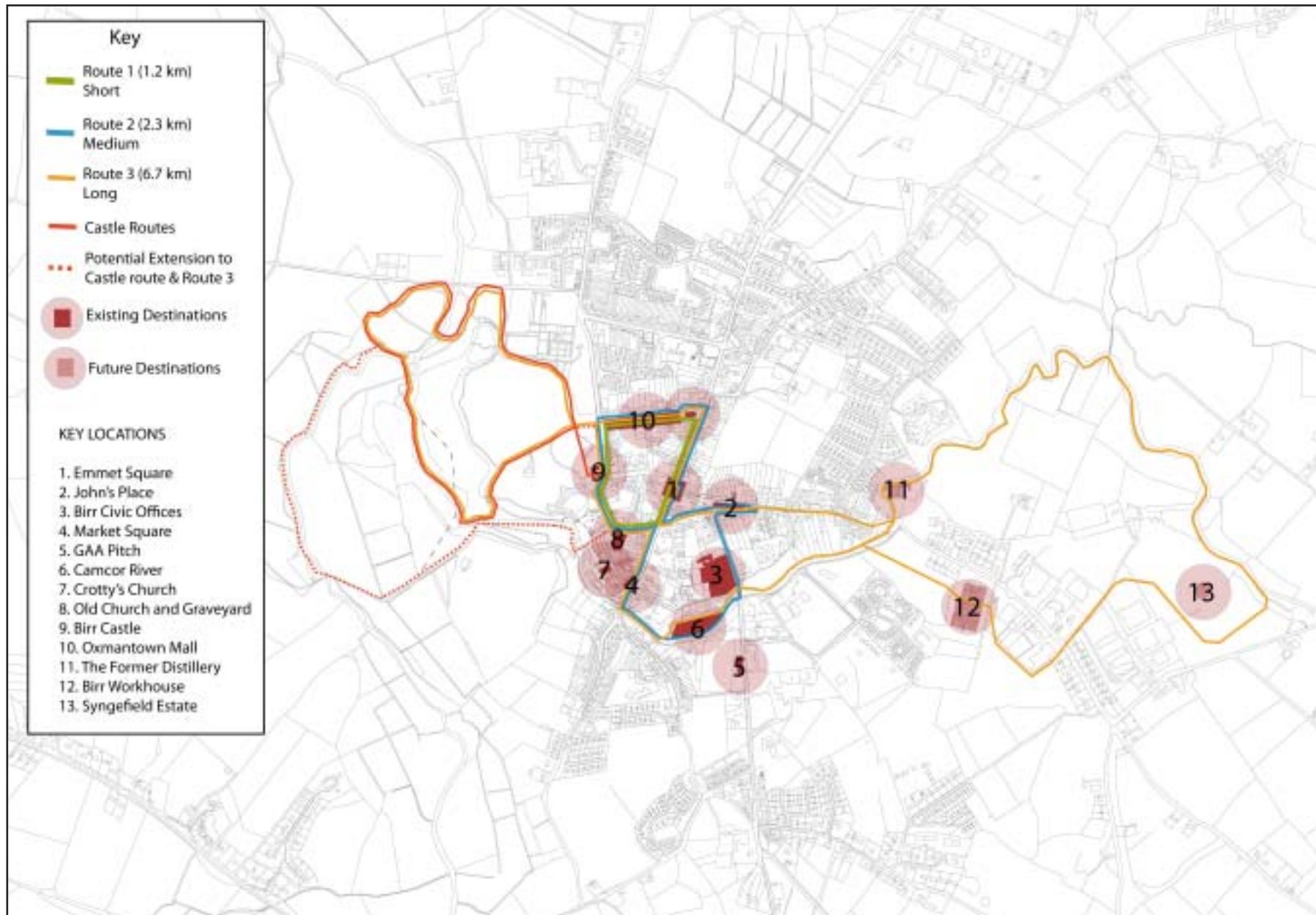
There is also a large scope for the inclusion of *Offaly Heritage Plan* objectives in the Public Realm Strategy. The policies and objectives of the plan advocate the use of the built and natural environment, and that existing features should be maintained and conserved.

