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# Understanding Clara

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The Town Centre First Plan for Clara sets out a strategic framework for the regeneration of the town over the long term. The overarching aim of the Plan is to strengthen the social, cultural, economic and environmental life in Clara for those who live, work, socialise and visit the town.

The Plan addresses the key strengths, challenges and opportunities which the town possesses along with identifying key interventions and proposals which are designed to ultimately strengthen Clara's Town Centre.

The strategic approach in formulating the Plan for Clara has been to identify and build on the town's existing strengths in order to enhance its long term social, cultural, economic and environmental resilience. Similarly, the Plan has identified weaknesses within Clara that also present future opportunities for the town.

On foot of the consultation and engagement process and the baseline analysis work that has been undertaken by the Plan team (details of which are provided within this Section), a number of Clara's strengths as a rural town have been identified and include, *inter alia*:

- A strong community spirit as evidenced by the number of local residents and business owners, for example, who attended the various consultation events and who submitted comments online.
- A local community who generally consider Clara as a good place to live and who wish to see the town prosper.
- A history of industrial heritage which has an interesting story to be celebrated.
- High quality natural infrastructure assets which are exemplified by the River Brosna and Clara Bog.

**“Everyone has the right to live in a great place. More importantly, everyone has the right to contribute to making the place where they already live great.”**

Fred Kent, Urban Planner

- Presence of heritage buildings and Protected Structures that provide Clara with character and identity.
- Majority of residents who live within a 15 minute walk and 10 minute cycle of Clara Town Centre.
- Recent placemaking enhancements that have improved the appearance of the Town Centre.

Clara's identified strengths have been used to formulate four key themes for the Town Centre which comprise:

- Community - A Town for People.
- Heritage Tourism.
- Natural Infrastructure.
- Placemaking.

Each of the key themes will make a positive contribution to the economic, social, cultural and environmental resilience of Clara over the long term - themes are set out in further detail in Section 3 of this TCF Plan.

# National Policy

The following sections of this TCF Plan provides the national, regional and local policy framework which the Plan has alignment with.

## Project 2040: National Planning Framework

The National Planning Framework (hereafter 'NPF') is the government's high-level strategic framework for guiding Ireland's future growth and development to 2040.<sup>2</sup> The NPF's goal is to help rural and urban Ireland successfully accommodate growth and change by supporting a shift toward Ireland's regions and cities while simultaneously acknowledging the importance of rural areas. The NPF is made up of ten National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs), which drive Ireland's economic, environmental, and social growth at the national, regional, and local levels.

The NPF's purpose is to create a shared vision and set of goals for all communities across the country. These objectives are referred to as NSOs and the NPF is responsible for achieving them. The following NSOs are, *inter alia*, relevant to the Clara Town Centre First Plan:

- **Compact Growth:** Carefully managing the sustainable growth of compact cities, towns and villages which will add value and create more appealing places in which people can live and work.
- **Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities:** Rural areas play a key role in defining our identity, in driving our economy and our high-quality environment and must be a major part of our future development.
- **Enhanced Amenities and Heritage:** This objective will ensure that our cities, towns and villages are desirable and can offer a

good quality of life. Investment will be required in well-designed public realm, which includes public spaces, parks and streets, as well as recreational infrastructure.

Furthermore, the NPF provides a number of policy objectives structured around the National Policy Objectives (NPOs). The following objectives<sup>3</sup> should be noted in relation to this plan:

- **National Policy Objective 4:** Ensure the creation of attractive, liveable, well designed, high quality urban places that are home to diverse and integrated communities that enjoy a high quality of life and well-being.
- **National Policy Objective 5:** Develop cities and towns of sufficient scale and quality to compete internationally and to be drivers of national and regional growth, investment and prosperity.
- **National Policy Objective 6:** Regenerate and rejuvenate cities, towns and villages of all types and scale as environmental assets, that can accommodate changing roles and functions, increased residential population and employment activity and enhanced levels of amenity and design quality, in order to sustainably influence and support their surrounding area.
- **National Policy Objective 7:** Apply a tailored approach to urban development, that will be linked to the Rural and Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, with a particular focus on reversing the stagnation or decline of many smaller urban centres, by identifying and establishing new roles and functions and

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<sup>2</sup> Project Ireland 2040, National Planning Framework, pg. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Project Ireland 2040, National Planning Framework, pg. 55.

enhancement of local infrastructure and amenities and in more self-contained settlements of all sizes, supporting a continuation of balanced population and employment growth.

- **National Policy Objective 11:** In meeting urban development requirements, there will be a presumption in favour of development that can encourage more people and generate more jobs and activity within existing cities, towns and villages, subject to development meeting appropriate planning standards and achieving targeted growth.
- **National Policy Objective 15:** Support the sustainable development of rural areas by encouraging growth and arresting decline in areas that have experienced low population growth or decline in recent decades and by managing the growth of areas that are under strong urban influence to avoid over-development, while sustaining vibrant rural communities.
- **National Policy Objective 16:** Target the reversal of rural decline in the core of small towns and villages through sustainable targeted measures that address vacant premises and deliver sustainable reuse and regeneration outcomes.
- **National Policy Objective 18a:** Support the proportionate growth of and appropriately designed development in rural towns that will contribute to their regeneration and renewal, including interventions in the public realm, the provision of amenities, the acquisition of sites and the provision of services.
- **National Policy Objective 18b:** Develop a programme for 'new homes in small towns and villages' with local authorities,

public infrastructure agencies such as Irish Water and local communities to provide serviced sites with appropriate infrastructure to attract people to build their own homes and live in small towns and villages.

- **National Policy Objective 27:** Ensure the integration of safe and convenient alternatives to the car into the design of our communities, by prioritising walking and cycling accessibility to both existing and proposed developments, and integrating physical activity facilities for all ages.
- **National Policy Objective 28:** Plan for a more diverse and socially inclusive society that targets equality of opportunity and a better quality of life for all citizens, through improved integration and greater accessibility in the delivery of sustainable communities and the provision of associated services.

The Eastern and Midlands Region of Ireland will have a population of approximately 2.85 million by 2040, at least half a million more than currently. The Midlands area consists of Laois, Longford, Westmeath and Offaly. Although these counties are not located immediately adjacent to Dublin, the wider effect of the Metropolitan area has resulted in some settlements experiencing rapid unsustainable population growth and others a decline.

The position of the Midlands is strategically significant, bordering both the Northern and Western, and Southern Regions. Its central location in Ireland can be leveraged to enable significant strategic investment to a greater extent than at present, supported by a sustainable pattern of population growth.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Project Ireland 2040, National Planning Framework, pg. 33.

Key future planning and development and place-making policy priorities for the Eastern and Midland Region include:<sup>5</sup>

- Enabling the complementary development of large and county towns in the wider Greater Dublin Area and Midland areas on the key strategic and public transport routes in a regionally coordinated manner, with an enhanced emphasis on measures to promote self-sustaining economic and employment based development opportunities to match and catch-up on rapid phases of housing delivery in recent years.
- More emphasis on consolidating the development of places that grew rapidly in the past decade or so with large scale commuter driven housing development with a particular focus on addressing local community and amenity facility provision in many of the larger commuter towns through targeted investment under relevant NPF National Strategic Outcomes.
- Preparing and implementing a regional priorities programme, to shape and inform delivery of the Regeneration and Development Initiative. Part of this programme should identify significant ready to-go city, rural town and village and rural rejuvenation priorities which could harness publicly owned land and other assets that are not being used actively at present such as former healthcare, military, transport and other complexes and combining the potential of such assets with community and wider private and public sector support and investment to bring about the transformation of both urban and rural areas and places in an integrated manner.

## National Development Plan 2021-2030

As part of Project Ireland 2040, the National Development Plan (NDP) sets out the Government's investment strategy and budget for the period 2021-2030. It is an ambitious plan that balances the significant demand for public investment across all sectors and regions of Ireland with a major focus on improving the delivery of infrastructure projects to ensure speed of delivery and value for money. The NDP will incorporate a total public investment of €165 billion over the period 2021-2030.<sup>6</sup>

Since the adoption of the NPF in 2018 a range of supporting measures have been implemented which includes the roll-out and operation of the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF). The URDF has proved to be vital in the promotion of co-ordinated investment in the renewal and redevelopment of cities and towns. Launched as part of the previous NDP, it will be extended to 2030 with an associated level of additional investment targeted in an integrated, dynamic and responsive way to underpin the NPF by supporting the regeneration and rejuvenation of our towns and cities with particular focus on compact growth.<sup>7</sup>

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of the quality of our urban living spaces and in this context the role of URDF has gained an increased significance as a catalyst for post-Covid-19 economic recovery, social renewal and regeneration of cities and towns.

URDF funding is to be directed across a number of strands that will separately address the needs of cities and towns across the country, reflecting both the experience of the funding calls to date, and the objectives of Housing for All in terms of accelerating new supply and tackling vacancy in towns, which is reflective of the Town Centre First approach.

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<sup>5</sup> Project Ireland 2040, National Planning Framework, pg. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Project Ireland 2040, National Development Plan, pg. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Project Ireland 2040, National Development Plan, pg. 57.

Towns aligned with the Town Centre First approach will seek to provide a toolkit for the enablement of specific visions for towns and specific criteria will be included in the URDF to encourage the activation of vacant properties, and to bring stock back into productive use.

The bulk of funding has been assigned through a competitive bid process, however the time is now favourable, particularly with the enabling focus under “Town Centre First”, for the Department to work with local authorities to ensure a steady pipeline of projects for consideration for URDF funding rather than a competitive bid process.<sup>8</sup>

## **Our Rural Future - Rural Development Policy 2021-2025**

Our Rural Future provides a framework for the development of rural Ireland up to 2025. The policy is forward-looking and ambitious and addresses both the challenges facing rural areas and the opportunities which rural communities can benefit from in the coming years.

The Government will deliver innovative solutions to key policy challenges affecting rural areas through this policy including investment, job creation, sustainable population growth, balanced regional development, access to services, broadband connectivity, social cohesion and inclusion, Brexit and climate change adaptation. The implementation of this policy will have a transformative effect on rural areas and assist rural Ireland which is integral to our national recovery and future development.<sup>9</sup>

The strategy promotes a comprehensive, place-based approach to rural development, encouraging and supporting rural communities to establish cohesive and integrated plans to address their area’s long-term requirements. This strategy recognises that there is no one-

size-fits-all solution to satisfy every area’s developmental needs and advocates a holistic, place-based approach to rural development which encourages and supports rural communities to develop cohesive and integrated plans to meet the long-term needs of their own local area.

Our Rural Future focuses on the following thematic objectives:

- Supporting improved quality employment and career opportunities in rural areas.
- Assisting the regeneration, repopulation and development of rural towns and villages. Enhancing the participation, leadership and resilience of rural communities.
- Enhancing public services in rural areas.
- Supporting a Just Transition to a climate neutral economy.
- Nurturing our culture and heritage.

One of the key deliverables in the plan is **Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages** which is to be delivered through the following measures:<sup>10</sup>

- Put the future development and regeneration of rural towns at the heart of decision-making through the Town Centre First approach.
- Invest significantly in the revitalisation of rural town centres through the €1 billion Rural Regeneration and Development Fund.
- Expand the Town and Village Renewal Scheme as a key enabler to bring vacant and derelict buildings and sites back into use as multi-purpose spaces and for residential occupancy.

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<sup>8</sup> Project Ireland 2040, National Development Plan, pg. 58.

<sup>9</sup> Our Rural Future - Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, pg. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Our Rural Future - Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, pg. 11.

- As part of Budget 2022, examine the scope to introduce new financial supports to encourage increased residential occupancy in rural towns.
- Review and extend the regulations which exempt certain vacant commercial premises, such as “over the shop” type spaces, from requiring planning permission for change of use for residential purposes.
- Provide seed capital to Local Authorities to provide serviced sites at cost in towns and villages to allow individuals to build homes and encourage town living.
- Encourage Local Authorities to use their powers under CPO, where appropriate, to tackle vacant and derelict properties in Town Centres, to bring vacant properties back into use.
- Identify potential State owned properties in rural towns and villages which can be used for community purposes.
- Examine the feasibility of introducing ‘meanwhile use’ legislation so that empty buildings and shopfronts on main streets can be brought back into use on a short-term, temporary basis as pop up shops, street markets, exhibitions spaces and other purposes.
- Provide funding to support the upgrade and enhancement of shopfronts and street facades in towns and villages and for the adaptation of town centres for outdoor socialising.
- Fund Local Authorities to adapt and improve outdoor public spaces for cultural events and activities all-year round.
- Invest significantly in the development of parks, green spaces and recreational amenities in town centres to make them vibrant hubs for community enjoyment, and to increase footfall for local businesses.
- Provide grants to retail businesses in rural towns and villages to establish an online presence to complement traditional footfall trade.

## **Housing for All - A New Housing Plan for Ireland**

Housing for All is the Government’s housing plan to 2030 which seeks to improve Ireland’s housing system and deliver more homes of all types for people with different housing needs. In order to address vacancy (Housing Policy Objective 19), a new *Croí Conaithe (Towns)* fund has been included within Housing for All that seeks to bring forward serviced sites for housing to attract people to build their own homes and to support the refurbishment of vacant properties and enabling people to live in small towns and villages in a sustainable way.

New housing that is brought forward under the *Croí Conaithe (Towns)* fund will provide new choices for people to live in towns, villages and rural parts of the country, initially through the provision of a grant to support the refurbishment of vacant properties, with priority given to areas where the level of vacancy or dereliction is high.

## Town Centre First - A Policy Approach for Irish Towns

Town Centre First 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 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.”<sup>11</sup>*

The Town Centre First policy sets out a range of Actions which collectively will create the framework required to support our towns to achieve the desired outcomes and deliver on their own unique vision. These Actions are centred around improving our knowledge and understanding of our towns and what they need. Key priorities in establishing and growing this framework include:<sup>12</sup>

1. **A Network of Town Regeneration Officers** to bring a co-ordinated approach to delivery across the country.
2. **Capacity Building Programmes** for Town Teams to increase the skills and capabilities of Town Teams and enable them to deliver effectively.
3. **A National, Integrated and Scaled-up Health Check Programme** for towns which builds and expands on the success of the Heritage Council’s Collaborative Town Centre Health Check model and results in a national database of towns.
4. **A Town Centre First Toolkit to include a Web Portal** which will provide access to all available TCF resources and funding. The Toolkit will provide a best practice model for developing TCF plans that is

informed by existing models and include specific strands targeting key issues.

5. **A Targeted Investment Programme** to support towns in delivering the interventions identified in their bespoke Town Centre First Plans.
6. **Pathfinder Towns** will be immediately assisted to act as initial demonstrators of the TCF policy approach. A key ongoing focus of the policy will also be to identify early-stage towns where local stakeholders require more support to collaborate as part of a Town Team and to access investment programmes.
7. **Mechanisms to put Town Centres at the heart of decision making** including a methodology to assess the impact of development on town centres for applicability within the statutory planning system.
8. **Better data which enhances our understanding of Ireland’s towns** and builds an evidence base for the ongoing evolution of the TCF policy.
9. **A new National Town Centre First Office** established.
10. **Cross-Government focus and alignment** through a National Oversight and Advisory Group

The Programme for Government recognised the need for, and committed to, the development of a co-ordinated, strategic approach to town centre regeneration that would maximise the impact of the Government’s considerable investment in urban regeneration. This Town Centre First policy, informed by the model in Scotland, encourages Government Departments, Local Authorities, businesses and communities to put town centres at the heart of decision-making.

