

Portarlington Joint Local Area Plan 2024 – 2030

Submission from the Portarlington Business Association ('PBA')

1. Introduction and background

a. The Portarlington Business Association

The Portarlington Business Association ('PBA') was set up in March 2021 as a company limited by guarantee with a board of directors. The board includes Bernie Bracken, Dermot Daniels, Matt Dunne and Michael Turley each of whom has a keen interest in the town's economic and community development.

The main object of the PBA is to advance community and economic development, including urban and rural regeneration, in Portarlington and its hinterland.

Subsidiary objects include:

- (i) representing members and developing relationships with LCC and OCC, state bodies, community development and voluntary bodies; and
- (ii) establishing committees on strategic policies and working groups on economic and other development.

b. This submission

The PBA has prepared this document as its submission for the Joint Local Area Plan 2024-30.

c. PBA's vision for Portarlington

The PBA's vision for Portarlington is for a prosperous town that is a pleasant place to live and work for all making the most of its location and heritage.

2. Urban regeneration

a. The Portarlington Regeneration Strategy 2030 (the 'Strategy')

The main objective of the Strategy is "to create a more viable and visually attractive Town Centre in Portarlington for residents, visitors and workers through the appropriate rehabilitation of the Market House and other buildings and improvements to connectivity, public realm and amenities".

Underpinning this objective is the desire to ultimately regenerate the town centre by tackling critical issues such as poor pedestrian environment, dereliction and dysfunctional public spaces. This overall vision also includes increasing the attractiveness of the area to encourage investment.

The PBA is keen to see the work undertaken so far to be continued and developed.

b. Market House

The restoration and rejuvenation of the Market House is a key part of the Strategy and the PBA welcomes the progress with contractors currently on site to be completed in 2024.

c. Market Square

The Strategy proposes to remake the Market Square as a place which is usable as a public amenity and event space. Existing traffic movements would be reconfigured within the square to increase the usable space provided to pedestrians while still providing turning movements required for vehicles.

It also proposes to rationalise design in the public realm to eliminate clutter and to design street surfaces, landscape features, and traffic management interventions in a coordinated and strategic approach, aimed at improving the look of private properties via a council framework within the public realm.

The PBA supports key interventions including:

- reinforcement of the visual and physical connection to the Church of Ireland site and the architectural landmark of the Savoy Cinema;
- reduce the number of car parking spaces and move same to alternative, more appropriate locations;
- optimise the use of space to feature outdoor dining elements and a variety of standing and seating areas;
- provision of a significant civic event space within the historic town core as a venue for markets, small concerts, etc.; and
- better integration of Main Street and French Church Street and St. Paul's and St Michael's Churches.

d. Cinema

The Savoy Cinema is an integral part of the Market Square and needs to be renovated also. The PBA understands that the Port Art Collective has commissioned a feasibility report to see if it can be used as a centre for the arts community. The PBA would be in favour of such a solution.

e. Main Street

The PBA notes the great improvements made to Main Street with façade enhancement schemes, undergrounding of cables, resurfacing pavements and road, installation of litter bins, etc.

Further enhancement can be made on Main Street by tackling dereliction (e.g., Old AIB building) and installing street furniture and planting trees, etc.

f. Public Realm

The PBA is keen to see further improvement to the public realm that were identified in the Strategy carried out. These include:

- provision of outdoor dining areas and animating building forecourts;
- designated pedestrian crossings;
- developing a lighting strategy for the town;
- developing a wayfinding and signage strategy for the town;
- enhancing the connecting streets through use of consistent paving materials, street furniture, lighting, and signage;
- identifying new car parking spaces, re-surface existing carparks with permeable surfaces; and
- creating and/ or improving existing linkages to River Walk, Derryounce, Emo Court and Lea Castle.

3. Carparking

a. Background

Vehicular access and parking are vitally important to the businesses in the town. Currently, car parking is provided on Main Street, Market Square, Peoples' Park and Community Centre with private parking also provided by traders off the Link Road (e.g., Centra).

