

Clara Town Centre First Plan

Ár dTodhchaí
Tuaithe
Our Rural
Future



Rialtas na
hÉireann
Government
of Ireland

Tionscadal Éireann
Project Ireland
2040



Comhairle Chontae Uíbh Fhailí
Offaly County Council



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Prepared By: RMLA

Status: Final

Date: June 2023

Preface

“The Town Centre First policy aims to create town centres that function as viable, vibrant and attractive locations for people to live, work and visit, while also functioning as the service, social, cultural and recreational hub for the local community.”

Town Centre First - A Policy Approach for Irish Towns

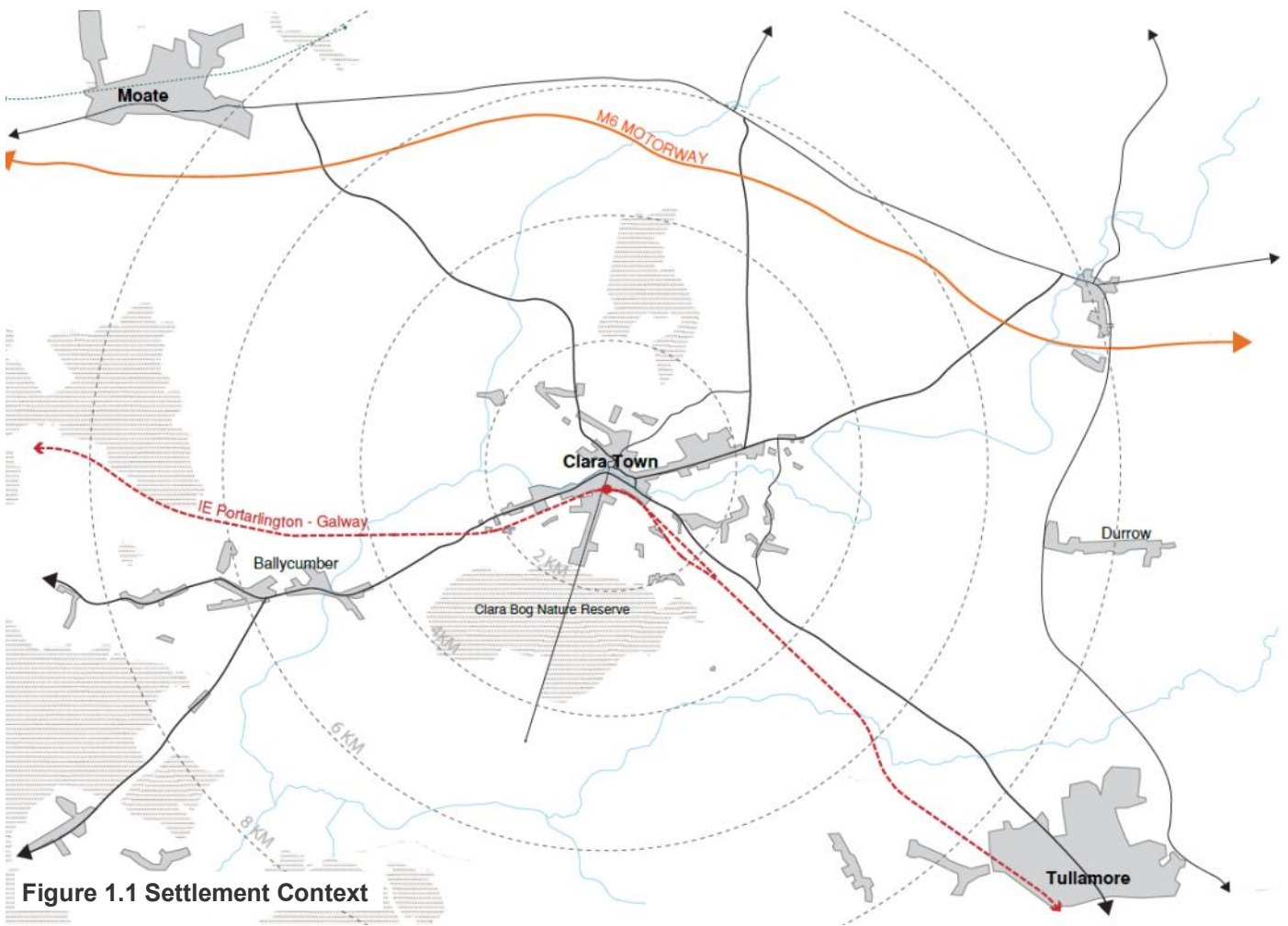
Introduction

Clara is located within the north west area of County Offaly and is situated on the River Brosna. As recorded by the 2016 Census, the town had a population of 3,336 persons. Clara has a strategic location within the Midlands with proximity to the settlements of Athlone to the north west and Tullamore to the south east which are designated as a 'Regional Growth Centre' and 'Key Town' respectively within the Eastern and Midland Region RSES.

Clara is situated on a plain which provides the origin of its meaning in Irish, being '*Clóirtheach*'. Of significance is the Clara Bog Nature Reserve which is renowned ecologically having been previously nominated for UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

The town has a rich industrial history which is largely associated with the Goodbody family who moved to Clara in 1825. The family introduced industry to the town and a long association began with the textiles sector and the development of the country's largest jute factory. Today, the town continues to provide important service and employment functions for its residents and wider hinterland areas.