<sup>11</sup> Town Centre First - A Policy Approach for Irish Towns, pg. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Town Centre First - A Policy Approach for Irish Towns, pg. 6.



## Climate Action Plan 2023

The Climate Action Plan sets out Ireland's strategic objective in transitioning to a climate-resilient, biodiversity-rich, environmentally sustainable and climate-neutral economy by 2050. Key climate targets for the country include:

- A reduction in emissions from electricity generation and large industry sectors by 43% by 2030.
- A reduction in emissions from all other sectors by 30% by 2030.
- An economy-wide 2030 reduction in emissions by at least 55%.<sup>13</sup>

In order to reach the above targets, sustained efforts will be required in terms of matters such as electricity generation through the rapid build-out of renewable generation capacity, accelerating the electrification of road transport and a modal shift to public and active transport, retro-fitting of buildings and acceleration of zero-emissions heating in commercial buildings for example.

## Offaly Climate Change Adaptation Strategy

Offaly's Climate Change Adaptation Strategy (CCAS) was adopted by Elected Members in September 2019. The CCAS sets out that the Strategy is the start of the process of adaptation planning in Offaly County Council and is the first step in increasing knowledge and understanding of our changing climate, growing resilience, and enabling effective responses to the threats posed by climate change.

The purpose of the CCAS is to:

- Ensure a proper comprehension of the key risks and vulnerabilities of climate change.

- Bring forward the implementation of climate resilient actions in a planned and proactive manner.
- Ensure that climate adaptation considerations are mainstreamed into all plans and policies and integrated into all operations and functions of Offaly County Council.<sup>14</sup>

## National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland

The National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland (NIFTI) 2021 sets out clear principles for the consideration of future transport investment and is closely aligned with key Government policy priorities and commitments, such as the Climate Action Plan and the National Development Plan.

The NIFTI sets out four key priorities for transport investment:

1. Decarbonisation.
2. Protection and Renewal.
3. Mobility of People and Goods in Urban Areas.
4. Enhanced Regional and Rural Connectivity.<sup>15</sup>

## Heritage Ireland 2030

Heritage Ireland 2030 is a framework for the protection, conservation, promotion, and management of Ireland's heritage for the next decade and beyond. Heritage Ireland 2030 recognises the importance of heritage for its intrinsic value, for economic development, tourism and innovation and the role it plays in individual and societal well-being.

The objectives of Heritage Ireland 2030 are set out under three themes:

<sup>13</sup> Climate Action Plan 2023, pg. 31.

<sup>14</sup> Offaly Climate Change Adaptation Strategy, pg. 2.

<sup>15</sup> National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland, pg. 8.

1. **Communities and Heritage:** local communities have a vital role to play in protecting heritage. As enshrined in the Faro Convention, communities are at the frontline in caring for, enjoying and sharing those things that are special about their places, their history and local traditions.
2. **Leadership and Heritage:** the need for a highly effective heritage policy and regulatory infrastructure is recognised.
3. **Heritage Partnerships:** build stronger heritage partnerships, enabling stakeholders to better work together to ensure the protection and value of Ireland's heritage.<sup>16</sup>

## The Digital Connectivity Strategy for Ireland Draft Paper 2022

The Draft Paper sets out that the availability of high speed, reliable digital connectivity will support the delivery of Ireland's economic and social ambitions in the digital era. This digital connectivity will support more balanced regional development, as well as supporting the green transition, including by enabling remote working, and the implementation of the Government's Remote Working Strategy, and facilitating greater access to regional talent and skills. It will contribute to the reinvigoration of town and villages and help to address the digital divide for rural areas, including the delivery of connectivity to even the most remote rural locations, facilitating the joining up of national networks.

Digital targets include:

- All Irish households and businesses will be covered by a Gigabit network no later than 2028.
- All populated areas covered by 5G by no later than 2030.

- Complete the delivery of digital connectivity to all Connected Hubs and all Schools by 2023.<sup>17</sup>

## Digital Town Blueprint 2023 Town Report, Clara Co. Offaly

The Digital Town Blueprint (DTB) is an entry-level assessment for local authorities, chambers of commerce, and other local community groups interested in understanding the current digital readiness of their town. The DTB has been designed to help towns rapidly and cost-effectively:

- Understand their current digital town readiness and digital competitiveness;
- Compare their town against Irish and international benchmarks; and
- Stimulate stakeholder engagement on digitalisation.

The Town Centre First policy explicitly recognises that successful places utilise digital technology to enhance the experience of living and working in towns, enabling greater choices in terms of location and lifestyle.

The digital town study of Clara (March 2023) was prepared for the Department of Rural and Community Development by the Irish Institute of Digital Business at DCU Business School, University of Galway and .IE.

The preliminary study assessment gave Clara an overall Digital Town Score of 44, placing the town within the 'Digital Readiness' which is a 'Clearly Defined and Documented' category stating that *"there is clear evidence of digital readiness. Use and sophistication of digital technologies and capabilities are documented and planned. KPIs are competitive relative to peer towns and regional, national and EU averages."*<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Heritage Ireland 2030, pg. 41-50.

<sup>17</sup> Digital Connectivity Strategy for Ireland Draft Paper 2022, pg. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Digital Town Blueprint 2023 Town Report Clara, Co. Offaly, pg. 54.

## **National Implementation Plan for the Sustainable Development Goals 2022-2024**

The new (second) Implementation Plan aims to build on the structures and mechanisms from the first Plan and to develop and integrate additional approaches in areas identified through review and consultation as requiring further action. It sets out Ireland's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) implementation strategy for 2022-2024 and forms part of a series of consecutive Implementation Plans, each building on the previous iteration, to work towards achieving the SDGs.

Strategic Objectives set out within the Implementation Plan include:

1. To embed the SDG framework into the work of Government Departments to achieve greater Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development.
2. To integrate the SDGs into Local Authority work to better support the localisation of the SDGs.
3. Greater partnerships for the Goals.
4. To further incorporate the principle of Leave No One Behind into Ireland's Agenda 2030 implementation and reporting mechanisms.
5. Strong reporting mechanisms.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> National Implementation Plan for the Sustainable Development Goals 2022-2024, pg. 14-16.

# Regional Policy

## Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midlands Region 2019 - 2031

The Eastern and Midland Region's (EMRA) Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) outlines the regional policies for the next 9 years of growth and provides the basis for sustainable development. The RSES identifies regional assets, opportunities and pressures and provides appropriate policy responses in the form of 16 no. Regional Policy Objectives. The vision for the RSES is:

*“To create a sustainable and competitive Region that supports the health and wellbeing of our people and places, from urban to rural, with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunities for all.”<sup>20</sup>*

The population of the Region previously stood at 292,300 persons (Census 2016), however preliminary Census 2022 data determines the regional population as being 316,799 persons, an increase of c.8.4%, with an increase in the County Offaly population of c.6% over the same period to 82,668 persons.

The Regional Policy Objectives, which are linked to National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs) of the NPF, that have particular relevance to Clara include:

- **Compact Growth and Urban Regeneration:** Promote the regeneration of our cities, towns and villages by making better use of under-used land and buildings within the existing built-up urban footprint and to drive the delivery of quality housing and employment choice for the Region's citizens (NSO 1).
- **Rural Communities:** Support sustainable rural development and strengthen rural networks, economies and communities. Manage urban generated growth in areas under strong urban influence and encourage sustainable growth in areas that have experienced decline or stagnation (NSO 1, 3, 4).
- **Healthy Communities:** Protect and enhance the quality of our built and natural environment to support active lifestyles including walking and cycling, ensure clean air and water for all and quality healthcare and services that support human health (NSO 10).
- **Creative Places:** Enhance, integrate and protect our arts, culture and heritage assets to promote creative places and heritage-led regeneration (NSO 5, 7).
- **Integrated Transport and Land Use:** Promote best use of Transport Infrastructure, existing and planned, and promote sustainable and active modes of travel to ensure the proper integration of transportation and land use planning (NSO 2, 6, 8,9).
- **Support the Transition to Low Carbon and Clean Energy:** Pursue climate mitigation in line with global and national targets and harness the potential for a more distributed renewables-focused energy system to support the transition to a low carbon economy by 2050 (NSO 8, 9).
- **Enhanced Green Infrastructure:** Identify, protect and enhance Green Infrastructure and ecosystem services in the Region and promote the sustainable management of strategic natural assets such as our coastlines, farmlands, peatlands, uplands,

<sup>20</sup> RSES for the Eastern and Midlands Region, pg. 6.

woodlands and wetlands (NSO 8, 9, 11).

- **Biodiversity and Natural Heritage:** Promote coordinated spatial planning to conserve and enhance the biodiversity of our protected habitats and species including landscape and heritage protection (NSO 7, 8).
- **A Strong Economy Supported by Enterprise and Innovation:** To build a resilient economic base and promote innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystems that support smart specialisation, cluster development and sustained economic growth (NSO 5, 10).
- **Improve Education Skills and Social Inclusion:** To improve education and develop the right skills to attract employers and retain talent and promote social inclusion to ensure opportunities for quality jobs across the Region (NSO 5, 10).
- **Enhanced Strategic Connectivity:** Protect and enhance international connectivity and regional accessibility to support economic development, build economic resilience and support strengthened rural communities and economies including the blue-green economy and tourism (NSO 2, 3, 6).
- **Collaboration Platform:** Provide a regional framework for collaboration and partnerships and to support local and regional bodies in leveraging funding and partnership opportunities (NSO 2, 3, 5).<sup>21</sup>

## Midland Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024

The Midland Regional Enterprise Plan (MREP) was brought forward by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment in March 2022 and sets out projects and initiatives across the four Midlands counties of Longford,

Westmeath, Laois and Offaly.

The MREP has three strategic objectives:<sup>22</sup>

1. **Climate action - transition to a zero-carbon economy:** support the activities of the Midlands Regional Transition Team to develop transformative projects to guide emerging low-carbon focused projects across the region.
2. **Capitalising on strengths of the Midlands through smart specialisation and digitalisation:** includes actions to capitalise and realise business, industry, and skills opportunities presented by TU status; leverage 'The Midlands Advanced Manufacturing Action Plan' to position the region as an advanced manufacturing centre of excellence and develop a Smart Connected Technologies Cluster.
3. **Positioning the Midlands as the destination of choice to live, work, visit, invest and learn:** includes actions to promote and position the region as a community of choice; to support and develop additional flexible office solutions throughout the region, including the exploration of and the development of vacant properties; to progress and support tourism development, visitor experience development plans and the experience economy across the region and finally to establish a Regional Food and Drink Cluster in the Midlands.

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<sup>21</sup> RSES for the Eastern and Midlands Region, Appendix I.

<sup>21</sup> Midland Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024, pg. 11-20.

# Local Policy

## Offaly County Development Plan 2021 – 2027

The County Development Plan (CDP) for Offaly was adopted on 10th September 2021 and came into effect 22nd October 2021. The CDP sets out the policies and objectives that will guide the proper planning and sustainable development within the County over the six year Plan period to 2027. The strategic vision as contained within the CDP seeks:

*“To create a sustainable and competitive county that supports the health and wellbeing of our people and places, from urban to rural, with access to employment opportunities supported by high quality housing and physical, social and community infrastructure for all, in a climate resilient manner and with respect for our biodiversity.”<sup>23</sup>*

In summary, the strategic objectives outlined in the CDP include:

- Plan for a population increase in County Offaly during the Plan period of 9,239 persons.
- Consolidate settlements to avoid undesirable and inefficient sprawl.
- Ensure better alignment between the location of population growth and employment growth.
- Reduce car dependency, and increase the use of sustainable mobility such as walking, cycling and public transport.
- Direct a significant proportion of the county’s development and population growth into Tullamore, a ‘Key Town’ as per the RSES.

- Reverse the decline/stagnation of towns and villages through renewal and regeneration, and create healthy place-making.
- Protect and enhance Offaly’s natural assets.
- Provide high quality housing with adequate infrastructure, services and amenities.
- Make more efficient use of key resources such as land, water, energy, waste and transportation infrastructure.
- Create a competitive business environment supporting economic development, job creation, tourism and prosperity for all.
- Achieve transition to a competitive, low carbon, climate resilient and environmentally sustainable economy.
- Encourage inclusive and active sustainable communities based around a strong network of community facilities and amenities.
- Contribute, as practicable, towards achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The Settlement Hierarchy within the CDP designates Clara as a “Town”. In the hierarchy, *“towns have a local service and employment function. There is a need to promote regeneration and revitalisation of towns and support local enterprise and employment opportunities to ensure their viability as service centres for the surrounding rural areas. Those in proximity to the larger urban centres have*

<sup>23</sup> Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027, pg. 12.

*experienced significant growth and urban generated pressures and require the levels of growth to be managed and to ensure that there is a requisite service level for the existing population.”<sup>24</sup>*

## Clara Town Plan

Volume II of the Offaly CDP 2021-2027 contains the Clara Town Plan. The Town Plan adopts an asset based approach to the future spatial development of Clara focusing on areas which have the greatest capacity and potential for growth in line with its place in the county settlement hierarchy and core strategy.

The strategic aims for Clara include:<sup>25</sup>

1. **Reinforce Clara town centre** as the heart of the town by avoiding undesirable and inefficient sprawl, achieving critical mass and consolidating new development within the built-up footprint of the town, through targeting a significant proportion of future development on infill/brownfield/underutilised sites and extending out sequentially subject to available infrastructure.
2. **Harness the economic and employment generating potential of the town** through the on-going development of the service and manufacturing sectors in the town, in particular the Lehinch Business Park, and facilitate new enterprises within the zoned and serviced areas of the town.
3. **Deliver high quality housing** of a sufficient scale, mix, tenure, sequence and density, located in optimum locations and aligned with adequate social and physical infrastructure.
4. **Promote permeable, healthy neighbourhoods** that focus on place making and a sense of wellbeing to ensure Clara is an attractive place to live and work.
5. **Promote and support innovative housing models** including live-work units, special needs housing and housing for older people in Clara Town Centre.
6. **Provision of ecological connectivity and walking and cycling infrastructure throughout the town** which links all the Green Infrastructure available to residents in Clara; Clara Bog, Eiscir Riada, River Brosna, the Goodbody Reservoir and the disused Clara – Banagher railway line.
7. **Protect Clara’s built heritage assets** which are a non-renewable resource that contributes to our understanding of the past.
8. **Early and/or timely provision** (in tandem with development), **of critical physical and social infrastructure** necessary for the future sustainable growth of Clara town.
9. **Facilitate and support a broad range of community, cultural and recreational facilities** to serve the needs of the residents of the Plan area and its wider catchment.
10. **Enhance climate adaptation and mitigation**, and accelerate a transition to a low carbon, climate resilient and environmentally sustainable economy in Clara.

<sup>24</sup> Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027, pg. 50.

<sup>25</sup> Clara Town Plan, pg. 3.

The Town Plan identifies a number of Opportunity Sites<sup>26</sup> which are as follows:

- **Erry Mill and lands at Frederick Street:** Erry Mill is the largest surviving Flour Mill in County Offaly and occupies a prominent site at the corner of the Ballycumber Road and Bridge Street. The site contains Protected Structures and its redevelopment should include the careful restoration and reuse of these buildings. Potential uses include a creative hub, incubation facilities, enterprise centre, community meeting spaces, conference facilities, office and residential development, a linear park and surface car park.
- **Lands to the rear of River Street/Main Street:** Situated in close proximity to the commercial heart of the town centre. It is likely that some buildings may need to be demolished in order to gain satisfactory access to these lands. Potential uses include a contemporary landmark building, mixed-use scheme, large convenience retail store, covered market space, residential development and surface car park.
- **Charlestown Mill and County Council Yard:** These properties make up a large site in close proximity to the town centre. The Mill is a Protected Structure and is a prominent gateway feature sited beside Charlestown Bridge at the edge of the town centre. Potential uses include a heritage museum, distillery/brewery, craft work, galleries, café, Third Level education facility, primary care centre, residential care facilities.