The Public Realm Strategy is also in accordance with the

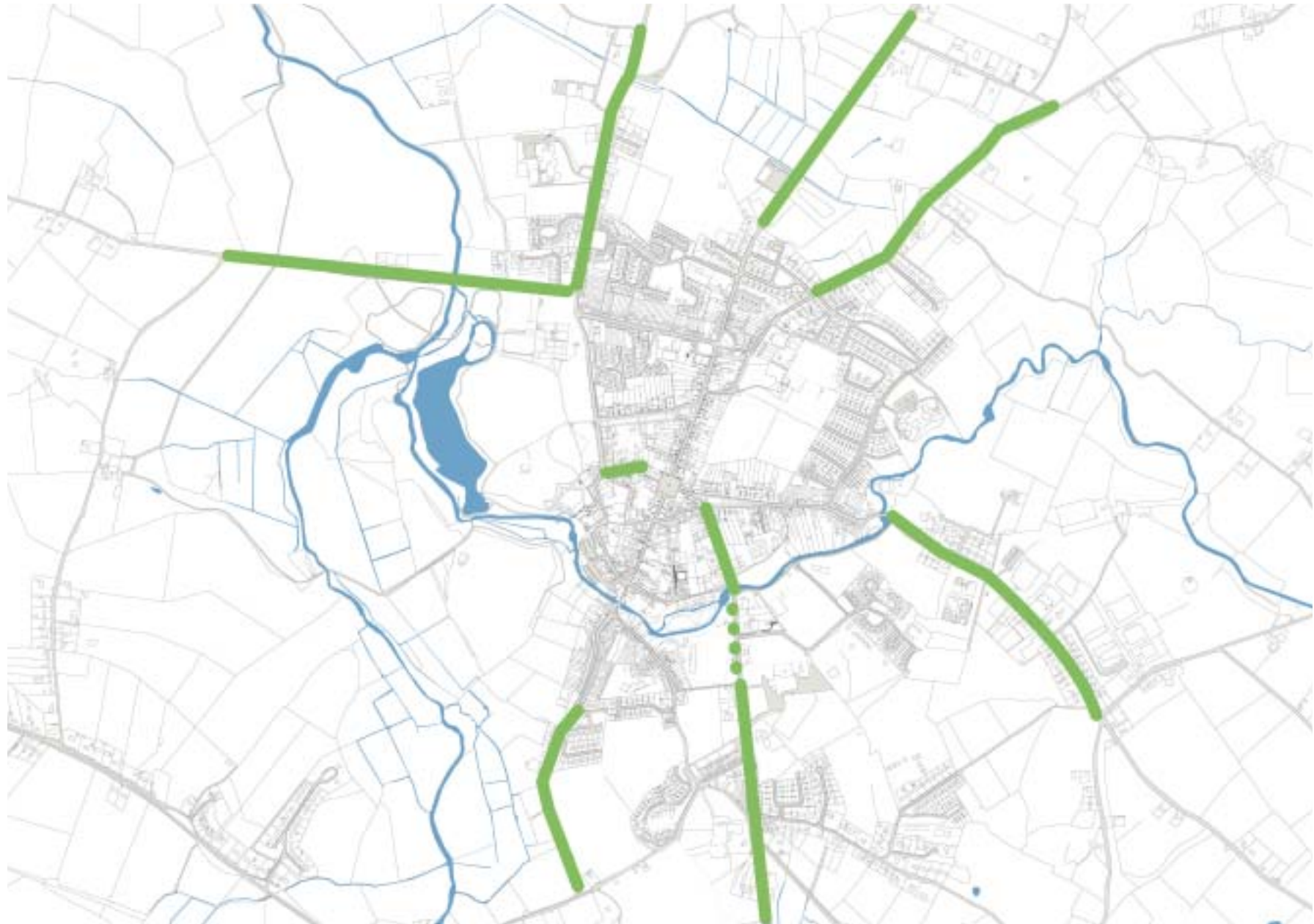
- € *Sustainable Development: A Strategy for Ireland*
- € *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016*
- € *National Climate Change Strategy 2007-2012*
- € *National Biodiversity Plan*
- € *National Heritage Plan*
- € *Offaly County Council's Arts Plan 2007-2011*

plan of proposed tourist trails

102



plan of potential street tree locations



consultation report

104

1. Introduction

This document serves to summarise feedback received from members of the public in response to the Draft Public Realm Plan for Birr.