This Town Centre First Plan for Clara (hereafter 'the Plan') has been prepared by RMLA, Urban Agency and SYSTRA in line with the Town Centre First policy brought forward by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Department of Rural and Community Development.



Clara Town Centre First - Study Area

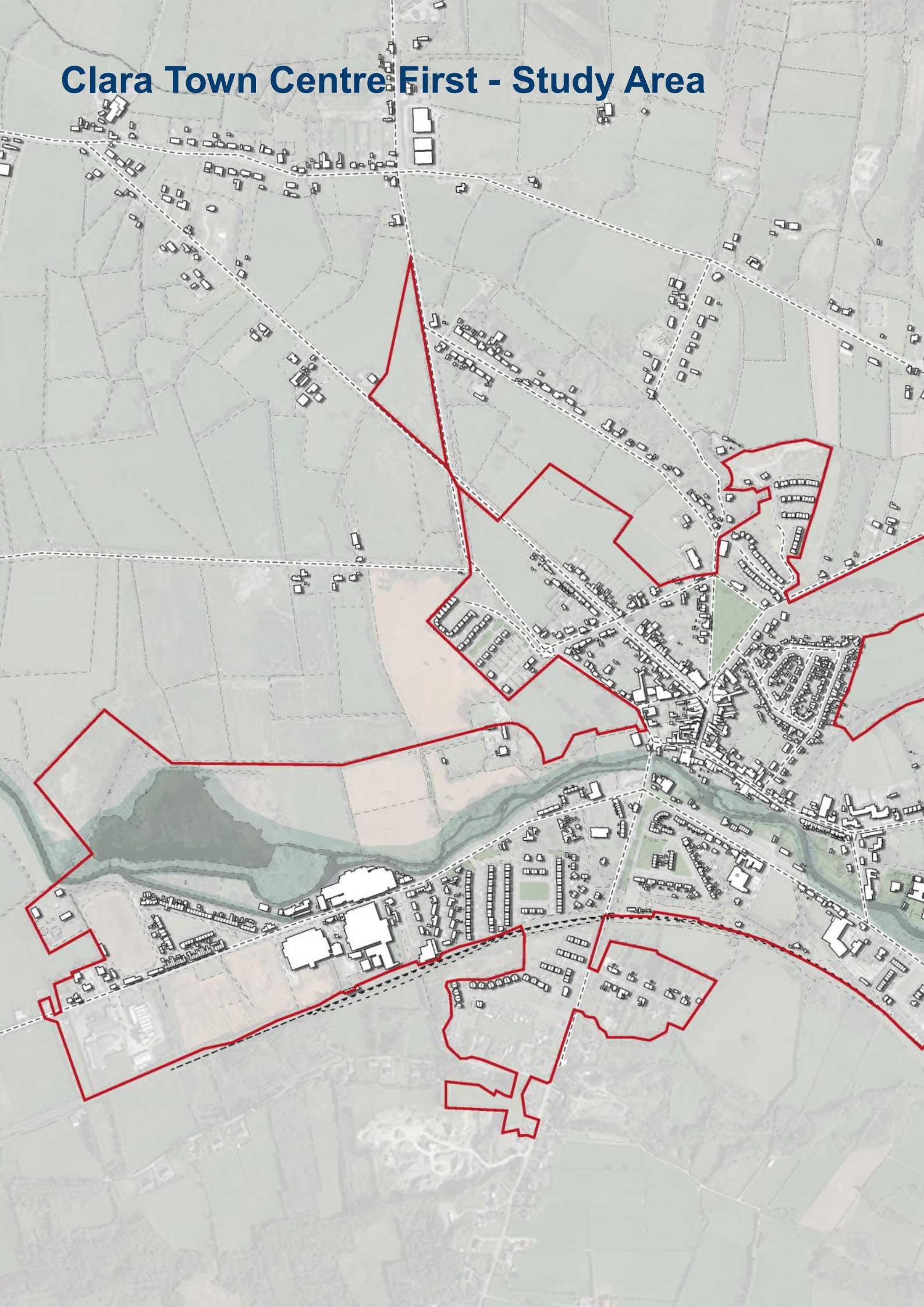
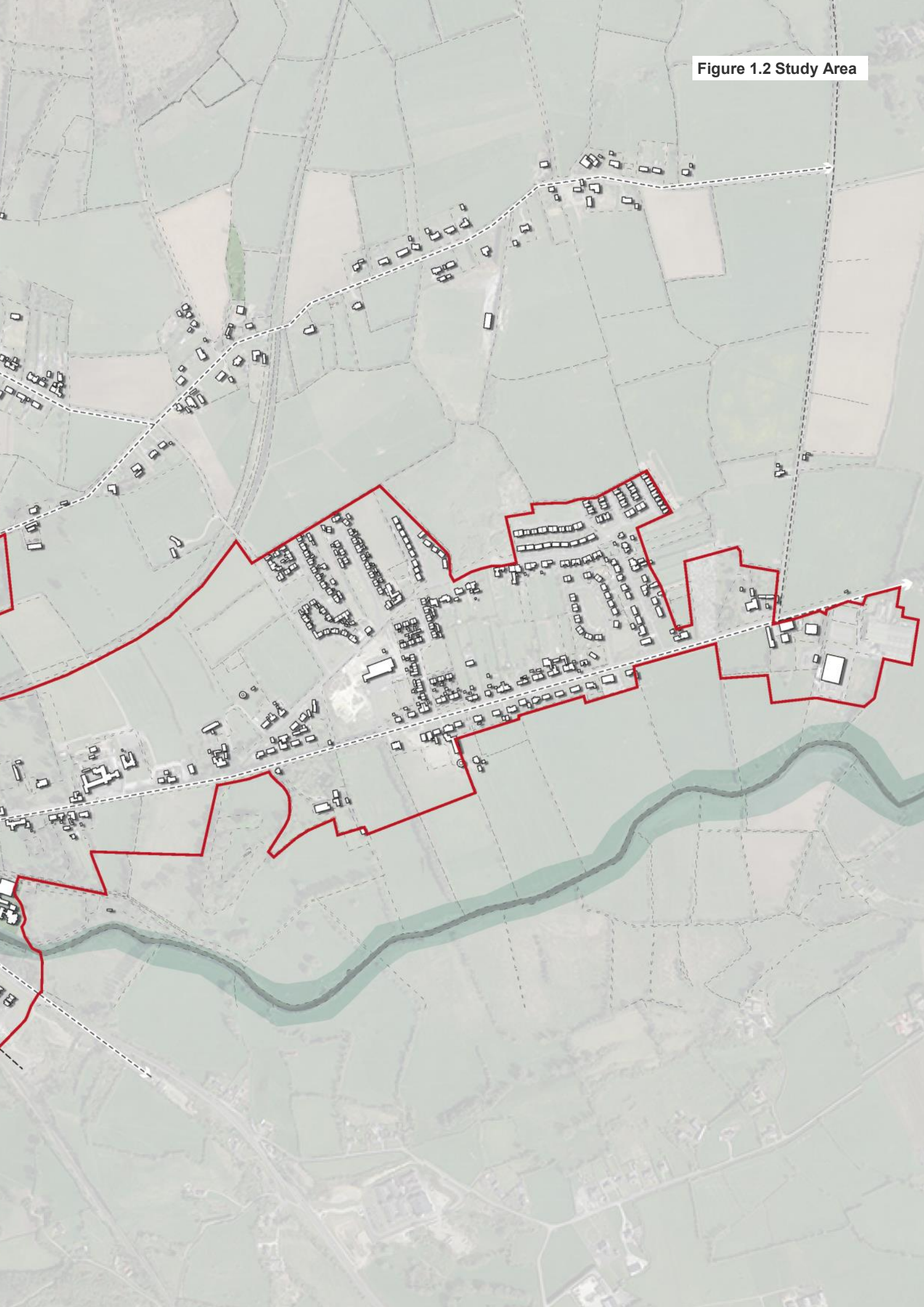