## Clara Town Team's Blueprint Documents

The masterplan documents were prepared by the Town Team (refer to Appendices I and II) and in summary they recognise the potential of Clara in terms of its accessibility and connectivity to the wider Midlands Region but that it is at a 'crossroads' figuratively speaking. The masterplan (refer to Appendix I) provides a SWOT analysis<sup>27</sup> of the settlement of Clara along with recommendations in relation to a number of key areas including:

- Parking and Traffic.
- Heritage.
- Town Centre Regeneration.
- Dereliction and Vacancy.
- Open Space and Green Infrastructure.
- Biodiversity and Natural Heritage.

## Local Economic and Community Plan 2016 - 2021

As set out within its Executive Summary, the Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) is an integrated plan containing an Economic Plan prepared by the Strategic Policy Committee (SPC) for Economic Development, Enterprise and Planning and a Community Plan prepared by the Local Community Development Committee (LCDC). Stakeholder engagement and public consultation has played an essential part in shaping this plan to work for communities. The overarching vision for the LECP is based around Offaly's finest attributes in terms of People, Business and Place.

The purpose of a LECP is to set out the objectives and actions needed to promote and support the economic, local and community development of an area for a six year period.

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<sup>26</sup> Clara Town Plan, pg. 7-10.

<sup>27</sup> Clara Town Team's Blueprint Documents, pg. 4.



Within the LECP, the train station at Clara, which is located on a strategic rail corridor, is categorised as being a ‘strength’ for the town, while the international significance of Clara bog is defined as being an ‘opportunity’.

## **Offaly Digital Strategy 2020 – 2022**

The Digital Strategy sets the agenda to support the short-term rollout of digital infrastructure and services to citizens in Offaly over an initial two-year, first phase timeline from 2020 to 2022. An immediate short term strategy provides initial digital footsteps to focus efforts on immediate needs and enable plans for the medium term thereafter. The Digital Strategy is based upon three pillars being ‘Infrastructure, ‘Citizens’ and ‘Enterprise’.<sup>28</sup>

## **Local Projects**

### **Town and Village Renewal Scheme**

Phase 2 of the Renewal Scheme (see Figure 2.1) provided for street enhancement works to Main Street, improvements to existing pedestrian footpaths along both sides of Main Street and Church Street, the upgrading of existing controlled pedestrian crossings and installation of a new pedestrian crossing, lining of on-street parallel parking areas, provision of a new kerbed verge and planting on Church Street provision of street furniture, and other associated works as necessary to facilitate the installation of the proposed street enhancement works.

The remodeling of the junction of Egan’s Lane and the Square and the junction of Egan’s Lane with Bridge Street was also included along with the restriction of traffic on Egan’s Lane to one-way outward from the Square.

The provision of marked out on-street parking on Egan’s Lane and other associated works as necessary to facilitate the installation of the proposed street enhancement works.

Offaly County Council has recently secured funding of €100,000 as awarded by the Department for Rural and Community Development’s under their Town and Village Renewal Scheme project (2022 Streetscape Enhancement Measure). This funding will be used for the improvement of c. 40 no. properties (painting works) located on Church Street, River Street and Main Street.

### **Part 8 Residential Development at Raheen**

A Part 8 planning application (see Figure 2.2) was submitted in January 2021 for the construction of 38 no. dwellings. The housing mix provides for single and two storey units accommodating 1-4 no. bedrooms.

The proposed development also included the provision of 2 no. controlled pedestrian crossings to the R420, the realignment of the junction of the L20157 Local Road with the R420 Regional Road and the provision of a new footpath to the R420 & L2017. The proposed development is currently at tender stage and construction is expected to commence in 2023.

### **Active Travel Schemes**

Clara has been successful in securing funding under the Active Travel Investment Grant Allocations for 2023 with funding awarded for the following schemes:

- Active Travel Footpath Improvements in Clara: Funding of €298,882; and
- SRTS Support Infrastructure Frederick Street: Funding of €9,382.

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<sup>28</sup> Offaly Digital Strategy 2020-2022, pg. 13.

Figure 2.1 Street Enhancement Works Plan

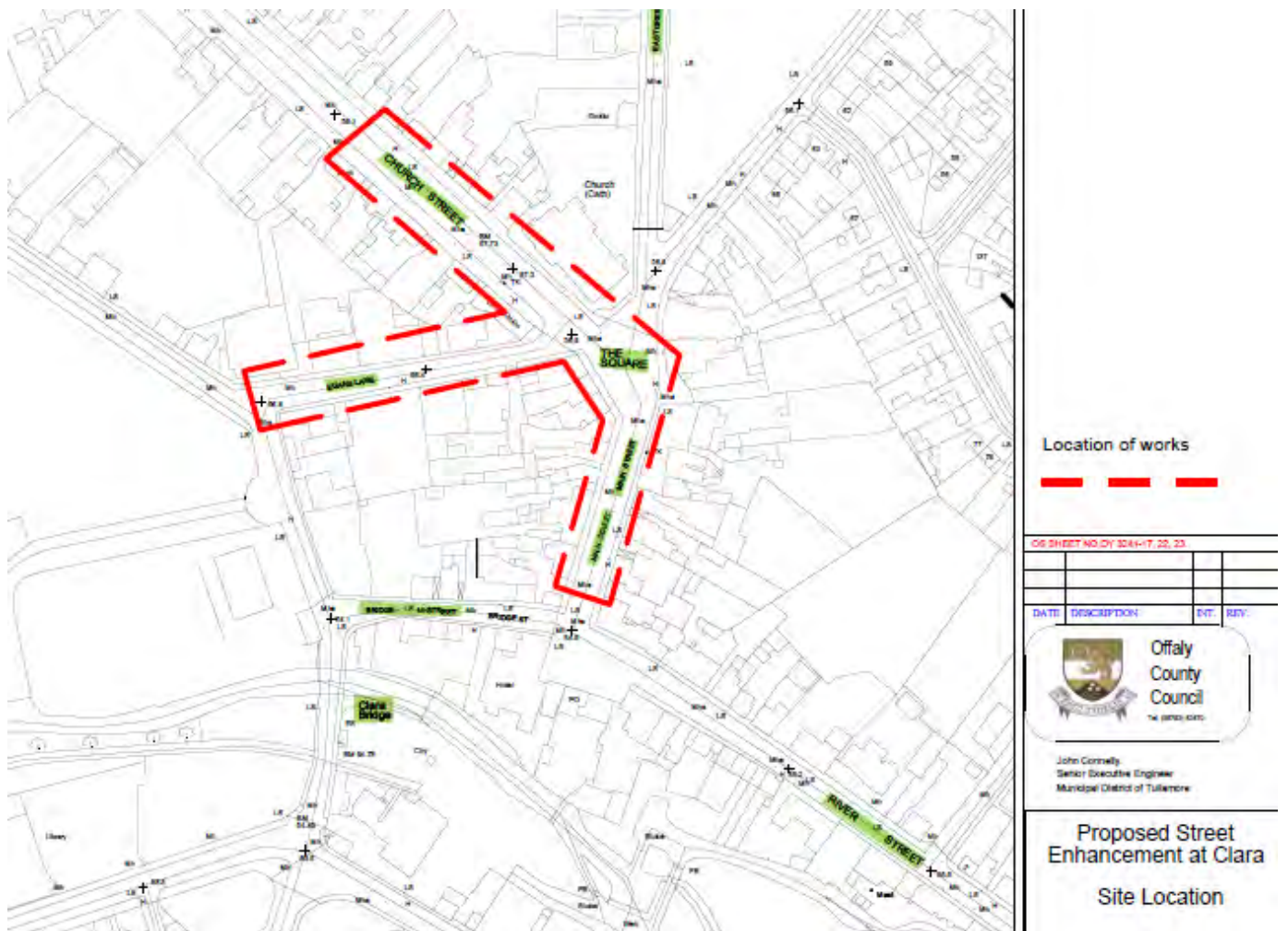


Figure 2.2 Proposed Site Layout (Part 8 Scheme)



## Clashawaun River Walk Amenity

Offaly County Council (as lead organisation) along with Clara Heritage Group have secured funding of €200,000 from the Department of Rural and Community Development (under the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme 2021) for the future development of a new 400m river walk amenity along the banks of the River Brosna at Clashawaun.

The proposal is to develop a river walk amenity, similar to a linear park, on the banks of the River Brosna in Clara, by opening up the riverbank and creating an accessible walkway - this project aligns with Objective NHO-01 of the Clara Town Plan.

Figure 2.3 River Walk Amenity - Section



Source: Mitchell & Associates

Source: Mitchell & Associates

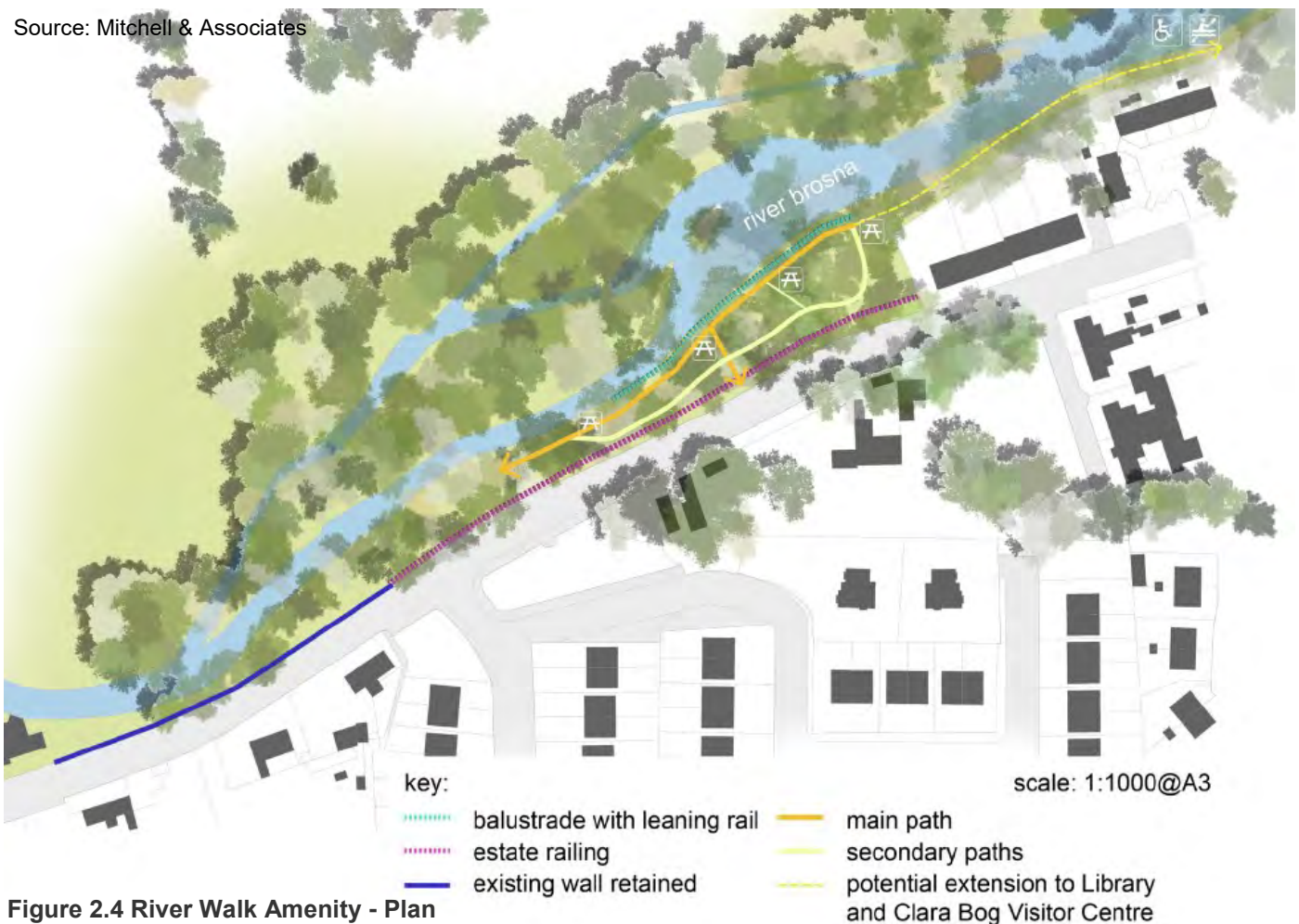


Figure 2.4 River Walk Amenity - Plan

## Clara Bog Trail

Offaly County Council (as lead organisation) along with Clara Community Council secured funding of €72,000 from the Department of Rural and Community Development (under the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme 2019) for the Clara Bog Trail project. This project provides a 450m section of footway from Clara Bog Visitor Centre to the Clara Bog Nature Reserve. This section of footway connects to the existing boardwalk within the Nature Reserve. This project aligns with Objective NHO-06 of the Clara Town Plan.

Clara Bog Trail



Aerial Photograph of Clara Bog Trail



## Age Friendly Town

Clara has been selected as one of 25 Age Friendly pilot towns across the country. The age friendly strategy in Clara has been a collaborative one between the Council, the community and local businesses.

The overall aim for each Age Friendly Town is to enhance the quality of life of older people in the community through the delivery of improvements in matters such as outdoor spaces and buildings, transportation, housing and social participation for example.

## Drayton Villa Lands - Masterplan

Lands encompassing and situated north of Drayton Villa on Kilbeggan Road have been identified in a masterplan proposal for new residential and educational uses comprising c.71 houses within the northern and central portions of the site and a new post-Primary School in the southern portion of the site along with adjoining playing pitches. Within the masterplan proposal, allowance has also been given for lands for additional buildings for Scoil Pronsias Naofa while accommodating a pathway through the existing woodland area to the north/north west.

### Example of Age Friendly Parking in Malahide, Co. Dublin



# Socio-Economic Analysis

This section of the Report presents an analysis of socio-economic information for Clara which has been primarily informed by data obtained from the Central Statistics Office (CSO). The analysis undertaken provides the baseline social, demographic and economic structures of Clara along with other citizen-related information such as educational attainment and modes of transport used by residents.

## Social and Demographic Structure

### Population

The settlement of Clara had a population of 3,336 persons as recorded by the Census undertaken in 2016. While the preliminary results from the recent 2022 Census have not yet released Clara's 2022 settlement population, the preliminary results do provide an updated population figure for the Clara Electoral Division area which recorded a population figure of 4,204 persons. This represents a rise of c.6% over the intercensal six year period from 3,956 persons. The preliminary 2022 Census results reveal that the population of the County has risen to 82,668 which is a c.6% percentage increase since 2016. For comparative purposes, the populations of the Electoral Divisions for Tullamore, Birr and Edenderry, as recorded by the 2022 Census, are provided at Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Electoral Division Populations (2022)

Settlement	ED 2022 Population
Clara	4,204
Tullamore	11,894
Edenderry	7,502
Birr	4,729

### Age Structure

In terms of age structure, c.43% of Clara's population was aged between 0 and 29 years with c.39% aged between 30-59 years. Those aged 60 years and older accounted for c.18% of the town's population as identified in the 2016 census results (see Figure 2.5). Clara is considered to have a young population with c.57% of its population aged 39 years or younger.