2. Draft Proposals

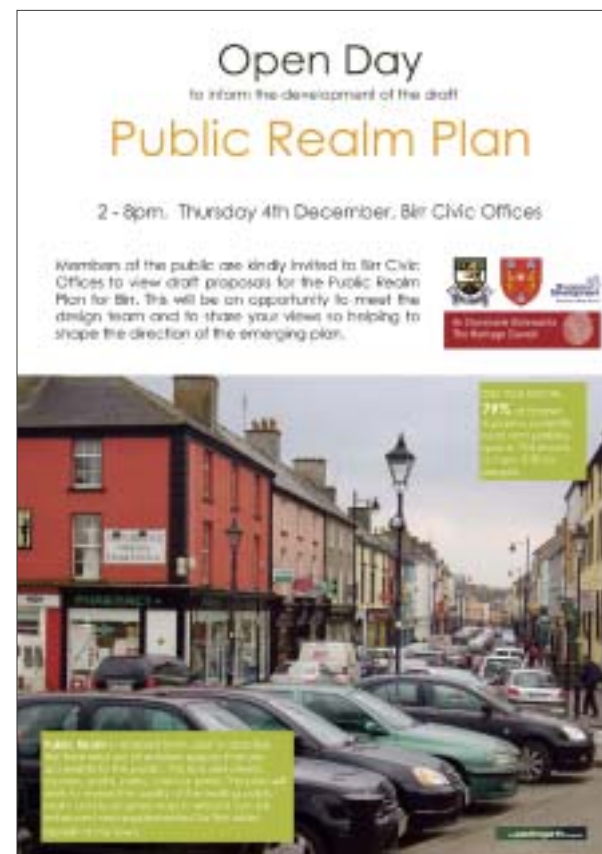
A total of 27 draft proposals have been developed, based on an extensive process of information gathering, client and stakeholder consultation and analysis. They include improved streetscapes, approach roads, lighting, signage and interpretation, as well as site-specific projects to upgrade open spaces such as Camcor River Park, the Castle Walls and the setting of St Brendan's, Church of Ireland.

3. Stakeholder Consultations

During the initial stages of the public realm plan process, consultation meetings were carried out with the following stakeholders. These invaluable sessions, in addition those with the client team, ensured that the plan was prepared with full awareness of the issues and aspirations of each party.

- Birr Town Councillors
- Birr Historical Society
- Birr Tidy Town Committee
- Birr Castle & Demense
- Irish Georgian Society (Birr Chapter)
- National Monuments Service
- West Offaly Partnership

The consultant team wish to thank all who participated in this process.



4. Community Consultation Event

A public open day was held at Birr Civic Offices between 2pm and 8pm on Thursday 4 December 2008. Members of the public were invited to view draft proposals shown as photographs, sketches and plans, mounted on a series of display boards. Members of both the client and consultants teams were on hand to discuss draft proposals with visitors on a one-to-one basis. Feedback was recorded verbally with team members and via written forms completed during and immediately after the event by members of the public. The open day was well attended with a total of 39 people registering their attendance, however, it is estimated that approximately 80 people attended the event in total. A total of 10 written feedback forms and 2 emails were received.