Figure 1.2 Study Area



History and Settlement Evolution

The modern day settlement of Clara was established in the 18th century by the Quakers. However, evidence shows that there have been settlers in existence in the Clara area since the 12th century.

The various archaeological sites and monuments which are situated on the periphery of the town are testament to the long history of settlement in Clara and surrounding areas.

The historic map images below and overleaf provide an illustration of how the settlement of Clara has evolved since c.1829.

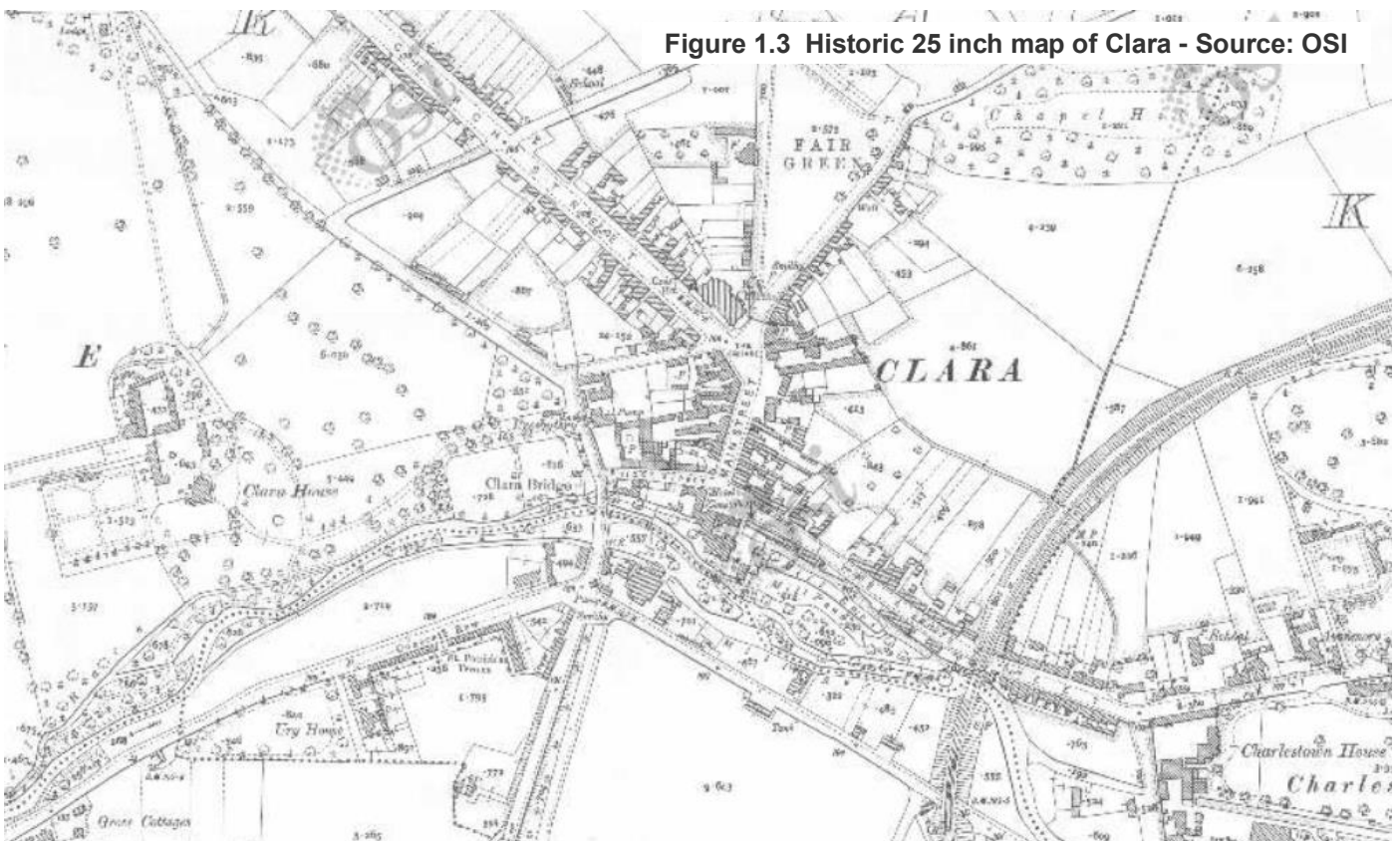


Figure 1.3 Historic 25 inch map of Clara - Source: OSI

Figure 1.4 Historic 6 inch map of Clara - Source: OSI