### Marital Status

Single persons accounted for more than half (c.55%) of all persons living in Clara as recorded by the 2016 Census. Those who were identified as being 'Married' represented 35% of the population. Persons who were recorded as being either 'Separated' and 'Widowed' were 4% each.

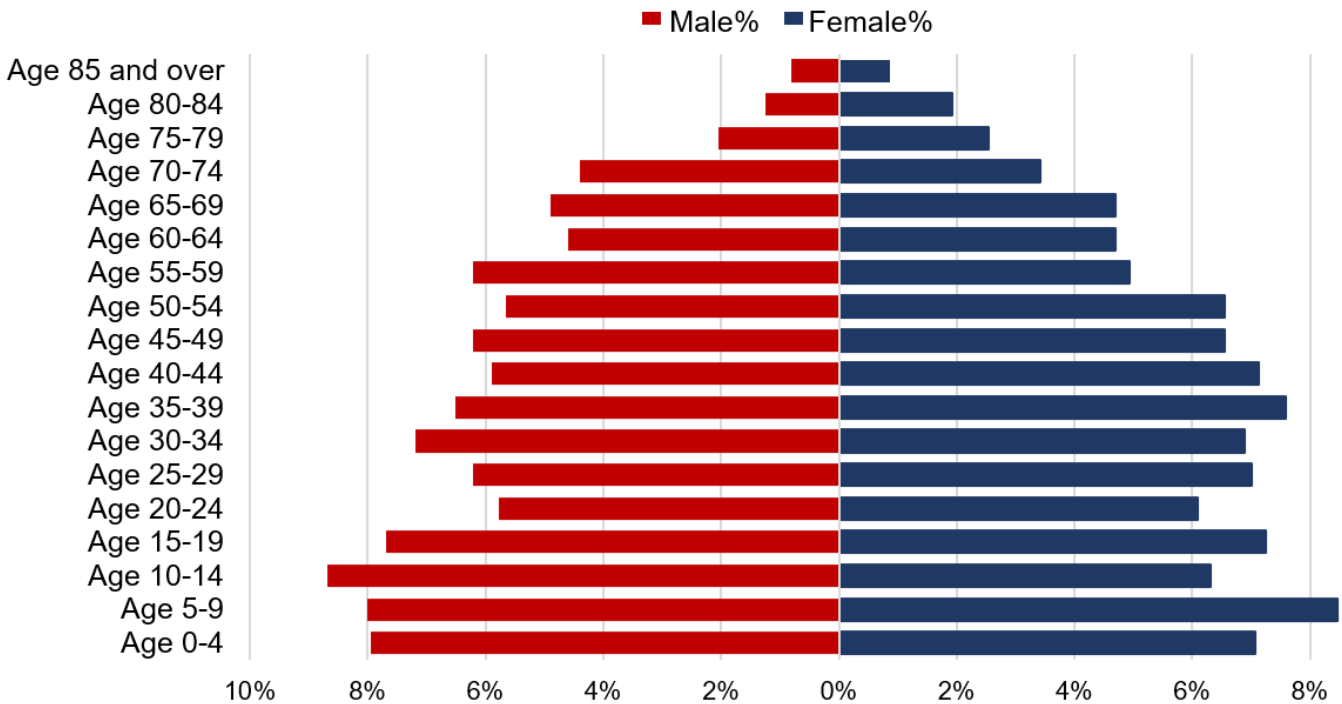
### Household Size

A 'One Person' household size accounted for c.23% of all households in Clara with a slight increase to c.28% for 'Two Person' households. Cumulatively, over half of all households in Clara had no more than two persons while three persons and over accounted for c.48% of the town's household size.

### Household Type

The most common household type recorded for Clara was 'Married Couple with Children' with just over one quarter of all households (c.27%) within this category. Those in the 'Cohabiting with Children' category represented only c.6%, while 'One Parent Family (Mother) with Children' accounted for c.14% of all households in the town.

Figure 2.5 Age Structure - Clara (2016 Census)



### Housing Tenure

In terms of housing tenure, c.33% of private households in Clara were 'Owned with a Mortgage or Loan' with the 'Owned Outright' tenure accounting for c.35%. Having regard to rented accommodation, c.13% of households were rented from a 'Private Landlord' with c.17% of Clara's households being 'Rented from Local Authority or a Voluntary Housing Body'. In total, just over two-thirds of Clara's households had ownership of their property.

### Occupancy Status

As recorded by the 2016 Census data, c.89% of dwellings in Clara were occupied with c.2% falling into the 'Temporarily Absent' category. 'Other Vacant Dwellings' and 'Unoccupied Holiday Homes' accounted for c.9% of the total housing stock in Clara.

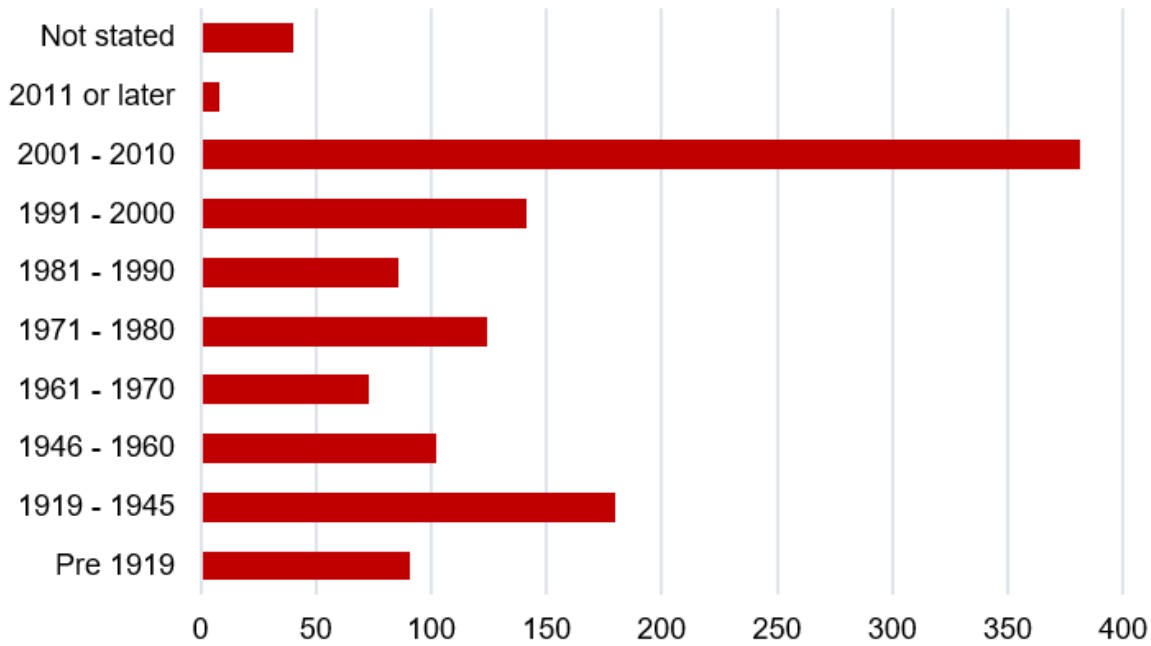
### Housing Stock

In relation to Clara's housing stock, a total of 389 no. houses (c.32%) were constructed from the year 2001 onwards with only 8 no. houses (c.1%) built from the year 2011 and onwards (see Figure 2.6). New housing stock is classified as being constructed from 1991 onwards, and this category accounted for c.43% of the total housing in Clara. Older housing stock built prior to the year 1990 represented over half of all stock in Clara at c.54%.

### Educational Attainment

For persons aged 15 years and above, a total of c.22% of Clara residents had attained an 'Upper Secondary' level of education with c.8% achieving a 'Technical or Vocational' qualification. In relation to Third Level education, c.10% of residents had achieved an 'Ordinary/Bachelor's Degree' with a further c.3% in total having obtained a Postgraduate qualification.

Figure 2.6 Housing Stock - Clara (2016 Census)

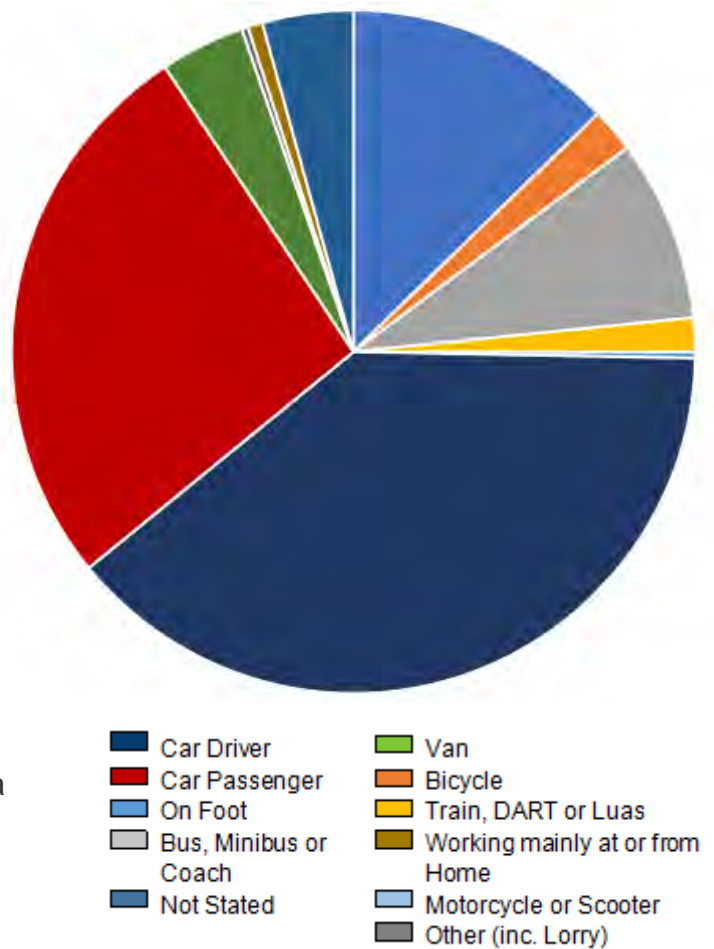


### Commuting & Journey Duration

In terms of modes of transport used for commuting trips (to work, school and/or college), the dominant mode of travel in Clara was the 'Private Car' (accounting for both car driver and car passenger), which represented a figure of c.65% of journeys (see Figure 2.7). The second most popular means of travel was 'On Foot' with c.13% of journeys undertaken by this mode. Sustainable modes of transport i.e. Walking, Bus, Train etc. cumulatively accounted for around one-quarter of all journeys made.

For commuting journeys undertaken, less than half (c.45%) of journeys were 15 minutes, while c.30% of the commuting trips had a duration of between 15 to 30 minutes. A small percentage (c.7%) had a journey of one hour and more. In terms of car ownership, three quarters (75%) of all households in Clara had ownership of up to 2 cars with 20% of households not having access to a car at all.

Figure 2.7 Commuting - Clara (2016 Census)





## Economic Structure

### Principal Economic Status

For persons aged 15 years and above, c.45% of Clara's workforce population were recorded as being 'At Work' with c.11% being 'Unemployed' while the same percentage were classified as being 'Students'. Those persons who had retired amounted to c.15%. A total of c.7% of the town's workforce were unable to work due to permanent sickness or disability (see Table 2.2).

**Table 2.2 Principal Economic Status - Clara Workforce (2016 Census)**

Economic Status	Total Persons	Total %
At Work	1,140	44.5%
Looking for First Regular Job	28	1.1%
Unemployed	281	11%
Student	284	11.1%
Looking after Family/Home	248	9.7%
Retired	394	15.4%
Unable to Work (Permanent Sickness/Disability)	178	6.9%
Other	9	0.4%

### Industry Group

The highest percentage of Clara's residents were recorded as being in employment in the 'Manufacturing Industries' group at c.23%, followed closely by 'Professional Services' at c.22%. Cumulatively, those industry groups accounted for just under half of Clara's total residents. Those persons employed in 'Commerce and Trade' accounted for c.20%. Industry group figures for Clara are illustrated at Figure 2.8.

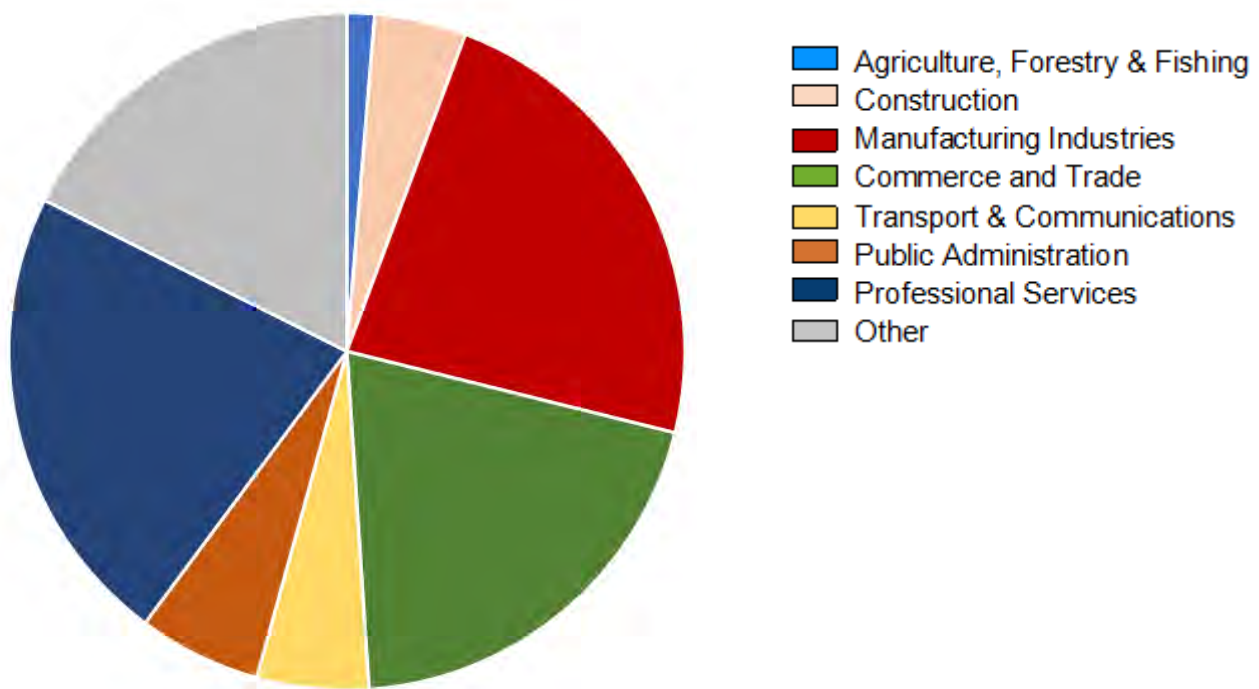
### Occupational Status

Residents in Clara held a wide range of occupations. Discounting the 'Other' category, the highest percentage of Clara's population held an occupation within the 'Process, Plant and Machine Operatives' group at c.16%. 'Skilled Trade Occupations' was next at c.12% of all residents. Cumulatively, c.21% of residents in Clara held a position within a senior/managerial occupation which included positions such as Directors, Managers, Senior Officials, Professional and Technical roles etc.

### Salary Values

Clara's population generated a significant salary value to the County that was c. €42.3 million per annum (as at 2016). The 'Professional Services' industry group generated the highest group salary amount at c. €11.7 million followed by 'Manufacturing Industries' at €10.3 million. The lowest salary generator per industry group was 'Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing' which amounted to c. €600,000 annually. The average annual salary for County Offaly in 2016 was €35,217.