5. Community Consultation Feedback

- a) Sign clutter –most people agreed that sign clutter is a problem for the town’s image and support a programme to remove unnecessary signage.
- b) Maintenance – several comments were made regarding the maintenance and cleanliness of specific areas. In particular, the railings and light fixtures at St. Johns Mall were mentioned. In addition, the maintenance of shop fronts and the amount of derelict properties were noted.
- c) Buses – better location for bus set down and pick up area. Current position within Emmet Square is dangerous and does not work. Better access to public transport within the town is needed.
- d) Rosse Row / Castle Street – most consultees agreed that traffic needed to be slowed down and that a safe cross pedestrian crossing should be designated.
- e) Street Signs – comments were made in support of street signs, preferably in both English and Irish.
- f) Taxi Rank – a dedicated taxi rank was proposed to reduce the impact of pub goers congregating in residential areas, leading to instances of antisocial behaviour.
- g) Town Centre Residents – it was highlighted that the number of people living in the centre of Birr is decreasing and that a forum with remaining residents should be established to prevent further decline.
- h) Main Street - The majority of consultees agreed the traffic needs to be reduced, but there was no consensus as to what degree, i.e. reduce parking or pedestrianise the street. There was some concern of where the displaced cars will park.
- i) Emmet Square – The majority of consultees agreed that Emmet Square is not performing to its fullest potential and would like to see it improved. A reduction in traffic and car parking levels were broadly accepted as the most effective means of doing this, however a opinions differed on the degree to which such reduction should take place. It was suggested that the farmers market could then be moved to Emmet Square. Also, it was understood that improving the square will attract tourists whom visit the castle.
- j) Column restoration – mixed support for railings to be replaced. Concerns about the current gathering around the column.
- k) Approach Roads – most people agreed the approach roads need improvement and supported the idea of planting more trees and removing unnecessary signage. The idea of a gateway sign/sculpture was generally well received.
- l) Architectural facades – two comments made suggesting that business should not use plastic signs within the historical core. Specific references were made of the need to improve the quality of the Gardai Station and the GAA boundary wall.
- m) Connaught Street – two suggestions were made to pedestrianise Connaught Street and another comment about inappropriate shop signs should be replaced.
- n) Cycle scheme – consultees suggested that the Public Realm Plan should locate areas for cycle parking.
- o) Camcor Park – Most people supported the idea of extending Camcor Park. Suggestion that the park plans have provisions for canoes. A garden space opposite the former monastery was suggested for inclusion in the proposals. A delegation in support of a skate park being located in Camcor Park attended the event. Through discussion, it was agreed that if such a facility was located there, it must be well integrated into the park as a whole
- p) Heritage – several comments were made expressing that the Georgian Heritage of Birr needs to be more greatly emphasised, with conservation a key component to the public realm plan.
- q) Arts & Crafts – a suggestion was made that Birr should encourage more arts and crafts studios and outlets, thus becoming a tourism attraction.

guidelines for new development

Introduction

106 The draft Public Realm Plan for Birr sets out a series of proposals to improve the environmental quality of this historic town through its public realm. This includes the upgrading of important urban spaces, such as Emmet Square, Main Street and Birr's Georgian Malls and the improvement to the setting of Birr's key landmarks and architectural features. However, it is also vitally important that the character and quality of Birr is maintained and enhanced when new development occurs, be it brownfield development in existing areas or greenfield development on the periphery of the town.

The public realm has a critical role to play in providing a framework for such new development, providing new linkages and open spaces to complement the town's existing network. If managed incorrectly, new development risks being detrimental to the overall character and quality of this historic town, reducing its value as a place in which to live, work and visit. It is therefore important that the draft Public Realm Plan sets out guidance in relation to the provision and design of new public realm in Birr. The following guidelines identify key considerations in achieving attractive, functional, safe and sustainable public realm.

An example of newly designed neighbourhood space (The Staiths South Bank)



Guidance principles

a. Existing Assets – the design of new development should seek to take advantage of the sites own existing assets, thus adding the uniqueness and character of development. Where possible this should include the retention of on-site features such as old buildings, mature trees or hedgerows. Off-site features can also contribute greatly to the quality of a place, with views to nearby landmarks such as Birr Castle or church towers an asset that should always be harnessed to positive effect.

b. Quality not Quantity – a common misconception is that open space is always a good thing, regardless of its design or distribution. However, the overprovision of open space can have a negative effect, leading to misuse and a maintenance burden. An approach of quality over quantity should be adopted in relation to the provision of new public realm for Birr. Spaces must be designed to a high quality, with a clear understanding of their maintenance requirements and proposed uses.

c. Space Typologies – new open spaces including streets require clear functions assigned to them, thus heightening their relevance and use to the people that live there. This avoids the creation of ‘left over spaces’ that see little use and can become problematic and unsightly. A good tool in defining space typologies is assigning names that define their roles. A public realm language of avenues, boulevards, greens, squares, parks, play areas and wildlife gardens, for example, immediately defines the roles specific open spaces will fulfil. Opportunities for spaces to play more than one role should also be explored, with good design allowing for flexibility of use.