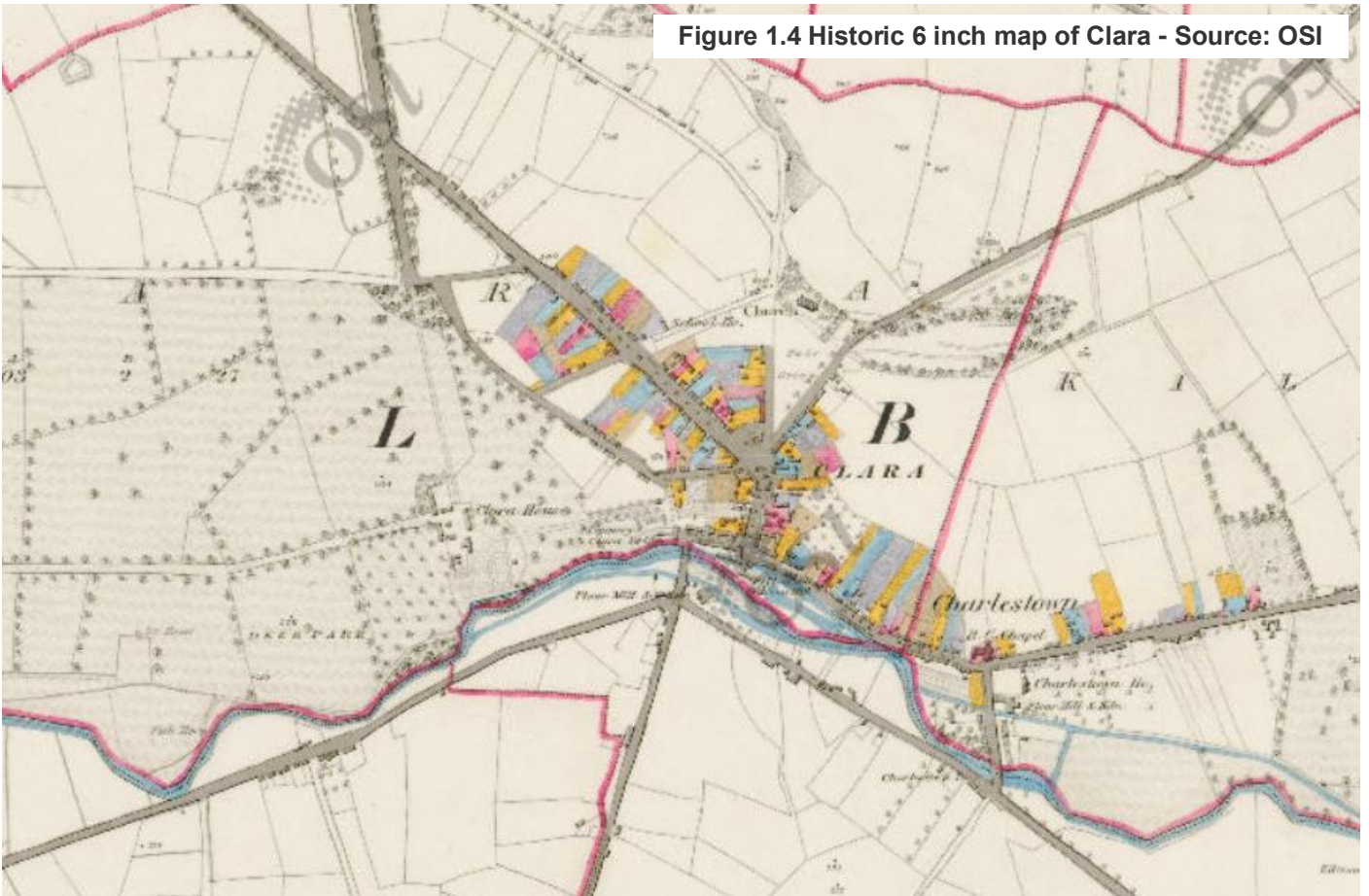
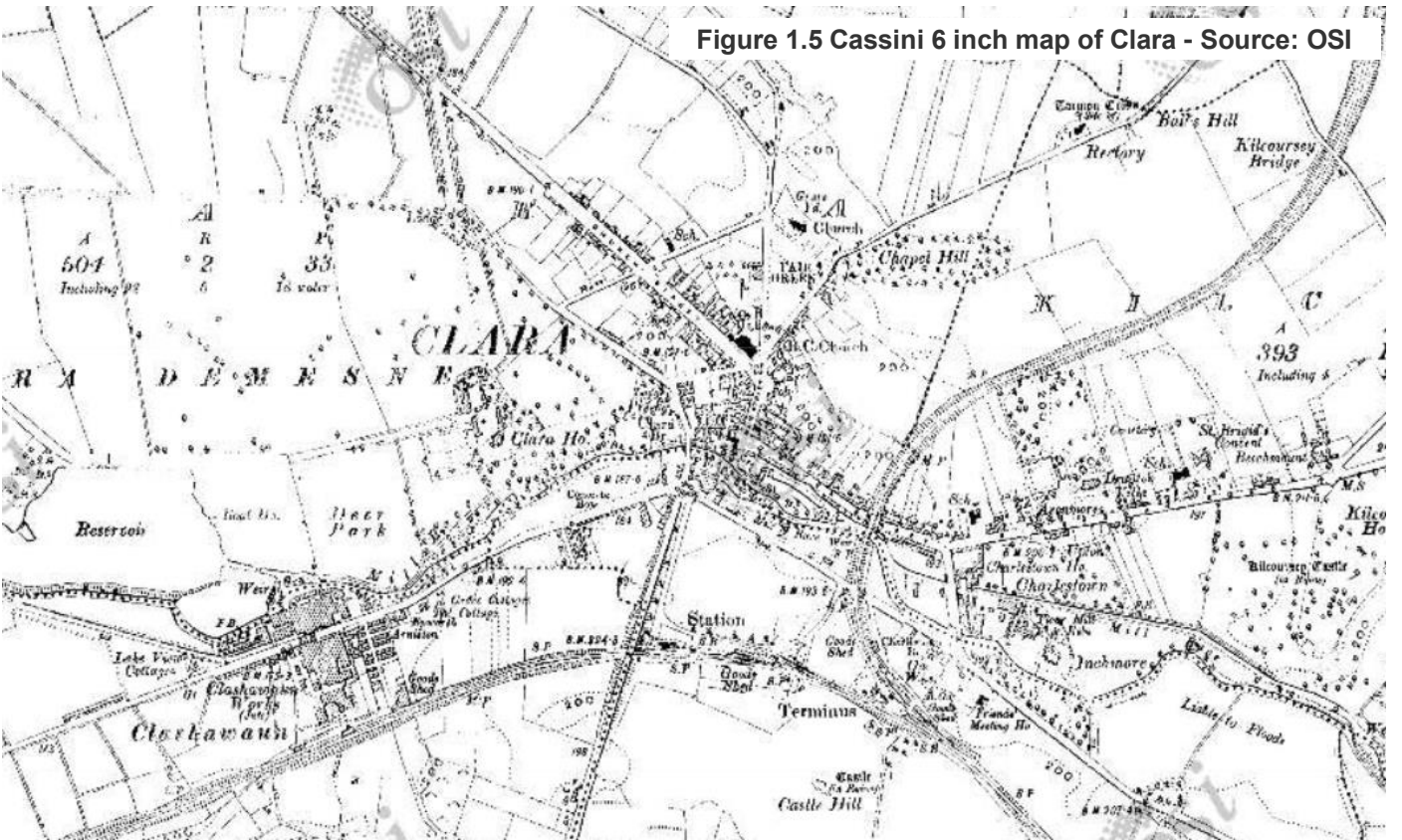


Figure 1.5 Cassini 6 inch map of Clara - Source: OSI



Town Centre First Policy

The 'Town Centre First - A Policy Approach for Irish Towns' represents a new approach to the development of our towns where local communities and local businesses can be central to reimagining their own towns and planning their own futures. The policy aims to create town centres that function as viable, vibrant and attractive locations for people to live, work and visit, while also functioning as the service, social, cultural and recreational hub for the local community.¹



The Town Centre First policy recognises that successful places:

- Are characterised by an attractive public realm (streets, spaces and parks) that is designed to invite people to meet, mingle and dwell;
- Contain a variety of services/shops that provide employment opportunities, enable people to shop locally and meet the needs of the local community;
- Provide a range of cultural, recreational and community spaces (that includes scope for periodic events and festivals) that bring together community members and attract visitors/tourists;
- Contain a well maintained building stock that creates visual interest and animates streets and spaces;
- Conserve, adapt and highlight historical buildings and streetscapes that provide the town with a unique identity;
- Are attractive vibrant places for enterprises to grow and develop;
- Are well connected and accessible to sustainable modes of transport, enabling a high proportion of journeys to be made by foot and/or bicycle from the immediate hinterland (e.g. the '10 minute town' concept);
- Manage traffic within central areas so that streets prioritise vulnerable users (pedestrians and cyclists), enabling them to move about safely and in comfort;
- Provide a mix of housing typologies and tenures to cater for diverse communities in terms of age, income and mobility;
- Utilise digital technology to enhance the experience of living and working in towns, enabling greater choices in terms of location and lifestyle;
- Provide opportunities for the amenity, health and well-being of residents, workers and visitors.

¹ Town Centre First - A Policy Approach for Irish Towns, pg. 3

Response to Town Centre First Policy

The structure of the TCF Plan for Clara has been prepared to ensure alignment with the core elements of the Town Centre First Policy - see table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1 Clara TCF Plan Structure

Clara TCF Plan Section	TCF Policy Core Element	Clara TCF Plan Response
Section 1	Core Element 1: Collaboration & Communication	The Town Centre First Plan for Clara has undertaken a comprehensive engagement process which has included collaboration with the Town Team, local residents and business owners, Elected Members and Offaly County Council. The collaborative process ensures that 'people' are at the heart of the TCF Plan. Section 1 of the Plan sets out details regarding the public engagement undertaken.
Section 2	Core Element 2: Understanding The Place (Analysis & Appraisal)	Section 2 of the TCF Plan contains a socio-economic, urban, transportation and placemaking analysis of Clara to establish its baseline position. This analysis has provided the Plan team with a detailed understanding of Clara. This section provides a SCOT (Strengths, Challenges, Opportunities and Threats) analysis which has been informed by the baseline analysis.
Section 3	Core Element 3: Defining The Place (Objectives & Actions)	High level themes are established in Section 3 which are determined as having significance and importance for Clara over the long term. Themes presented for the Town Centre are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community - A Town for People • Heritage Tourism • Natural Infrastructure • Placemaking Objectives and outcomes are presented in relation to each theme and their alignment with the Town Centre First Policy.
Section 4	Core Element 4: Enabling The Place	Section 4 of the TCF Plan describes the proposed project interventions and a pathway for their delivery and implementation in Clara. A number of case studies are described which provide details of similar projects throughout the country. In terms of delivery and implementation, information regarding project costs, timelines, phasing, actors etc are highlighted in this section of the Plan.