Figure 2.8 Industry Group - Clara (2016 Census)



### Infrastructure

The settlement of Clara is situated on the axis of two regional roads being the R420 (which runs north west-south east) and the R436 (which runs east-west). The M6 motorway provides a key transport link and is situated a relatively short distance away, being c.8km to the north.

Clara benefits from having a location on the rail network that provides sustainable transport connectivity to settlements such as Dublin, Galway, Westport and Ballina and more locally to Athlone, Tullamore and Kildare. By road, Clara is situated c.12km north west of the settlement of Tullamore.

In terms of digital connectivity, a total of 63% of all households had broadband internet access with just over half of all Clara households having their own personal computer.

### Economic Assets

The adopted County Development Plan (CDP) designates a Retail Core which is centred around the River Street/Church Street locale. This provides a focus for retailing in the town.

Situated to the north on the R420 road is Carraig Mór Industrial Estate which provides modern industrial units for use. On the western periphery of Clara, there are a number of commercial/industrial operators such as Paltech, Rosderra Irish Meats, Waste Matters and Thrace Synthetic Packaging Ltd which are situated on the R436 route. This area of Clara is designated for Industrial and Warehousing land uses in the adopted CDP.

To the eastern periphery, also on the R436 route, there are a number of health/pharma employers at Europharma Concepts Ltd and Nelipak Healthcare Packaging Europe Ltd. A sand and gravel quarry is located off L2015 New Road.

In terms of its geographic location, Clara benefits from being a short distance from the county town of Tullamore. The settlement of Athlone, which is a designated Regional Growth Centre in the RSES, is less than 30 km from Clara to the north west on the M6 motorway.

As referenced in Section 1, the LECP sets out that the train station at Clara is categorised as being a ‘strength’ for the town. Clara bog, which has international ecological status, is defined as being an ‘opportunity’ for the town.

### Value of the Economy

A metric that can be utilised to appraise levels of economic value/activity is ‘Gross Value Added’ (GVA). CSO data for the Midland region placed a GVA value per person of €21,248 (basic prices) for the year 2016<sup>29</sup>. If this value is applied to Clara’s population (which is taken as 3,336 persons), a GVA value for the town is calculated as being c.€71 million.

Taking a regional perspective, the population of the Midland region in 2016 was 292,301 persons and, similarly, if the GVA value is applied to the regional population, a regional GVA figure of €6.2 billion is generated. Through a comparative assessment of the GVA figures as set out above, it is estimated that the settlement of Clara contributes c.1% of the Midland region’s overall GVA figure.

### Land Rental Values

Data obtained in relation to property rental values can provide an indicator regarding potential economic value. Available information sourced from the Property Services Regulatory Authority in respect of a select number of rental properties in Clara with different land uses and associated rental values is summarised in Table 2.3.

### Socio-Economic Analysis - Key Findings

- **c.43% of Clara’s population aged between 0- 29 years with c.57% aged**

Table 2.3 Rental Values - Clara

Property Location	Land Use	Average Annual Rent
Garran an Chaislean	Community	€4,200
Clara House	Agricultural	€3,600
River House	Retail	€15,600
Main Street	Unknown	€20,800

**39 or younger.**

- **More than half of residents (c.55%) were of ‘Single’ status with c.35% being ‘Married’.**
  - **c.51% of all households in Clara had no more than two persons.**
  - **Just under half of the labour force (c.45%) in Clara were considered to be ‘At Work’.**
  - **Foremost industry group that residents belonged to was ‘Manufacturing Industries’ at c.23%.**
  - **Annual salary generation in Clara was estimated at just over c.€42 million.**
  - **c.10% of Clara’s population have obtained a Third Level degree with an additional c.3% achieving a Postgraduate qualification.**
  - **For commuting journeys to places of work, c.65% of Clara residents used a private car with only c.14% using sustainable modes. For trips to school and college, sustainable modal share increased to c.23%.**
  - **Clara has a high level of car ownership with 50% of households having ownership of one car while c.75% of households have ownership of up to two cars.**
- c.21% of employees in Clara held a senior occupation such as a Director, Manager or Senior Official.**

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/cirgdp/countyincomesandregionalgdp2019/>

# Urban Analysis

This section of the Plan presents an urban audit of the settlement of Clara in terms of, *inter alia*, its streetscapes, public spaces, built form, core areas, character areas, landmark and heritage buildings and overall settlement pattern.



# Clara - Locational Context



Figure 2.9 Locational Context



# Clara - Approach to Town Centre



Figure 2.10 Approach to Town Centre





# Clara - Land Use Analysis

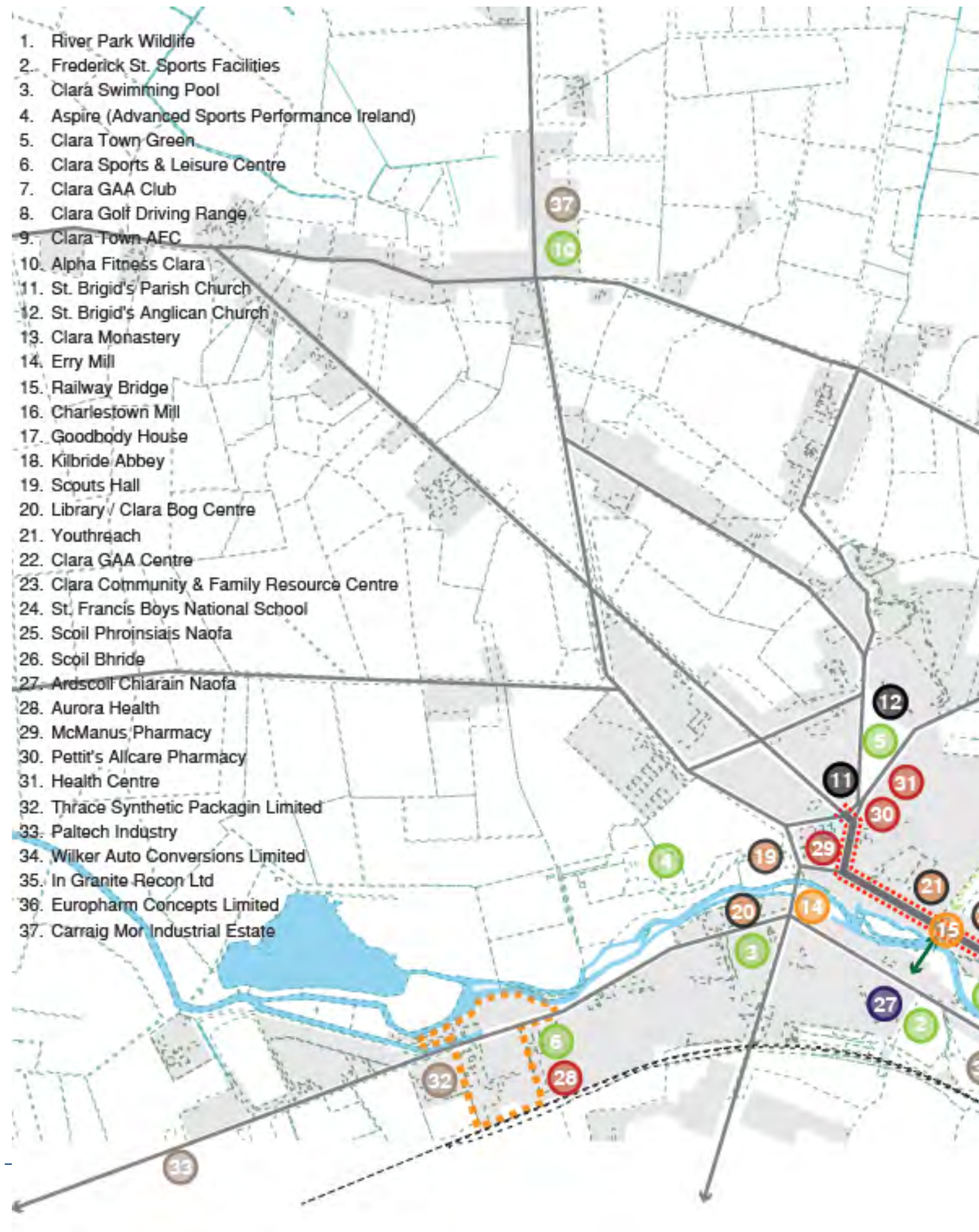
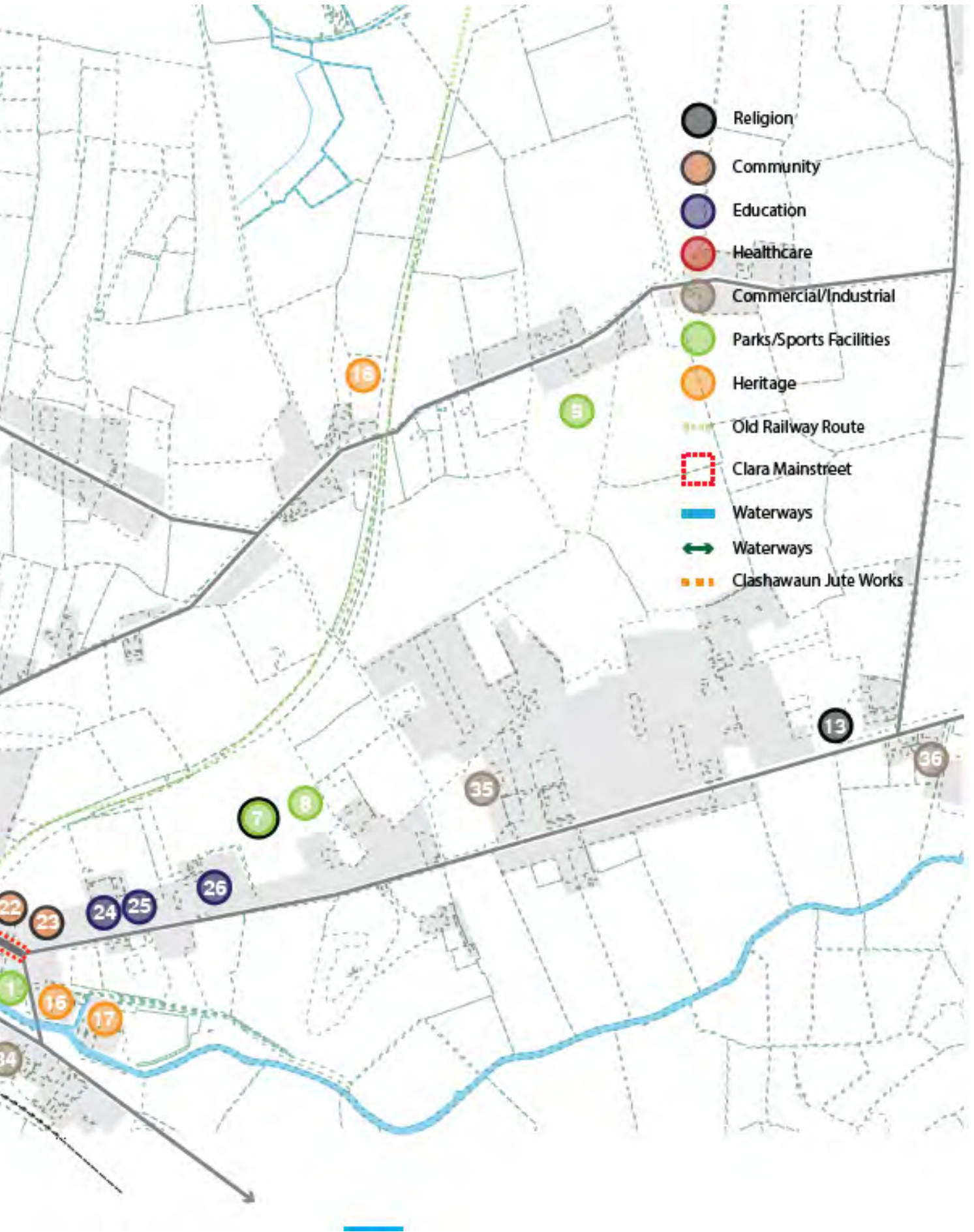