d. Spatial Hierarchies – the relationship of spaces with one another is an important factor to consider, with the introduction of a spatial hierarchy that helps to define the character and ‘legibility’ of new developments. This recognises primary, secondary and tertiary routes and spaces that should be reflected through their scale and design. Inspiration should be sought from the fine urban spaces existent within Birr, characterised by strong spatial definition and well-placed landmark buildings.



e. **Fronts and Backs** – the quality of public spaces, be they parks or streets, is largely formed by their relationship with adjacent buildings. The use, location and design of new buildings in Birr are therefore critically important when considering the quality of its public realm. New buildings should always front onto public space, thus focussing activity levels in public areas helping to keep them safe and lively. Conversely, private areas such as gardens, loading areas and blank walls should be kept to the backs of properties away from areas of public space. This helps to keep them secure and minimises the impact of inactivity on the public realm. This simple but important rule of back-to-back development will greatly contribute to the creation of safe and attractive new public realm in Birr.

f. **Mixed Use** – the distributions of land use have a direct relationship with the quality of public realm, with some uses making a more positive contribution than others. It is therefore important that land use planning decisions are made with the public realm in mind, so that the public spaces that are created are safe and enjoyable places to be. In built up areas, a mixture of uses is desirable to activate the public realm through different times of the day and night. In central parts of Birr, the benefits of this can be clearly seen. Further out of town, large industrial or commercial premises that make little positive contribution to public realm can, for example, be located in the centre of large urban blocks, so that smaller more active units wrap around them. This technique can also be applied to areas of car parking.

g. Biodiversity – open spaces have a critical role to play in providing habitats for wildlife, often important in mitigating the impact of green field development. New development must therefore seek to contribute to the increase of biodiversity through the provision of diverse open spaces suitable to a range of plants, animals and birds. To ensure this provision is more than a token gesture, an understanding of the ecology of the site and its surroundings should inform the process of design. Successful establishment of wildlife areas also contribute to educational opportunity and character of the new development.

h. Design for People – all development must balance the requirements of different users and transport modes, including pedestrians, cyclists and car users. Good public realm as part of a sustainable development must encourage walking as a form of transport and discourage the unnecessary use of cars for short journeys. This is achieved through the provision of good quality connections between areas of housing and commercial areas that are safe and attractive to use during the day and evening. Parking provision must also be located in areas that are safe and visible to deter crime, whilst minimising their visual impact

i. Material Considerations – the quality of the public realm must be considered to detailed level of design and specification. A palette of public realm materials should be prepared to enable a consistent approach to the design of streets and open spaces in Birr (to be provided by the Public Realm Plan). Such consistency contributes to the aesthetic quality of the town’s public realm as well as aiding maintenance regimes. Hard and soft landscape materials must be of good quality and well constructed to ensure longevity.

j. Managing Lively Places – the management and maintenance of public realm once constructed is a vital element in ensuring its sustainability and continued relevance to the local people. Adequate resourcing must be allocated to ensure that the public realm is maintained to a sufficiently high level, with opportunities to involve local residents in this process. The use of open spaces for local events and activities should also be encouraged and promoted, thus maximising their value to residents and the town as a whole.



The design and condition of building frontages have a direct influence on the character and quality of the adjacent public realm. Inappropriate building frontages negatively impact the wider area, especially those in prominent locations, such as road junctions or high ground. Whilst the majority of buildings in the town centre are in private ownership, mechanisms to improve detrimental frontages should be pursued.

Appropriate building frontages can be described through several sets of issues: general façade maintenance, façade design, signage, window appropriateness, roof maintenance, landscaping and derelict buildings. General façade maintenance deals with the cosmetic issues, such as overall cleanliness. Wall finishes appropriate to the building's architectural style are also important. Painting a building regularly is another simple issue in general façade maintenance. Window repairs are also important as broken windows convey a negative image to passers-by. Ancillary equipment causes visual clutter on a building façade, thus any elements not currently in use, such as signage hardware, should be removed. Window fan units, especially in historic buildings, clash strongly with the character of frontages. Overhead cabling is another visual clutter on a historic streetscape. Also, invading vegetation can not only damage a building, but convey neglect. As every building is different, there are sometimes issues unique to a particular building that relate to its general façade maintenance which also need to be addressed.