1

Collaboration & Communication

Collaboration & Communication

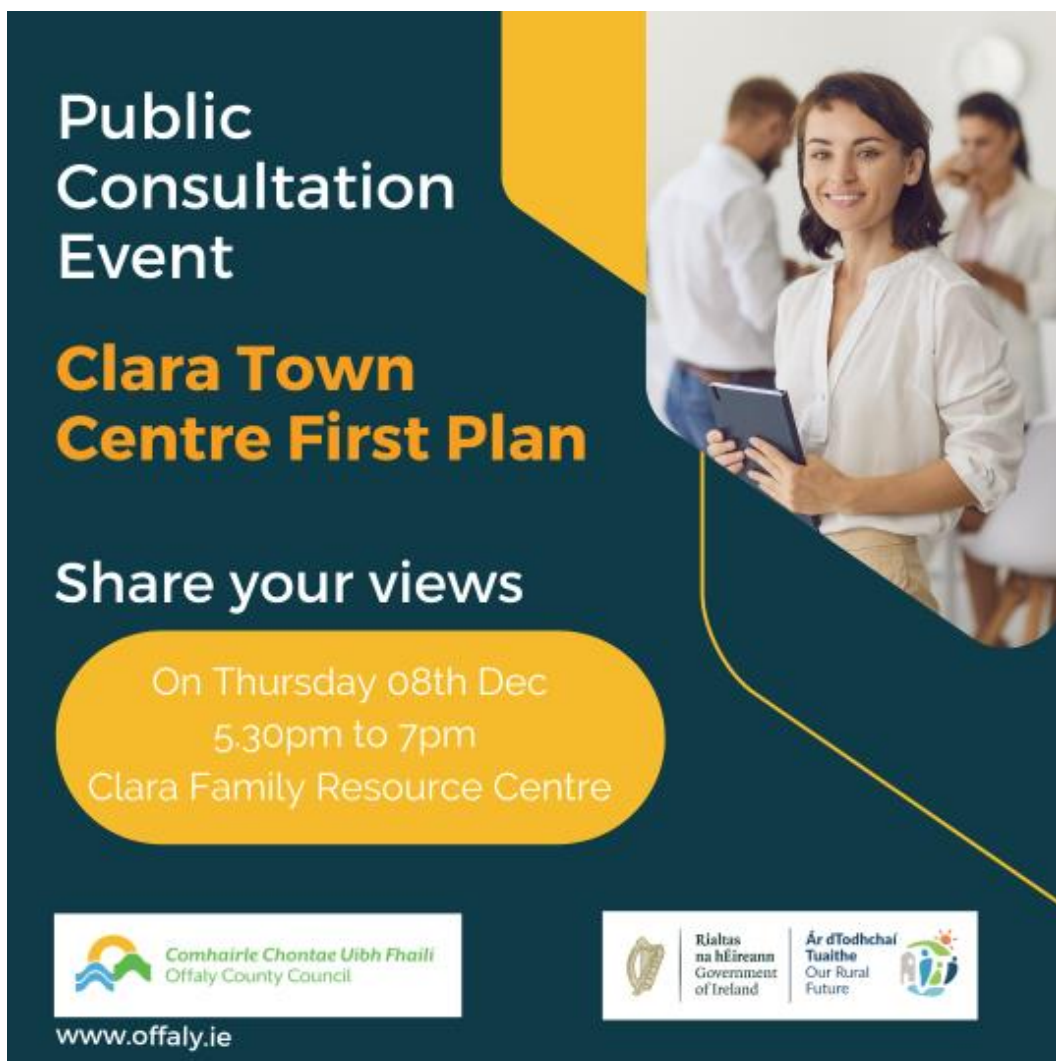
A Collaborative Process

The TCF Plan for Clara has undertaken a collaborative process which has included input from, *inter alia*, Offaly County Council, the Town Team, Town Regeneration Officer and local residents and business owners.

The collaborative process and engagement with local stakeholders has been central to the preparation of the Plan with public consultation events held in Clara. Online surveys have also been made available for comments. A timeline of the public consultation process is set out overleaf.

The results of the consultative process are important and are integrated into the remaining sections of this Plan. As part of this process, a number of topics emerged which provided a focus for the Plan and an emphasis for the project interventions as proposed.

For information, the Town Team is comprised of members of the Community Council, Heritage Society, GAA, Tidy Towns, Family Resource Centre, Roman Catholic Church, Church of Ireland, local Primary Schools, local business owners, local Councillors, Chamber of Commerce.





Public Consultation Event


Clara Town Centre First Plan

Share your views

On Thursday 08th Dec
5.30pm to 7pm
Clara Family Resource Centre

 Comhairle Chontae Uíbh Pháilí
Offaly County Council

 Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

 Ár dTodhchaí
Tualthe
Our Rural Future

www.offaly.ie

Consultation Timeline

**July
2022**

Project Kick-Off

- Initial project kick-off meeting held with Offaly County Council, Town Regeneration Officer and Clara Town Team.

**November
2022**

Online Survey

- An online survey was made available on the Offaly County Council website for the public. The survey took the same format as the upcoming public consultation workshop.
- The survey allowed views, opinions, local knowledge and ideas to be captured from those who were unable to attend the public information session.
- The survey proved to be an effective engagement tool with a total of 55 replies received, demonstrating the interest of the local community.

Public Consultation 1

- The public consultation was held at the Community and Family Resource Centre on River Street on 17th November 2022.
- The public consultation involved the presentation of information boards which focused on core subjects: Urban Design & Public Realm; Planning & Environment and Movement & Transport.
- An interactive table session followed whereby participants

were encouraged to relay their views and opinions on particular areas.

- Those attending the consultation were encouraged to note their comments and ideas in the booklets (based on a SWOT analysis) and drawings provided, with a general comment box also provided to capture views.
- A wide range of responses were gathered during the session.
- This was a key element of the TCF Plan process as comments/view collated during this stage provided local knowledge regarding core issues facing Clara. This helped to identify the key themes of the TCF Plan.

December 2022

Youth Workshop

- A youth workshop was held on 8th December 2022 prior to the second public consultation event. A group of students from post-primary schools in the local area were invited to express their views on Clara.
- The purpose of the youth workshop was to gain an understanding of the key issues that affect the lives of young people living in Clara.
- The session provided a new perspective on the Town, assisting in the development of the TCF Plan and project interventions.

Public Consultation 2

- The Plan team met with members of the Clara community and presented their baseline analysis findings and research on

8th December 2022 at the Community and Family Resource Centre.

- Four key theme areas were presented: Community; Heritage Tourism; Natural Infrastructure and Placemaking. Potential interventions and projects were presented for each of the theme areas in which participants were encouraged to engage and share their views regarding same.
- The result of this process has directly informed the proposed interventions identified in this TCF Plan.

Town Centre Plan

- Town Centre Plan is presented to the Town Team and Elected Members.
- Public Information Session held in Clara Library on the 21st June 2023, where the key themes and conceptual projects from the Draft Plan were on display for public viewing.



Social media engagement - Clara TCF Plan

June 2023



Public Consultation Event - 8th December 2022

Sample comments received during Public Consultation process

Clara Town Centre First Plan

Public Consultation – 17th November 2022

Strengths - What are the Town's greatest assets and attributes?

Great community groups who want to see improvements in the town & who will take action eg. Clara Heritage Group + Clara Tidy Towns.

Location - 15 minutes to Tullamore, 10 minutes to Monke + Killebeggan, 20 minutes to Athlone.

Train station - however not enough trains to Tullamore for people to get into + out of work - which means they have to drive.

Weaknesses - What areas do you think could be improved?

Parking in town -> parking on carriage way - e.g. Avea Street; parking on west side of the fair green making the road single carriage way; parking on footpaths.

Traffic in town -> mostly caused by parking on carriage ways + blocking access to two way traffic.