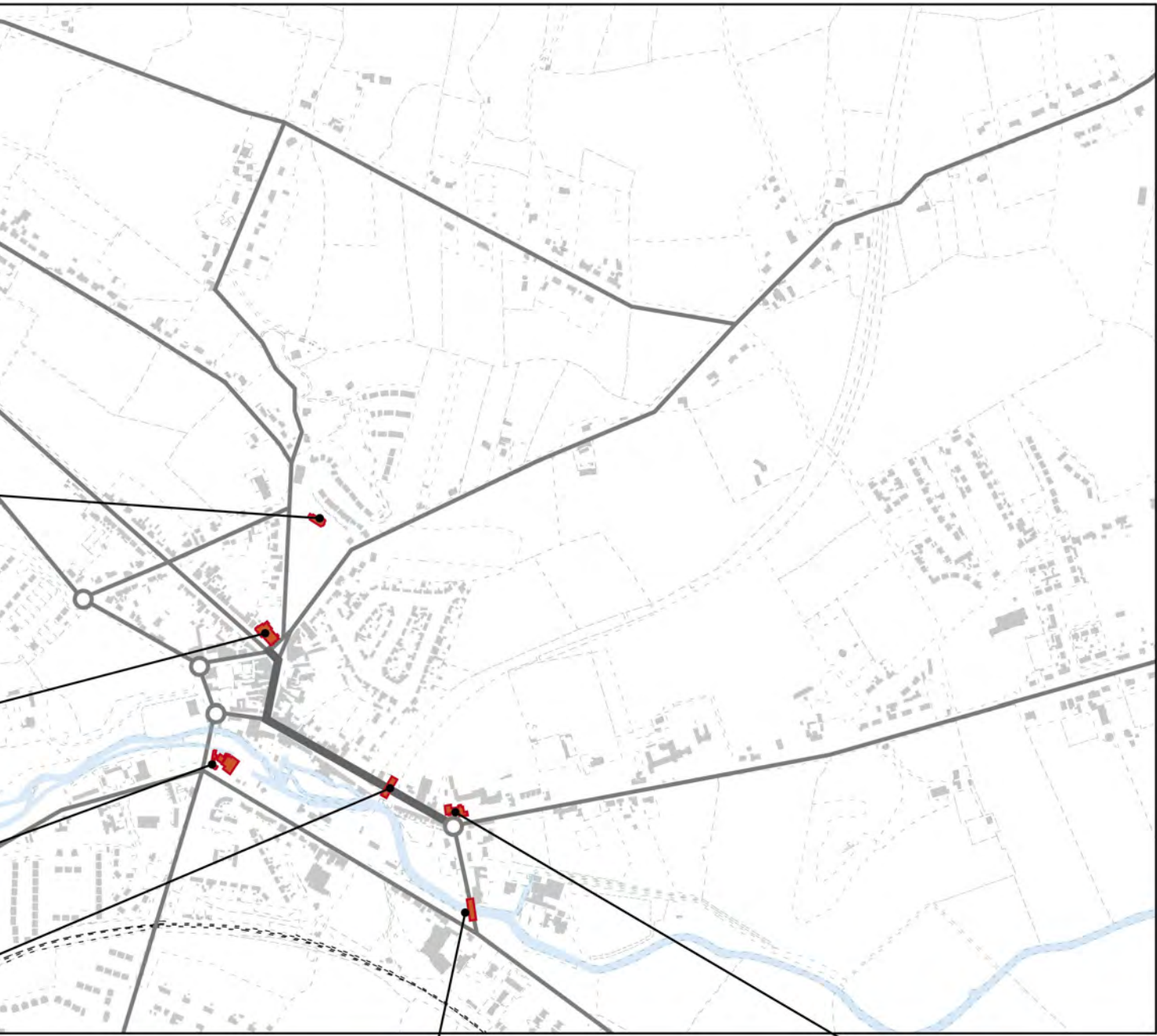
Figure 2.11 Land Use Analysis



# Clara - Landmarks



Figure 2.12 Landmarks



CHARLESTOWN BRIDGE

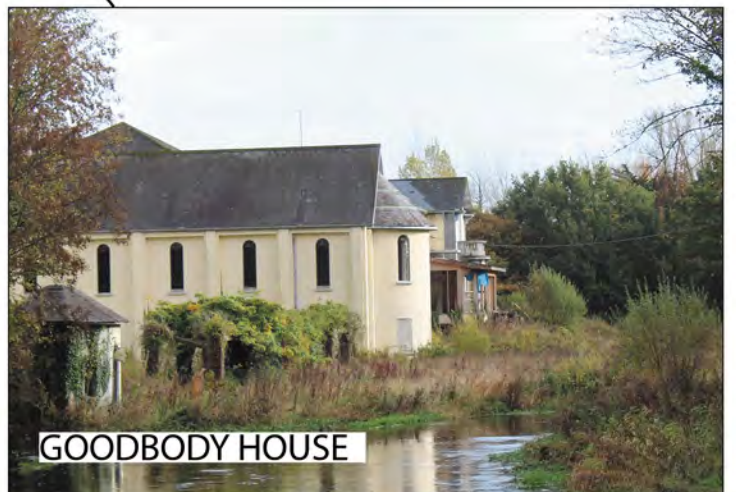
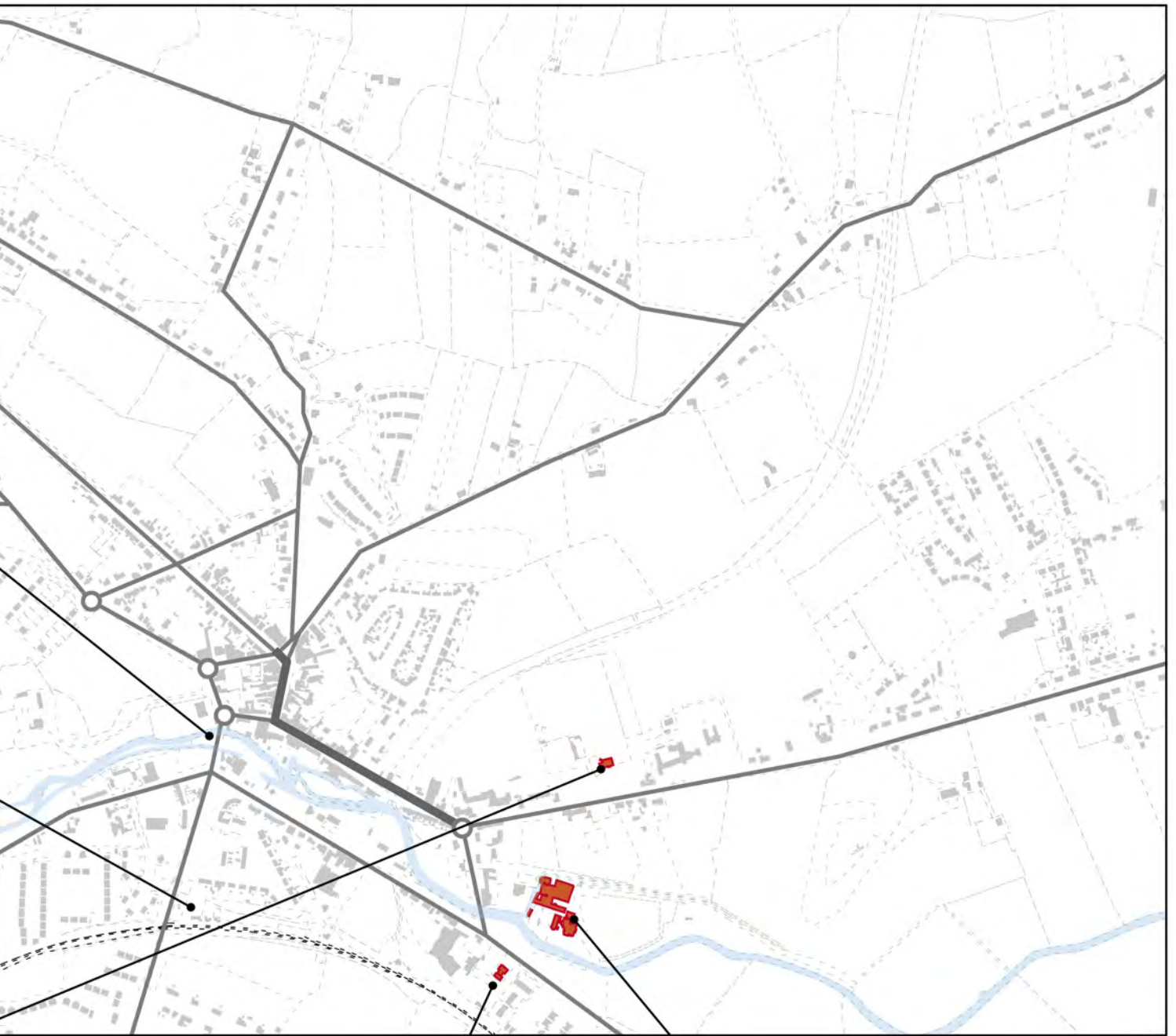


COMMUNITY AND FAMILY RESOURCE CENTRE

# Clara - Heritage Assets



Figure 2.13 Heritage Assets



# Clara - Unoccupied Properties (in proximity to Town Centre)

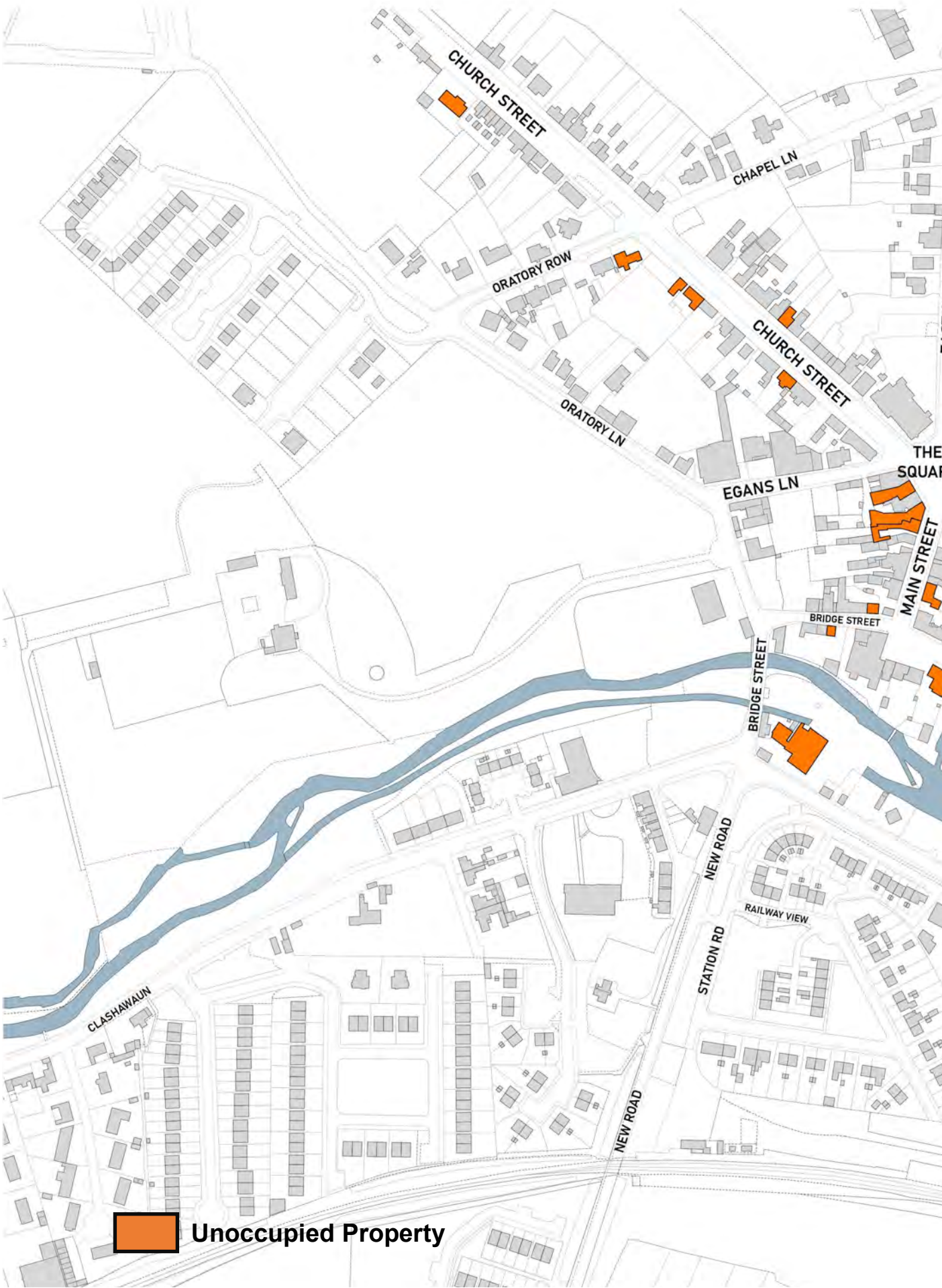


Figure 2.14 Heritage Assets





# Clara - Open Spaces



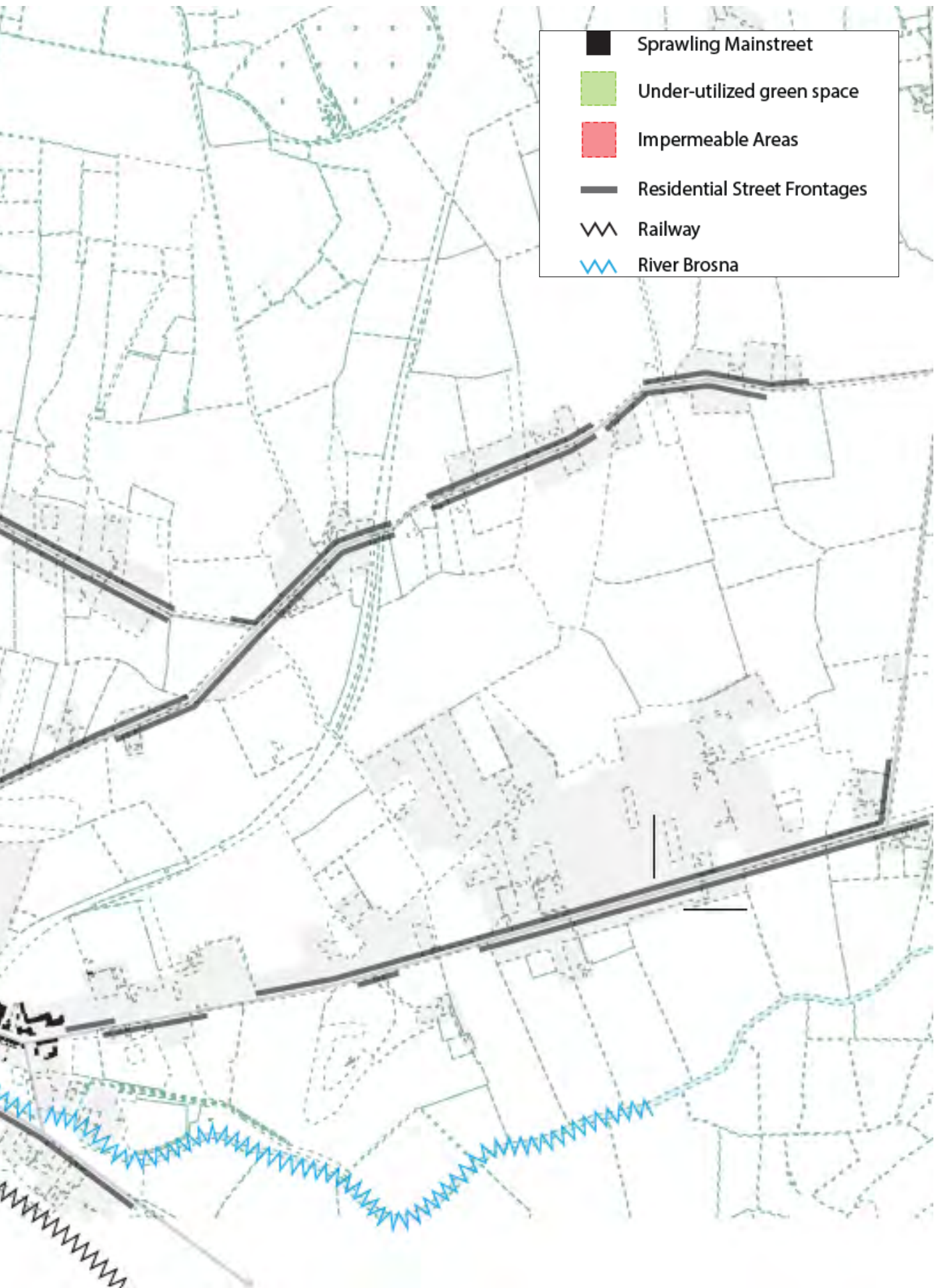
Figure 2.15 Open Spaces



# Clara - Constraints



Figure 2.16 Constraints



# Clara - Character Areas



Figure 2.17 Character Areas



# Clara - Opportunity & Project Sites

## Opportunity Sites

- 1 Erry Mill and Lands at Fredrick St
- 2 Lands to the rear of River St/ Main St
- 3 Charlestown Mill

## Project Sites

- 4 Farrell Building
- 5 Railway Greenway
- 6 River Walk
- 7 Goodbody's Reservoir Nature Walk
- 8 Water Sports Facility
- 9 Main Street Connections (see Laneways and Alleyways Project)
- 10 Town Centre Parking Locations
- 11 Former co-op Building
- 12 Town Centre Cycle Routes
- 13 Heritage Buildings Opportunities
- 14 Heritage-led Competition
- 15 Star Community Hall

## 'Laneways & Alleyways' Project

- A Passageway to River Street with link to Proposed River Walk
- B Passageway to lands to rear of River Street
- C Passageway to Main Street from lands to rear of River Street
- D Passageway to The Green from lands to rear of River Street

-  PROTECTED STRUCTURES
-  POTENTIAL CAR PARKING
-  EXISTING LIBRARY
-  EXISTING SWIMMING POOL
-  EXISTING TRAIN STATION
-  PROPOSED PEDESTRIAN/CYCLE LINKS
-  ENHANCED RIVERSIDE WALKWAY
-  PROPOSED PEDESTRIAN/CYCLE LINKS