Façade design encompasses another set of issues. Appropriate design depends on the building's use and style. Ireland is particularly well known for its attractive traditional shopfronts, featuring wood detailing and hand-painted signs. Avoiding garish or unattractive colours is important. Scale and proportion are also important. Historic shop fronts, for example, are generally small in scale and follow particular proportion in regards to the sizes of windows, doors, fascia, etc.

While modern construction should not seek to imitate historic frontages, it should keep the essential elements of a good frontage and blend well with its surroundings. Appropriate materials are also important in the design of a façade, and materials uncharacteristic to a building's style or time period should generally be avoided.

Signage is another important component of appropriate building frontages. By its very nature, signage is meant to attract attention, however it is important to ensure that signage does not clash or overwhelm the streetscape. One of the most important elements of appropriate signage is having a high-quality design and colour. Placement of signs is vitally important, particularly in buildings with multiple businesses. In such cases, multiple signs should be placed in an orderly and coherent fashion and the number of signs on a building frontage kept to a minimum to reduce visual clutter and be regularly maintained. Window displays in shops should also be orderly and attractive.

Windows appropriate to a building's style are desirable. Roofs should also be regularly maintained along with any landscaping fronting a building. Any derelict buildings should be addressed as soon as possible to mitigate the damaging effects of dereliction on the town.

These issues can be used as guidelines to both improve existing building frontages in Birr and direct the development of new ones. This will require the establishment of close working relationships between landowners, Birr Town Council and other stakeholders. The following pages show images from Birr which exemplify the issues discussed here. Additionally, the Public Realm Plan has mapped town centre frontages, highlighting those that display elements that are detrimental to the quality and character of adjacent public realm.

I. General Facade Maintenance

a. Overall Cleanliness

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Rosse Row: Mold/mildew stains on window sill and wall



Emmet Square: Stained masonry facade

b. Wall Finishes



John's Place: Historic Georgian house most likely needs to be rendered



Courthouse: Wall finish chipping away on the facade

c. Painting



Connaught Street: Painting peeling off facade

d. Window Repairs



Emmet Street: Broken window on Georgian facade



John's Place: Broken window on Georgian facade

e. Ancillary Equipment



Emmet Square: Window fan unit undermines visual integrity



Main Street: Leftover hardware causes visual clutter



Townsend Street: Multiple antennas visible from the street

f. Overhead Cabling



Townsend Street: Cabling causing visual clutter



Main Street: Cabling causing visual clutter

g. Invading Vegetation



Market Square: Vegetation invading gutters



Main Street: Vegetation invading shop fronts

h. Other



Townsend Street: Gate needing repair

II. Facade Design

a. Style



John's Place: Unengaging facade in prominent location



Castle Street: Blank, unengaging facade on way to Castle

b. Colours



Market Square: Potentially inappropriate colours

c. Scale & Proportion



Main Street: Taller shop front breaks building line



Main Street: Taller shop front breaks building line

d. Materials



Emmet Square: Stone cladding inappropriate

III. Signage

a. Design & Colour



Main Street: Lettering too large for fascia



Main Street: Large, busy sign conflicts with surroundings



Main Street: Large lettering clashes with architecture

b. Placement



Emmet Street: Disorganised placement of signs

c. Maintenance



Main Street: Signage needing maintenance



Main Street: Signage needing maintenance

d. Additional Signage



Main Street: Additional signage causing visual clutter

e. Display Orderliness



Main Street: Disorderly window display

IV. Window Appropriateness

V. Roof Maintenance

VI. Landscaping

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Main Street: Inappropriate window type