The overall look to the town, empty buildings left to go to ruin, broken footpaths, bent/broken barrier on blue street at crossing.

Need a one-way system on Egan's lane to allow parking for the bank + hardware shop on one side.

When crossing the town on river street on the fair green, there could be barriers like in Tullamore it would improve the look of the town.

Bad or no lighting in parts of town eg. Egan's lane + top of the fair green.

Opportunities - What opportunities can we take advantage of?

If parking + traffic issues were resolved you could make Clara a great town for walking + cycling around.

Join Clara to streamstown via the greenway which gives access to Athlone + Mullingar on the greenway.

Improve the fair green, bury the wires remove the part of tower on the west side + improve the driving across the green; replace bins, improve the building; add planting around the green.

Put a riverwalk on the Brosna.

Need a curbside cafe to the shops in Clara.

Need a traffic warden in town to ticket cars parked on double yellow lines + parking on footpaths.

Threats - What are the challenges Clara faces today and in the future?

Negative attitudes + unwillingness to change - there was a town plan a few years ago that suggested one way system on Egan's lane + improvement on church street it was met with negative comments from locals.

Derelect buildings in private ownership left to rot + nothing done to make the owners improve the facades.

By street to the fair green or 'green field' -> parking should not be placed @ any part of this green space - there is already a car park in the church grounds that is not used. Parking is needed elsewhere in the town for shops on main street + Avea street + at Egan's lane.

Have you any further comments you wish to make?

Need to improve the centre of town first + then radiate outwards to the approach roads into the town.

Clara Town Centre First Plan

Public Consultation – 17th November 2022

Strengths - What are the Town's greatest assets and attributes?

Brosna River!
The actual town layout is attractive
Proximity to the Bog -

Weaknesses - What areas do you think could be improved?

a Public Car Park is very badly needed -
The new square layout is extremely dangerous. It lends itself to accidents. The old Errymill needs a face lift

Clara Town Centre First Plan

Public Consultation – 17th November 2022

Strengths - What are the Town's greatest assets and attributes?

Railway, Central location -
River & waterways are very unique
Close to Motorways
A very unique history in Hilling and industry
Beautiful Green Field in Town
Center - / Chapel Hill is a tree covered Hill in Mid Town.

Weaknesses - What areas do you think could be improved?

Our Rivers & waterways needs to be cleared and repaired, Old Mills could be cleaned and secured.
Traffic and parking needs to be improved in the Town / Green Field area could be upgraded.
Chapel Hill could be turned into Town Park.



Project Kick Off Meeting - 19th July 2022



Project Kick Off Meeting - 19th July 2022

Selection of comments obtained during the Public Engagement Process

Theme 1: Community

- Good community spirit in Clara.
- Sports facilities and play areas need to be improved.
- Housing needed for all.
- Increased services to meet growing population.
- Enterprise building / remote working hub needed (for e.g. Erry Mill).
- Clara is generally a good place to live.
- Lack of investment due to proximity to Tullamore.
- Lack of evening economy and visitor accommodation.

Theme 2: Heritage Tourism

- Impressive architectural heritage - positive to see them utilised.
- Regenerate and re-use the old factory and mill buildings.
- Tourism a real opportunity for Clara.
- Museum for Clara's industrial heritage.
- History of the River Brosna and how it provided energy for industry - reviving the old industrial buildings.

Response:

The strong community spirit associated with Clara was highlighted by local residents as a key theme during the public consultation process.

As such, a primary outcome of the Town Centre First Plan for Clara is to create a welcoming, useable and accessible Town Centre for the local community and a Town Centre that generates civic pride and a place for people to meet, shop, live and work.

Response:

The Town Centre First Team and local community assisted the Plan team in terms of providing important local knowledge and information regarding key heritage sites within Clara and highlighting the industrial history associated with the town. The public consultation process has assisted in the identification of heritage sites which are under-utilised and in need of re-use and regeneration, allowing for potential opportunities for these buildings with a particular focus on tourism-based development.

Theme 3: Natural Infrastructure

- Clara Bog and River Brosna are good natural assets.
- Proper plan for River Park is needed.
- Beautiful countryside surrounding the town.
- The disused railway line could be used for a new cycleway/greenway.
- Potential of blue infrastructure in Clara.
- New walkways would be helpful.

Response:

The public consultation process highlighted the quality of the natural infrastructure in Clara which is characterised by Clara Bog and River Brosna which are key blue/green assets for the town.

The comments provided by the local community has allowed the Plan team to focus on utilising the town's natural green and blue assets as a means of enhancing the experience of Clara's natural environment for all.

Theme 4: Placemaking

- Vacant buildings affecting the appearance of the town.
- Bridges are attractive feature and could be improved with lighting.
- Parking can be problematic/traffic calming needed.
- Cycling infrastructure is poor.
- Too much reliance on private cars for journeys.
- More seating in the Town Centre.
- Traffic flow from Main Street to River Street is problematic.
- Improved street lighting.

Response:

Responses in relation to 'Placemaking' highlighted the negative impact that vacant/derelict buildings are having on the visual quality and appearance of the Town Centre. Creating an attractive Town Centre for Clara is a key objective of this TCF Plan as case studies from around the country have shown how Town Centres that portray a visual quality and distinctiveness are attractors of people that generate significant socio-economic benefits.