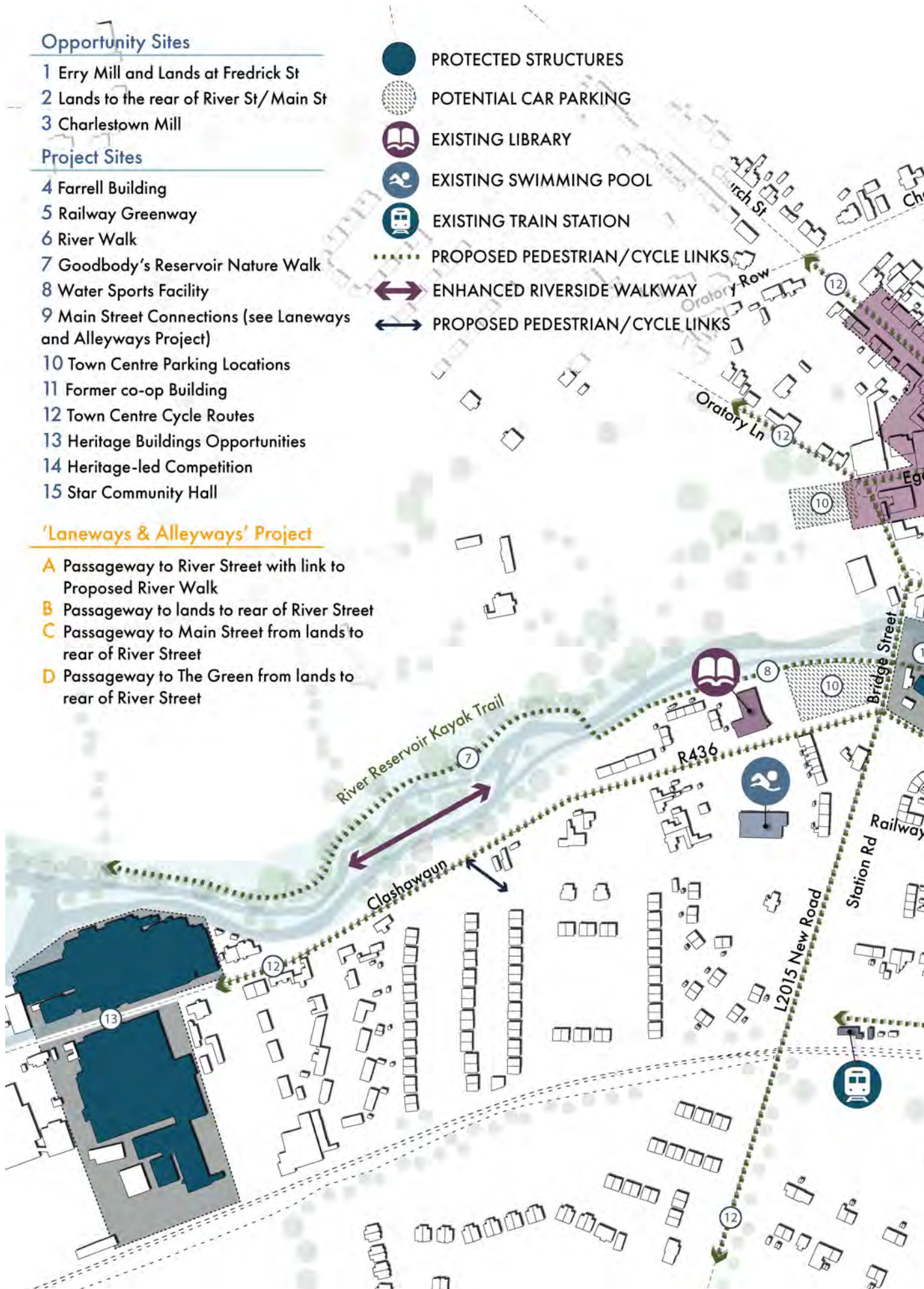
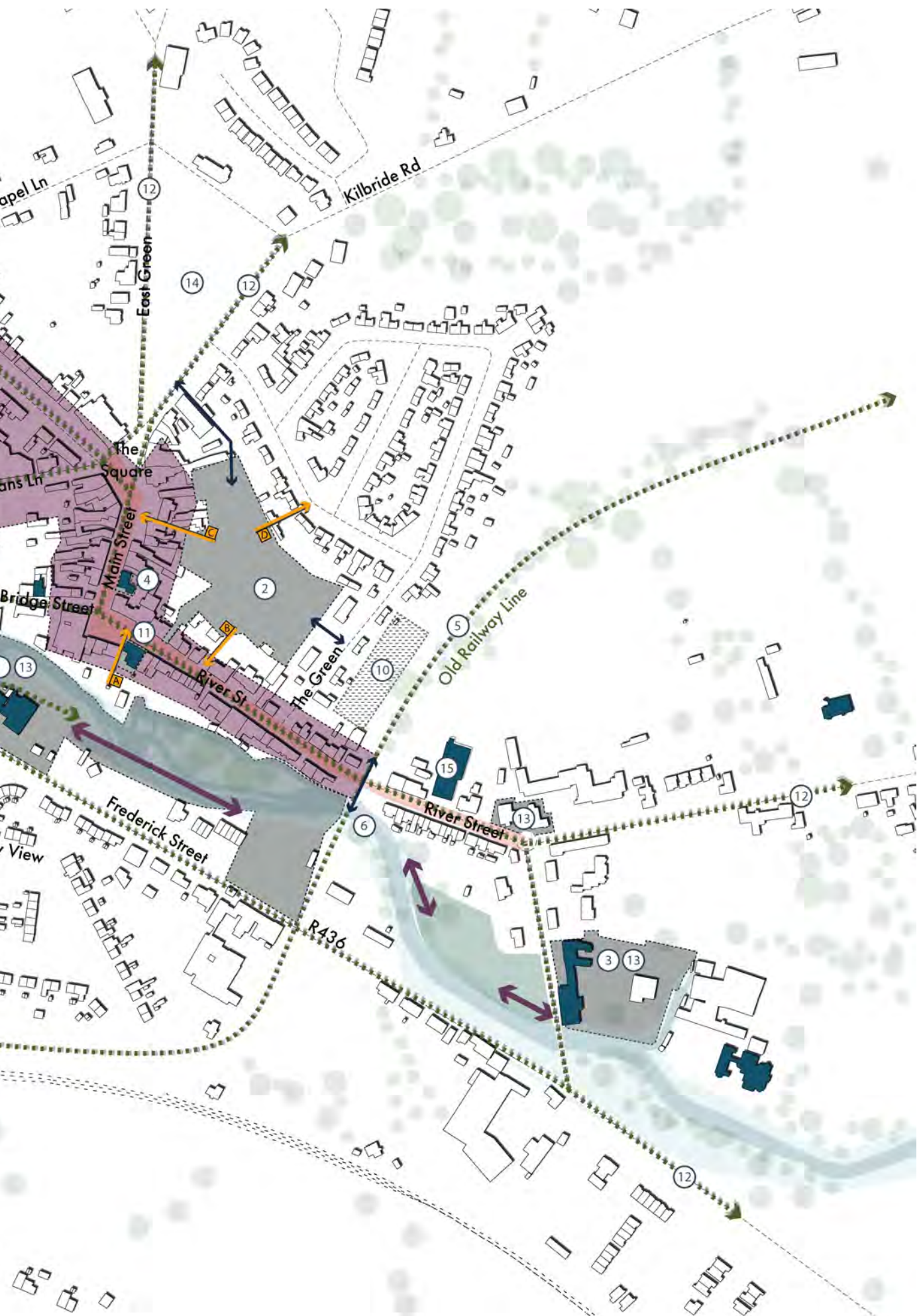


Figure 2.18 Opportunity & Project Sites





# Clara - Existing Context



Figure 2.19 Existing Context



# Clara Bog Nature Reserve



Figure 2.20 – Clara Bog Nature Reserve



## Urban Analysis - Key Findings

- **Context** - Approaches into Clara could be better defined, particularly from Tullamore, with various housing developments 'leaking' out into the periphery.
- **Clara Bog** - The amenity of Clara Bog Nature Reserve is within a 5km distance from the Town Centre and is an asset to the town.
- **Main Street** - This street is long and undefined with many vacant shopfronts where it becomes difficult to define a 'beginning' and an 'end'. Main Street also turns it's back on the River Brosna which runs parallel to the street. There is only one visual opportunity of the river from Main Street which exists at its eastern end.
- **Church Street** - Large set backs on the street provide an opportunity to improve public realm on the western approach into the Town Centre.
- **Residential** - Several infill opportunities around the Town Centre have been identified to help counteract the bleeding of the town into the periphery.
- **Heritage** - Multiple heritage sites, which could become anchors for Clara in terms of cultural/tourism or community assets, have been identified such as Clashawaun Jute Works, Goodbody House, Erry Mill, Charlestown Mill, Drayton Villa and the Railway Bridge.
- **Greenway** - The old railway line to the north of the Town Centre provides an opportunity to create a greenway connecting to the Galway - Dublin greenway route.

# Transportation Analysis

The first section of this analysis sets out a review of the existing evidence and documentation base in the context of transport and movement in Clara, with the second section providing a review of the existing transport infrastructure in the town including walking and cycling provision, public transport, general traffic conditions and car parking.

## Existing Evidence, Research and Documentation Base

The existing evidence and documentation base in the context of transport and movement in Clara has focused on the following:

- Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027 - Clara Town Plan.
- Clara Town Team's Blueprint Documents.
- Clara Towns and Environs Traffic Management Study 2007.

Clara Town Plan sets out a list of objectives with an holistic approach to ensure that growth will be sustainable in the long term supported by the provision of the necessary amenities, infrastructure, services and employment. The Plan has identified the following transport objectives:

### Town Centre Objectives

- TCO-04: Maintain and improve accessibility to and within the town centre and develop a comprehensive approach to the provision of car parking, pedestrian and cycle access with particular regard to the needs and access for people with disabilities.
- TCO-05: Further improve the streetscape and public realm in Clara town centre by undergrounding existing cables and

improving pavements and street furniture in particular.

- TCO-08: Provide loading bays of adequate capacity where they are needed most in order to ensure that traffic flows are not restricted.

### Biodiversity and Landscape Objectives

- NHO-02: Work with relevant stakeholders to examine the feasibility of developing an amenity route along the disused Clara-Banagher railway from Kilbride Cemetery to River Street in the town.
- NHO-06: Provide a footpath linking the town with Clara Bog as shown on the Clara Settlement Plan Objectives Map.

### Infrastructure Objectives - Roads and Access

- KIO-01: Investigate the feasibility of providing a future relief road to the north east of the town as indicated on the Clara Settlement Plan Objectives Map taking into account environmental sensitivities identified in the SEA Environmental Report and the policies and objectives of this County Development Plan relating to sustainable mobility, including Section 8.5.4 Corridor and Route Selection Process. The development of any relief road proposal shall be subject to the requirements of the EIA, Habitats, Water Framework and Flood Directives where relevant and appropriate.
- KIO-02: Prepare a Traffic Management Plan for Clara Town Centre.

- KIO-03: Provide where new development is proposed, new or additional access/linkages as indicated on the Clara Settlement Plan Objectives Map providing for the opening up the full development potential of back land, and developable areas in the town.
- KIO-04: Improve and upgrade all approach roads to the town as a method of enhancing the first impression of the town.
- KIO-05: Facilitate and implement measures to reduce or manage traffic associated with schools to regularise movement patterns and ease congestion.
- KIO-06: Identify car parks and other appropriate locations for the provision of battery charging infrastructure for electric cars.

### **Infrastructure Objectives - Walking and Cycling**

- KIO-07: Support improvements in the pedestrian and cycling infrastructure in the town that will improve connectivity and permeability, and promote more sustainable modes of transport.
- KIO-08: Provide cycle lanes or adequate space for cyclists on proposed footpaths within Clara Town in the locations shown on Clara Settlement Plan Objectives Map.
- KIO-09: To provide adequate, secure and sheltered bicycle parking facilities at appropriate locations: (i) in the town centre (ii) at employment areas and (iii) adjacent to heritage, community and amenity destinations.

### **Infrastructure Objectives - Public Parking**

- KIO-10: Support the provision of public off-street car parks at the locations shown on Clara Settlement Plan Objectives Map.

### **Infrastructure Objectives - Public Realm**

- KIO-11: Support public realm improvement works in the town centre, focusing on pavements, dedicated parking bays, additional pedestrian crossing, street furniture, signage and the provision where possible of cycle paths.
- KIO-12: Ensure footpaths in the town provide adequate access for persons with a disability or who have impaired mobility.

### **Clara Town Team's Blueprint Documents**

The masterplan documents were prepared by the Town Team to determine how the future of Clara can be shaped. The document at Appendix I includes a full section on 'Parking and Traffic' highlighting current issues, needs and recommendations such as:

- Clara Relief Road: Provision of Clara Relief Road to the west of the town centre from the Moate Road (R420) to the Ballycumber Road (R436), as shown on the Clara Settlement Plan Objectives Map. This infrastructure will alleviate the current traffic congestion, bringing through traffic outside of the town.
- Public Parking: On-street parking on both sides of the road increases the traffic congestion issue, in addition lack of off street parking is prejudicial to businesses. This document recommends the provision of off-street parking, outlining a number of potential locations.

In addition, it recommends:

- Adequate links should be provided to proposed off-street car parks to the town centre amenities and businesses.
- Locations for providing on-street car parking, electric vehicle parking and bike parking.

Figure 2.21 Clara Town Plan Objectives (CDP 2021-2027)