There is a need to review current parking arrangements with a view to reducing/ repositioning parking (except disabled parking) away from public realm spaces (Market Square and Main Street) to facilitate greater use by public / pedestrians / cyclists and for events (e.g., markets, festivals and concerts).

b. Existing carparks

The current situation is that several of the existing car parks on Link Road are congested with cars parked all day on certain weekdays and Saturdays, which makes it difficult for customers to access the businesses on the Main Street.

The situation needs to be ameliorated by the introduction of charging for cars parked more than 2 hours close to Main Street, with all-day parking provided further away (e.g., beside the Community Centre). It would also be important that such parking charges are enforced by traffic wardens.

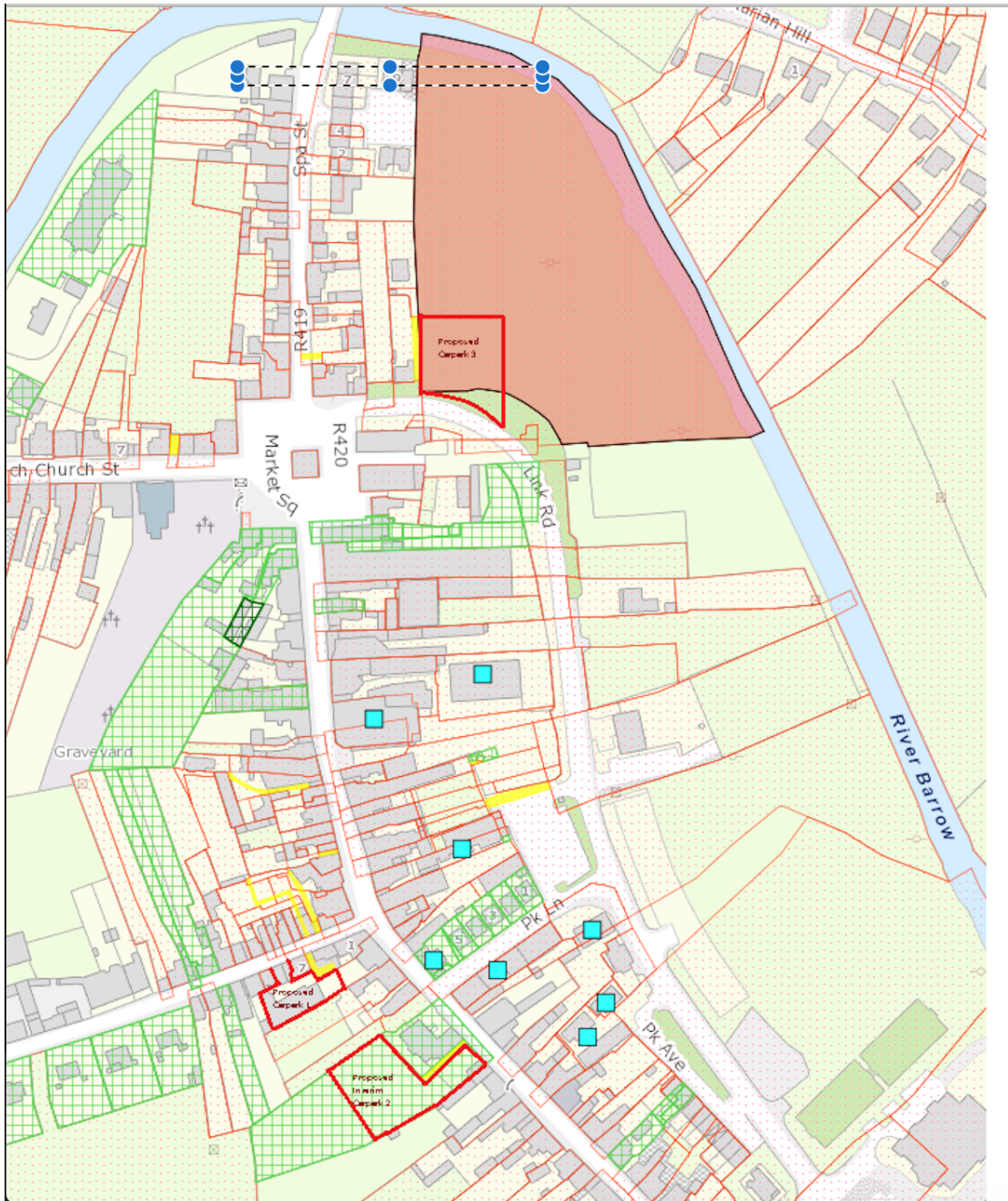
c. New car parking spaces

Following consultation with traders on Main Street, 3 possible sites for additional parking within the immediate environs were identified as follows:

Carpark 1: Foxcroft Street – this current building has circa 30 feet frontage onto Foxcroft Street with a pedestrian entrance into circa 0.25 acres of “unused land” to the rear. With a capacity of circa 50 cars this would help ease the traffic congestion in this part of town.

Carpark 2: Upper Main Street (rear of former AIB bank) proposed Carpark 2 – circa 0.5 acres, zoned Town Centre, available as interim carpark pending development of the site. This area is essential for the businesses located on Upper Main Street end of town.

Carpark 3: Link Road, Portarlinton – 0.5 acres, zoned Town Centre, ideal carpark serving the regenerated Market Square / Main Street/ French Church Street end of town.



The PBA is of the view that replacement car parking in these new car parks must come before valuable carparking spaces are eliminated on Main Street and Market Square or elsewhere.

d. Charging

The PBA would be in favour of car parking charges for over 2 hours in the Town Centre with the provision of free all-day parking in areas such as beside the Community Centre with funds raised from the charges to be applied to improve amenities within the town.

4. Traffic and congestion

a. Traffic calming measures

There are several main national roads converging on Market Square (R420, R419, R423) with a high level of HVG and other traffic through Market Square, which seriously impacts on its value as public realm.

There is regular traffic congestion in Town Centre, particularly from cars crossing town via the Barrow Bridge and Market Square to take children to and from schools on Station Road, Sandy Lane and Coláiste Íosagáin.

Any actions that can be taken to reduce the HGV traffic and speed in the town would be welcomed.

b. Increase active travel (particularly to/from schools)

The PBA is in favour of reducing vehicular traffic in the town by increasing active travel (walking and cycling), particularly to and from the schools in the town. This means the increased provision of safe pedestrian paths and cycleways with increased permeability between housing estates in the town.

In the JLAP 2018-2024, a potential new road was marked on the map from Riverside to Ballymorris Manor. The PBA considers that it is unlikely that that road will be constructed any time soon.

Instead, the PBA proposes that a new cycleway/ pedestrian path be built with a bridge over the Barrow close to the existing railway embankment/ bridge from Ballymorris Manor to Riverside to allow many of the thousand students who go across the Barrow River each day to attend secondary school in Coláiste Íosagáin and the hundreds of children who travel in the other direction to attend the primary schools.

Consideration should be given to a 'Velo' scheme where people can hire bikes in key locations such as the Railway Station, Market Square, Leisure Centre, Library, St Michael's Catholic Church, Coláiste Íosagáin, etc.

c. Gateways

The arrival experience should be designed to make first impressions of Portarlinton as positive as possible. This should include:

- keeping signage to a minimum to avoid an unattractive and cluttered appearance;
- planting street trees to contain the visual experience on arrival and screening unsightly buildings / unused ground;
- floral displays to introduce colour and seasonal display/ interest;

- boundary walls/ fences to be maintained and kept in good condition which requires cooperation of private landowners; and
- gateway locations within the public realm should be improved with planting, surface treatment, lighting and site-specific artworks that welcome people to Portarlington.

5. Anti-social behaviour

a. Dereliction/ vacant sites

The PBA notes that dereliction in Portarlington has been reduced by façade enhancement schemes and vacant property refurbishment grants for the renovation of properties, etc.

There is still an unacceptable level of dereliction in the town (e.g., Old AIB on Main Street), however, which means a constant need for the Councils to tackle this issue by applying the Derelict Sites Act 1990.

b. Littering/ bins

The PBA notes that the provision of litter bins on the Main Street have improved the situation. However, bins also need to be provided in other areas in the town.