Townsend Street: Home needing roof maintenance



Rosse Row: Homes needing roof maintenance



Emmet Square: building needing roof maintenance



John's Place: House with overgrown, untended vegetation



Castle Street

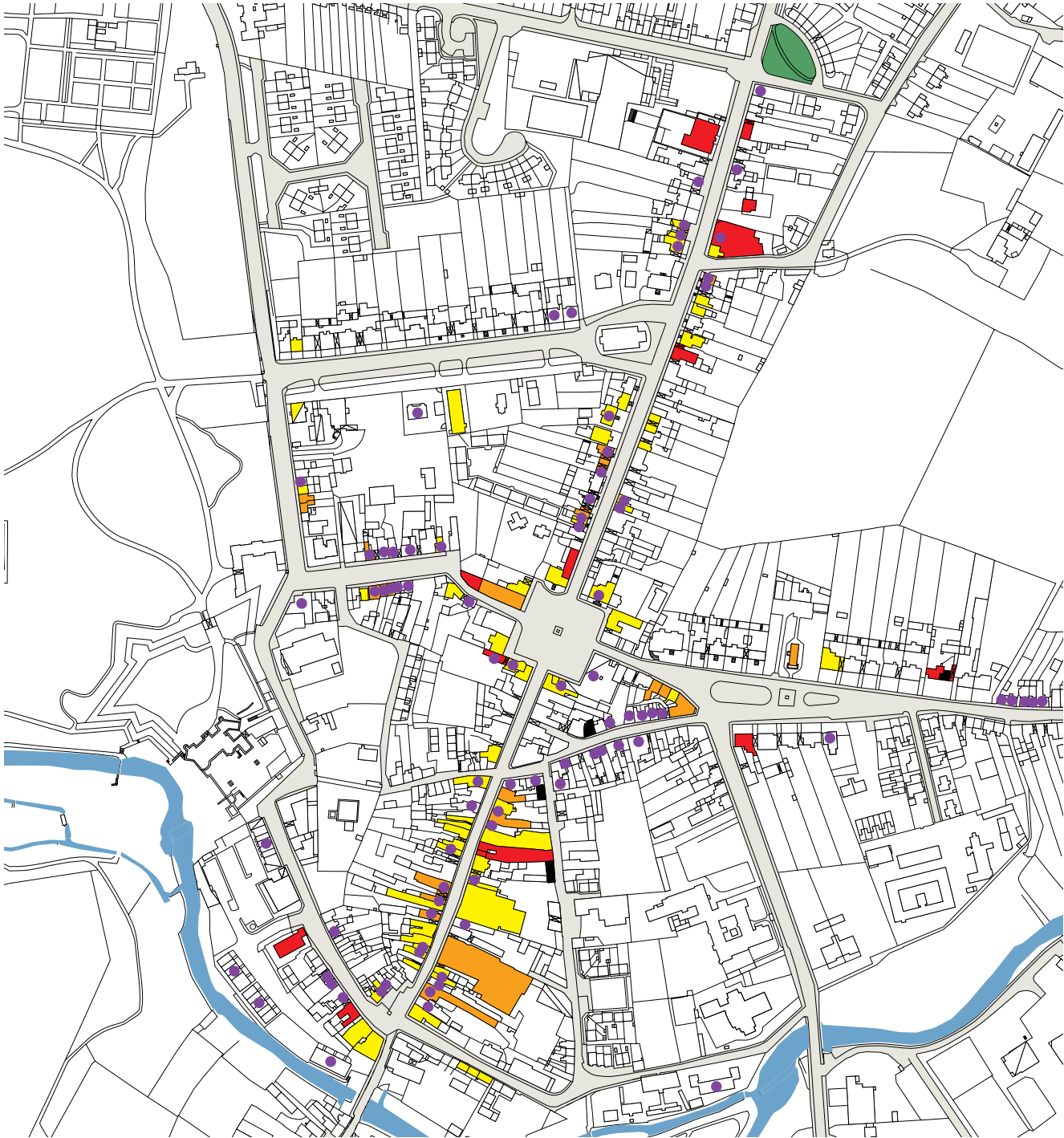


John's Place




VII. Derelict Buildings



Market Square



Key

-  **High Priority**
4 or more issues
-  **Medium Priority**
3 issues
-  **Low Priority**
2 or fewer issues
-  **Inappropriate Windows**

