

OFFALY COUNTY DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2020-2026 (CONSULTATION SUBMISSION)

Proposed Objective ‘ That the prestige of Tullamore as the County Town of Offaly be enhanced by the protection of its built heritage and the fostering of new high quality architecture’

Introduction

One hundred years ago, Tullamore was a large village. Today, it is, by European standards, a mid sized town. Fifty years hence, as it becomes a more important location for business and administration, it may have become a small city. It is appropriate to now begin to consider how Tullamore should present itself as the civic capital of Offaly and an important economic driver of the Midland region rivalling and possibly outstripping Athlone, Mullingar and Portlaoise. The review process of the County Plan gives the opportunity to envisage the role that the built heritage of the principal town might play in that transformation.

Policy Background

National policy ¹ seeks to develop cities and towns of sufficient scale and quality to compete internationally and to be drivers of national and regional growth, investment and prosperity. This will require their rejuvenation as environmental assets that can accommodate changing roles and functions, with increased residential population and employment activity and enhanced levels of amenity and design quality, in order to sustainably influence and support their surrounding area’.

This approach is reiterated and enlarged by the regional strategy² which sees Tullamore as a ‘**Key Town**’ and economic driver of the County and Midlands area and as a Tourism Hub whose consolidation and regeneration will be a key priority. Future Development Plans will be required to identify opportunity sites for town centre renewal- the redevelopment of the Grand Canal Harbour being identified as the most important project.

This new emphasis on design quality should be reflected in the new County Plan, particularly in relation to the future development of Tullamore as the County capital. This approach would then be fleshed out in detail in the policies and objectives to be pursued as part of the forthcoming Tullamore Municipal Area Development Plan 2020-2026.

¹ Project Ireland 2040- National Planning Framework Government of Ireland 2018

² Eastern and Midlands Region Spatial and Economic Strategy 2019-2031

Exemplars

In considering the role that architecture and civic design might play in the future of Tullamore as the capital of County Offaly, it is useful to examine how the national capital itself utilises its own built heritage as an asset in its future development.

The current plan for Dublin³ considers that:

' Built Heritage contributes significantly to the city's identity, to the collective memory of its community and to the richness and diversity of its urban fabric. The street pattern, local architectural features, the form of the buildings and spaces, civic buildings within set pieces of urban design and the industrial buildings of traditional enterprises, all contribute to the city's character, identity and authenticity and together form a key social, cultural and economic asset for the development of the city'.

As the National Capital, Dublin City Council promotes architectural and civic design projects which enhance its prestige and status in the eyes of visitors and investors and has brought forward a suite of coherent plans with specific and costed goals to achieve this. These are intended to display a modernising city but yet one which cherishes and celebrates its older buildings and spaces.

Conceived within a totally integrated plan, projects such as the development of Parnell Square as a cultural quarter, the redevelopment of Georges Quay/Tara Street as a modern business district and the pedestrianisation of much of the south city centre, all arise from the proposition that the city is as much a three dimensional cultural artefact as a piece of sculpture or a painting and which needs to be considered as an entity to deliver a more beautiful ambience for its citizens and visitors.

This was also the intention in Tullamore of the late 18th century when Lord Charleville using the opportunity of the balloon fire, laid out fine streets which gave a sense of order and grandeur while some of the best architects of the day were employed to provide significant public buildings -all with the intention of making Tullamore the county town of Offaly. His investment paid off when the county administration eventually moved from Philipstown in 1835.

It is time to adopt this approach once again and to use this review to begin to envisage and create an enhanced image for Tullamore as the dynamic capital of County Offaly and a dominant player in the Midlands Region.

³ Dublin City Development Plan 2016-2022

The architectural heritage of Tullamore today

The recent publication of the latest edition of the '*Buildings of Ireland*⁴ series gives an objective and professional overview of the architectural heritage of Offaly generally and Tullamore in particular.

The guide commences by noting that Tullamore is '*A thriving market and county town which retains many fine Georgian buildings. In the 19thc. high-quality commercial and institutional buildings were built. More than usually confident early 20c. buildings followed and a mid-c20 hospital. Offaly County Council's offices are one of the most significant early c21 buildings in the region*'.

Though many new buildings were erected from the 1960s onward, including the aforementioned County Offices (2002) by Ahrends, Burton and Koralek, few are singled out for commendation. The interior of the Church of the Assumption by Edward N. Smith and Partners (1986) is described as '*A strikingly engineered structure of laminated pine crucks, engaged to the side walls to form unconventional arcades, and reaching up between the clerestory windows to the apex of the nave. The effect is of effortless grace and strength*'. The extension to the Midlands Hospital (2007) by O'Connell Mahon and Murray O'Laoire, LLOYD Town Park by Murray Associates and Colaiste Choilm (2012) by Coady Partnership Architects are also noted. However no other modern buildings receive a commendation and recent significant projects such as the three canal bridges, are unmentioned.

Regrettably, during the same period, important buildings and artefacts such as the magnificent Clonaslee stone facade of Williams store in Patrick Street by architect Michael Scott and its Sean O'Sullivan murals was lost, George Wilkinson's workhouse (1841) and the Grand Canal Hotel (1801) demolished and the facade of Richard Castle's Barrack Masters House (c.1735) in High Street, concealed.

The Tullamore Street Enhancement Scheme which is currently under construction, will provide significant improvements in the public realm of the town-particularly in O'Connor Square- and its completion may be the catalyst for an increased awareness of the character and setting of the town's architectural heritage.

⁴ 'The Buildings of Ireland- Central Leinster, Kildare Laois and Offaly. Andrew Tierney. Yale University Press 2019

Future Actions

The responsibility for protecting the built heritage and ensuring architectural excellence in Tullamore will fall to the members and executives of Tullamore Municipal Council, implementing the policies and objectives of their 2020-2026 Development Plan.

Presumably the new plan will employ the statutory devices available for the protection and improvement of the built heritage such as the identification of Architectural Conservation Areas, the preparation of Urban Framework Plans and Local Area Plans as well as Vacant Site designation, but the essential first step should be a professional evaluation of the historic building stock of the town to determine its importance and significance, its use and condition and its potential future.

This study should be accompanied by a visual analysis determining the areas of coherent architectural character which need to be preserved or are capable of exploitation. It might also identify the locations where new buildings could add to the appearance of the town and the sites which presently create disamenity by virtue of dereliction, poor maintenance or sheer ugliness and whose improvement is essential.

Conclusion

In order therefore :

(a) to ensure an uninterrupted and coherent linkage between National and Regional policies and the forthcoming development plan of the Tullamore Municipal Council and

(b) to indicate that an improvement in the presentation and improvement of the architectural heritage of Tullamore is a countywide concern,

it would be appropriate for the new County plan to contain a supportive objective requiring that:

'The prestige of Tullamore as the County town of Offaly be enhanced by the protection of its built heritage and the fostering of high quality architecture'