A constant issue of dumping of household refuse on private property in the Town Centre and fly tipping locations on the edge of town on Bog Road (Co Offaly) for example. There is a need, therefore, for enforcement of waste removal regulations.

c. Petty crime

Unfortunately, there is an unacceptable level of petty crime (e.g., shoplifting and vandalism) in the town. As there is little or no Garda presence, there is no effective policing of the issue.

d. Enforcing parking regulations

There is a need for better enforcement of parking regulations in the town. This is not helped as parking wardens are wearing body cams, which means they do not attend the primary schools when children are leaving school.

6. Housing

a. Increase in affordable rentable property

There is a need for increased availability of affordable rental properties in the town. PBA members report that young employees are moving to live in other towns such as Portlaoise to find accommodation.

b. Balance of social housing/ social dumping

The Councils need to ensure that an over provision of social housing in Portarlington relative to private housing does not lead to high levels of social dumping in the town.

7. Economic development

a. Tourism/ accommodation/ hospitality/ heritage/ art & culture/ events

The PBA considers that tourism is totally under-developed in Portarlington. For example, there is no overnight accommodation or restaurant in the town for visitors. There is potential to promote the heritage (e.g., Huguenot heritage) of the town more.

The PBA would also be in favour of more events such as:

- a weekly farmers' market;
- seasonal markets (e.g., Christmas Fair, food fairs, etc.);
- festivals (e.g., French Festival and fun fairs);
- performing arts (concerts, street theatre performances, lighting shows, fleadh, etc.); and
- public congregation (e.g., welcoming teams that win finals etc.).

Pop up anchorage facilities should be provided for traders/ musicians/ performers to quickly set up stalls/ stages/ platforms/ marquees, power and lighting points, water taps, refuse disposal facilities, pop up seating, inflatable stages etc. in the Market Square and Main Street.

The PBA would be supportive of projects receiving funding for economic development under the Just Transition funds.

b. Long term strategy centred on railway station/ reverse commuting/ remote working

The PBA would recommend that Laois County Council undertakes a study to examine the economic potential of Portarlington Railway Station and surrounding urban area.

The PBA would be in full agreement with and support a proposal to develop a Buildings, Spatial and Economic Masterplan ('BESM') for the Portarlington Railway Station and urban area within 15 minutes' walk of the station.

We would regard a BSEM as essential to plan the future opportunities for the 5–15 minutes walking zone from the station (including the site itself) and build on the low carbon travel links from the site.

In addition, we would suggest that Portarlinton Railway Station be promoted as a 'gateway' for visitors / tourists and access to the Barrow Blueway, Emo Court, Lea Castle and Derryounce and to learn about the Huguenot heritage in the town etc.

The PBA is ready and willing to participate in any project liaison group that is established as part of such a project.

c. Support local traders/ businesses (e.g., Christmas tree/ lighting, events)

The PBA is in favour of and welcomes initiatives that support local traders and businesses (e.g. Christmas lighting on Main Street and Square), events that bring more people into the Market Square etc.

d. Town twinning

Portarlinton has now been twinned with Redessan in the south of France and the PBA is in favour of developing relations with that town with regular exchange visits and activities.

8. Infrastructure

a. Relief road(s)

The PBA is of the view that relief roads are required in the longer term to the north and south of the town to take traffic (particularly HGV) away from the Town Centre and Market Square.

b. Water/ sewerage

The water pressure and sewerage system in the Droughill area is in urgent need of upgrade as it is not fit-for-purpose as is and there are plans for a significant number of new houses in the area, which will compound the problem.

There is also a problem with severe limescale in the water in Portarlinton, which causes problems for domestic appliances etc.

9. Social inclusion

a. Town taxi service for disabled

The town needs a taxi service to enable disabled and elderly people to leave home for medical appointments, to go shopping, to attend church services and go out for an evening's entertainment.

b. Improved mobility for elderly/ disabled/ young children in town

Footpaths and entrances should be reviewed for improved access wheelchair bound and elderly people and people with young children in prams or on bicycles/ scooters.