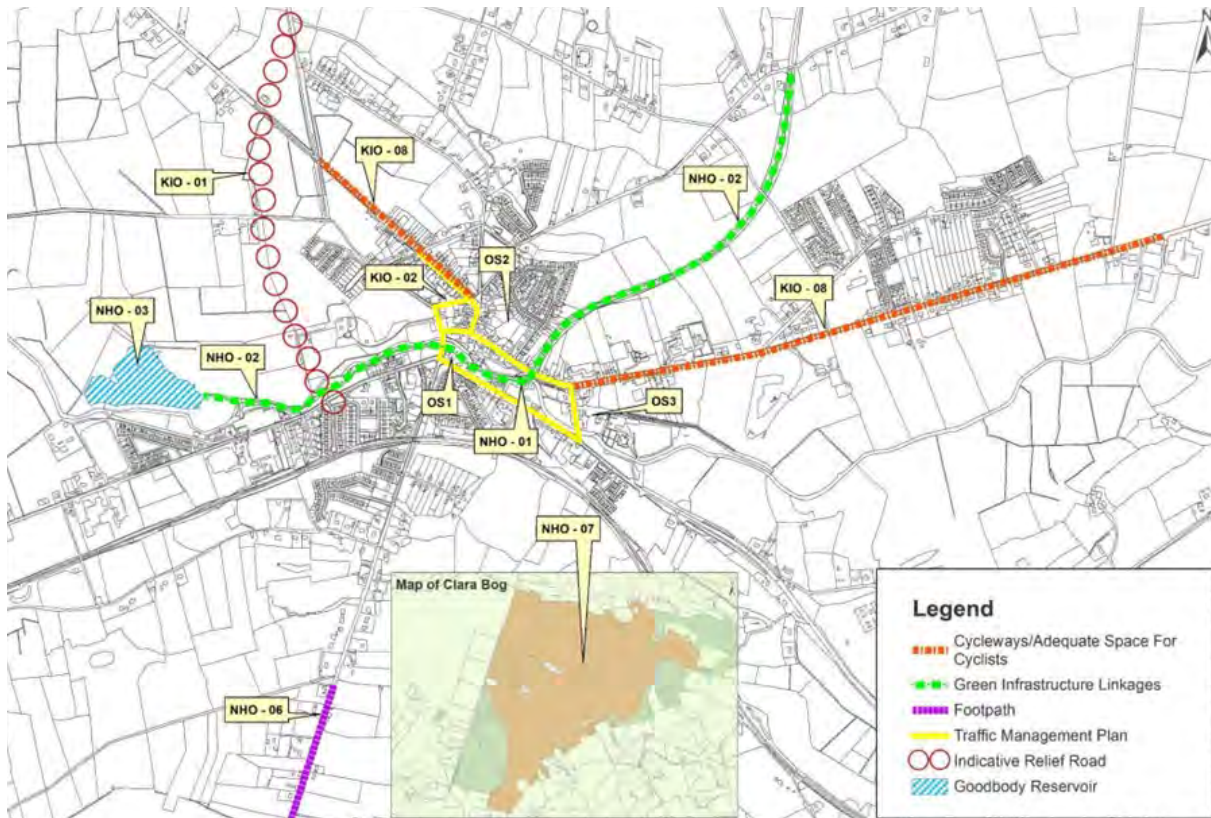
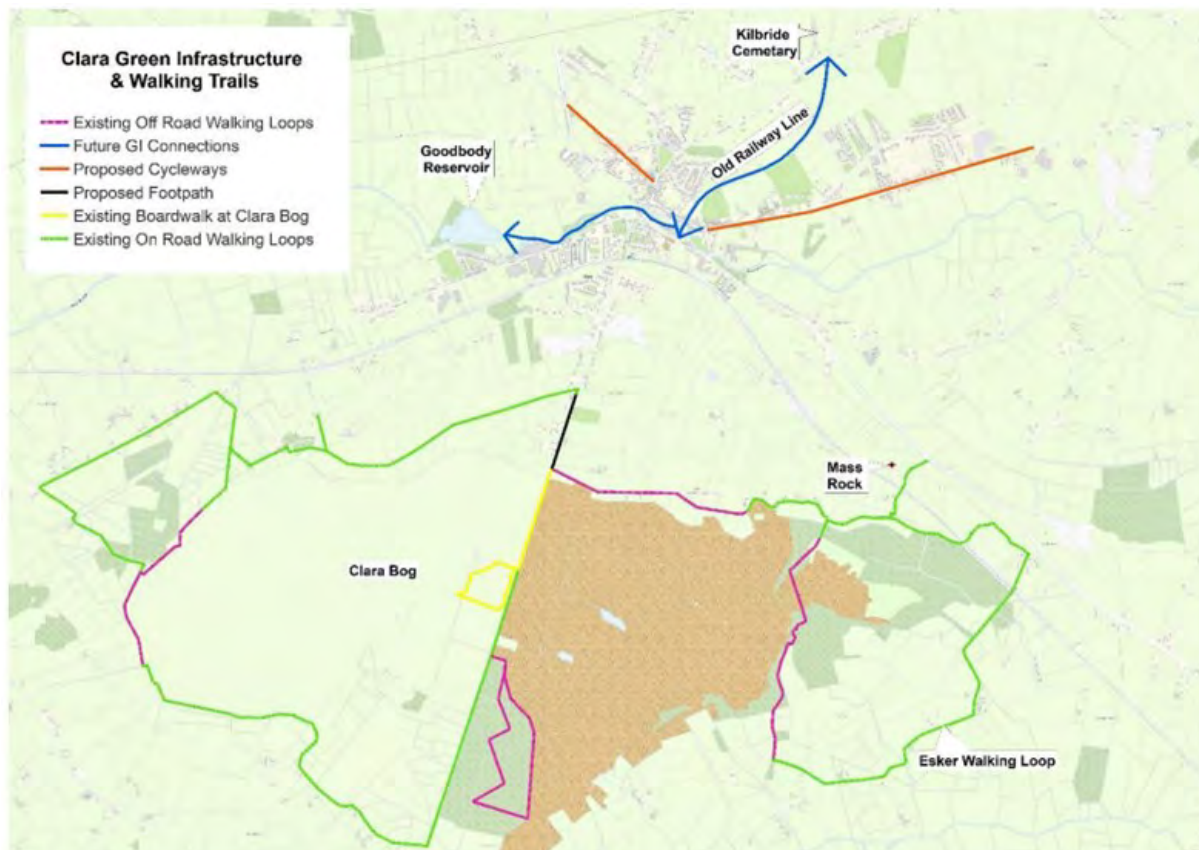


Figure 2.22 Potential Green Infrastructure Linkages and Existing Walking Routes (CDP 2021-2027)



- Recommendations for re-designing the existing on street car parking (e.g. angled parking), in some cases removing one side parking and the relocation of loading bays.
- Provision of paid parking in certain areas (commercial sector), the provision of signed parking restrictions and the need of parking enforcement.
- Disabled parking to be incorporated on the parking proposals.
- One-way system along Main Street, Egan's Lane and Bridge Street. Recommendation of providing one-way system along this loop will improve the traffic flows within the town centre.
- Bottleneck problem on the Kilbride Road. This issue should be assessed and a solution provided.
- Provide a footbridge beside the Clara Bridge.
- Increase public transport services.
- Clara-Streamstown Railway Line. The former railway line could be developed to provide a walking and cycling link which will connect several key areas, like schools, GAA social centre and Clara Family Resource Centre.
- Potential walkway from Charlestown Bridge to Clashauwan.
- River Brosna connects Kilbeggan, Clara, Ballycumber, Pullough and Ferbane, thus opening-up the midlands to wider tourist connections - Boora, Lemanaghan, Turraun Wetland.
- Continuation of the next phases of the Clashawaun River Walk Amenity project to help restore connections to the river for the community and visitors, thus weaving a connected landscape along the River Brosna.

### **Clara Towns and Environs Traffic Management Study**

Offaly County Council commissioned RPS Consulting Engineers in May 2006 to carry out a traffic management study in the town of Clara and its environs.

The report analysed the traffic conditions in 2006, including traffic data collection, identification of traffic problems and recommendation of traffic management measures that could be implemented in the town. A list of recommendations from the 2006 report are summarised below:

- Provision of roundabouts at certain junctions.
  - Introduction of parking controls.
  - Improvements to Main Street/River Street junction.
  - Improvements to Main Street/Chapel Hill junction.
  - Provision of a number of controlled pedestrian crossings.
  - Gateway structures on the main routes into the town.
  - Roundabouts on routes entering the town to slow vehicle speeds.
- Additional information in the masterplan documents outline the need to improve, develop and promote Green Infrastructure:
- Potential of the Clara to Banagher Greenway and the Clara to Streamstown greenways –providing connectivity between major intercity rail routes and both the Royal and Grand Canals.



- Widening of footpaths to provide shared cycleway/footways along approach roads to the town.
  - Provision of a new bridge to replace Charlestown Bridge to improve the situation at the eastern entrance to the town.
  - Provision of a western relief/link road be considered from the Ballycumber Road to the Moate Road to divert traffic away from the town's main streets.
- A number of measures identified in the study have been provided, like the Street Enhancement Works along Church Street and Main Street.
- Results indicate similar levels of bus and train usage within Clara when compared to the county average. This shows good accessibility to train in County Offaly as a whole.
  - Car/Van/Motorcycle/Lorry comprised 70% of means of travel for Clara's population aged 5 years+ to work, school or college which is slightly higher than the county average at 69% and moderately higher than the State average 63%.
  - Vehicular trips to work comprised c.42% while trips for education were c.29%. The majority of trips made as car passengers are school trips with twice as many students being driven as walking to school.

## Review of Transportation

This section provides a baseline assessment of the existing travel patterns, existing walking and cycling networks, existing public transport services, road infrastructure and car parking. Additionally, a further review of future proposals for cycling, walking and public transport interventions is provided.

### Existing Travel Patterns

An evaluation of Census 2016 data on commuting travel patterns to and from Clara Town are summarised at Table 2.4.

- Significant percentage of Clara residents (c.13%) walk as a means of transport in which is slightly above the figure for the county.
- 2% of trips were made by bicycle which is comparable to the County average but below national targets of 10% commuting by bike by 2020<sup>30</sup>. High volumes of traffic and the non-provision of cycle facilities in the Town Centre means cycling within Clara is not an attractive option.

Table 2.4 Travel Patterns - Clara and County Offaly

Mode	Clara	Co. Offaly
On Foot	13%	11%
Bicycle	2%	1%
Public Transport	10%	10%
Vehicle (Car, Van, Lorry etc)	70%	69%
Working from Home/ Not Stated	5%	8%

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/healthwellbeing/our-priority-programmes/heal/healpublications/national-cycle-policy-framework.pdf>

## Existing Walking Infrastructure

A high level review of walking and cycling facilities along key streets and links within the study area was undertaken. For walking facilities, the assessment focused on footpath provision and pedestrian crossings.

The Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets (DMURS)<sup>31</sup> sets out that a minimum footpath width of 1.8m is considered adequate for areas of low pedestrian activity, whilst the desirable width is 2.5m. A minimum width of 3m is considered adequate for areas of moderate to high pedestrian activity and updated for a minimum width of 4m is considered adequate in areas of high pedestrian activity. Pedestrian crossings are described in terms of their frequency, type and provision of dropped kerbs, tactile paving, road markings and pedestrian guard rails.

Footpaths within the town centre are generally in good condition and present continuity. There are however pinch points, narrow footpaths (less than 1.8m) and lack of crossings along some desire lines. Examples are illustrated overleaf and include:

- Footpaths along Bridge Street are especially narrow (1m) and usually blocked by cars parked on the path.
- Both Charlestown Bridge and Clara Bridge present narrow footpaths and discontinuity.
- On arterial roads leading into the town centre, such as Kilbeggan Road (R436), New Road, R420 heading to Frederick Street, R436 – Clashauwan Road, there are generally footpaths on one or both sides of the road although they are quite narrow in places.
- Mini-roundabouts at Bridge Street / Clara Bridge, Egan's Lane / Bridge Street and River Street / Kilbeggan Road present

poor pedestrian facilities with no crossings provided and narrow footpaths.

Within the town centre, works have been recently undertaken along the Main Street, Church Street and Egan's Lane with improved footpaths, public realm and provision of pedestrian crossings.

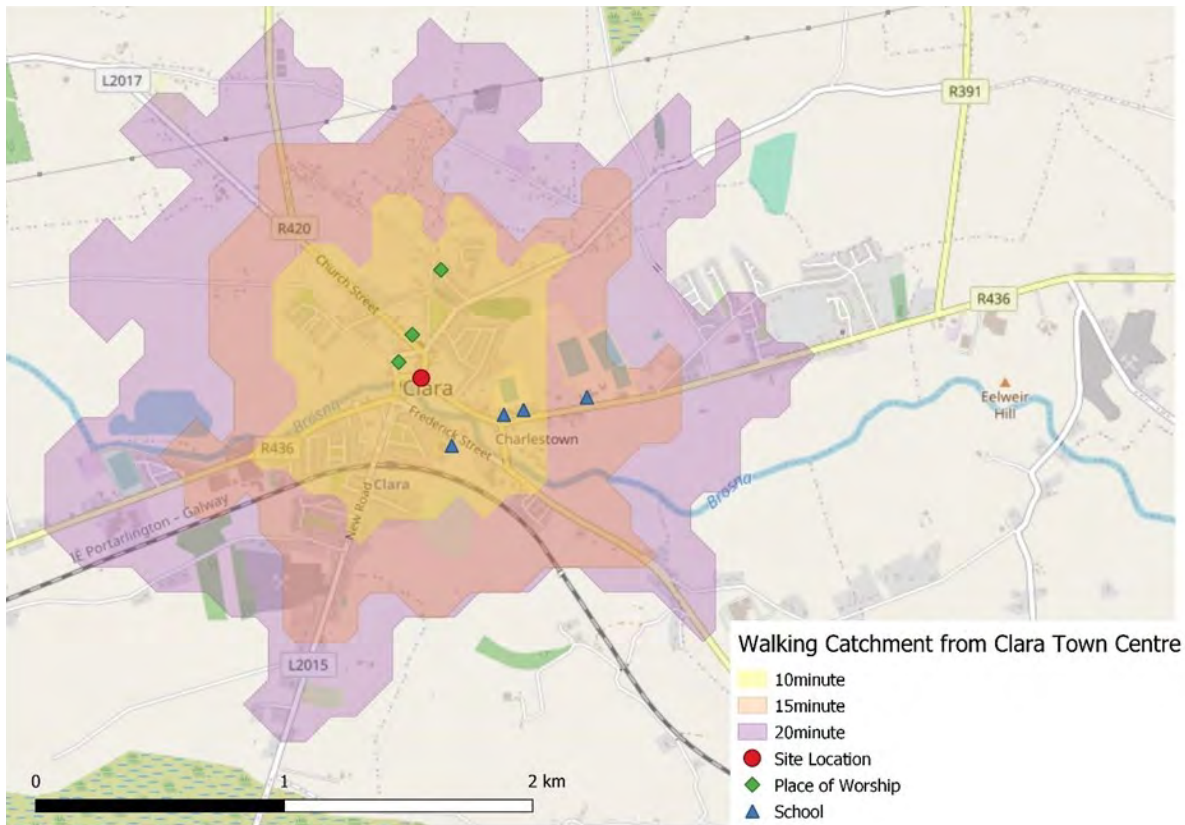
Analysis was undertaken of the areas within a 10, 15 and 20 minute walk of Clara town centre and the results are illustrated in Figure 2.23.

The results indicate that the majority of population living in Clara are within a 10 minute walk of the town centre. This suggests that there is an opportunity to encourage increased levels of active travel through improvements to the walk and cycle network.

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3360b1-design-manual-for-urban-roads-and-streets/>

Figure 2.23 Walking Catchment - Clara



River Street / Kilbeggan Road Roundabout - substandard pedestrian facilities (no crossings and narrow footpaths)



Bridge Street / Clara Bridge Mini-Roundabout (no crossings and narrow footpaths)



Bridge Street (narrow footpaths, cars parked on footpath)



**The Green (narrow and discontinuous footpaths)**



**River Street (ground level difference between footpath and carriageway)**



**Charlestown Bridge (lack of footpath on eastern side)**



**Frederick Street/R436 (narrow footpaths and wide carriageway on approach to Town Centre)**



## Age Friendly Ireland - Walkability Audit

An Age/Disability Friendly Walkability Audit was undertaken in Clara on 12th April 2022 and 16th June 2022. The participants were a mix of ages and mobility levels, from a variety of associations and from Offaly County Council. Four routes were covered over 2 days. During the audit notes were taken of areas or items identified as impacting on mobility and ease of access, noted areas of concern and also highlighted recommendations for improvements. A number of questions were asked to the participants with the following results to highlight:

**Footpaths:** the overall rate given by the participants to the footpaths on the survey is **OK/Good**. However, the following issues were found:

- 92% of the participants responded that cars parking on footpaths is a problem.
- 62% responded that 'Street furniture', such as bins, plant boxes, or signs block the footpaths.
- Only 35% responded that the footpaths are ramped at kerb and easy to negotiate.
- 42% responded that footpaths are not wide enough for two people to walk side by side.

**Crossings and Junctions:** the overall rate given by the participants to the crossings and junctions is **GOOD**. With the following positive results to note:

- 65% responded that crossing points are convenient to where people need to go.
- 62% responded that busy streets/junctions are well equipped with pedestrian crossings.
- 81% responded that most drivers yield to pedestrians.

- Only 15% responded that pedestrian crossings have a clear sound signal and that slow moving pedestrians can get across the street in the time allowed by traffic lights.

**Aesthetics Look & Feel:** the overall rate given by the participants to Aesthetics Look & Feel is **OK/GOOD**.

**Public Spaces, Parking & Buildings:** the overall rate given by the participants to Public Spaces, Parking & Buildings is **GOOD**.

However, the participants highlighted issues like lack of bike parking, public toilets and benches/rest areas around the routes. In addition, a 46% of responses were negative with regards availability of car parking spaces with 65% stating bicycle parking facilities weren't available close to amenities.

**Safety & Comfort:** the overall rate given by the participants to Safety & Comfort is **GOOD** with one issue to note:

- 54% responded that car speeds are too fast in the area.
- 50% responded that cyclists sharing the footpath can be a problem.
- 54% responded that the street lighting is good in the area walked.
- 92% responded that they would feel safe walking alone on this route in the daytime.

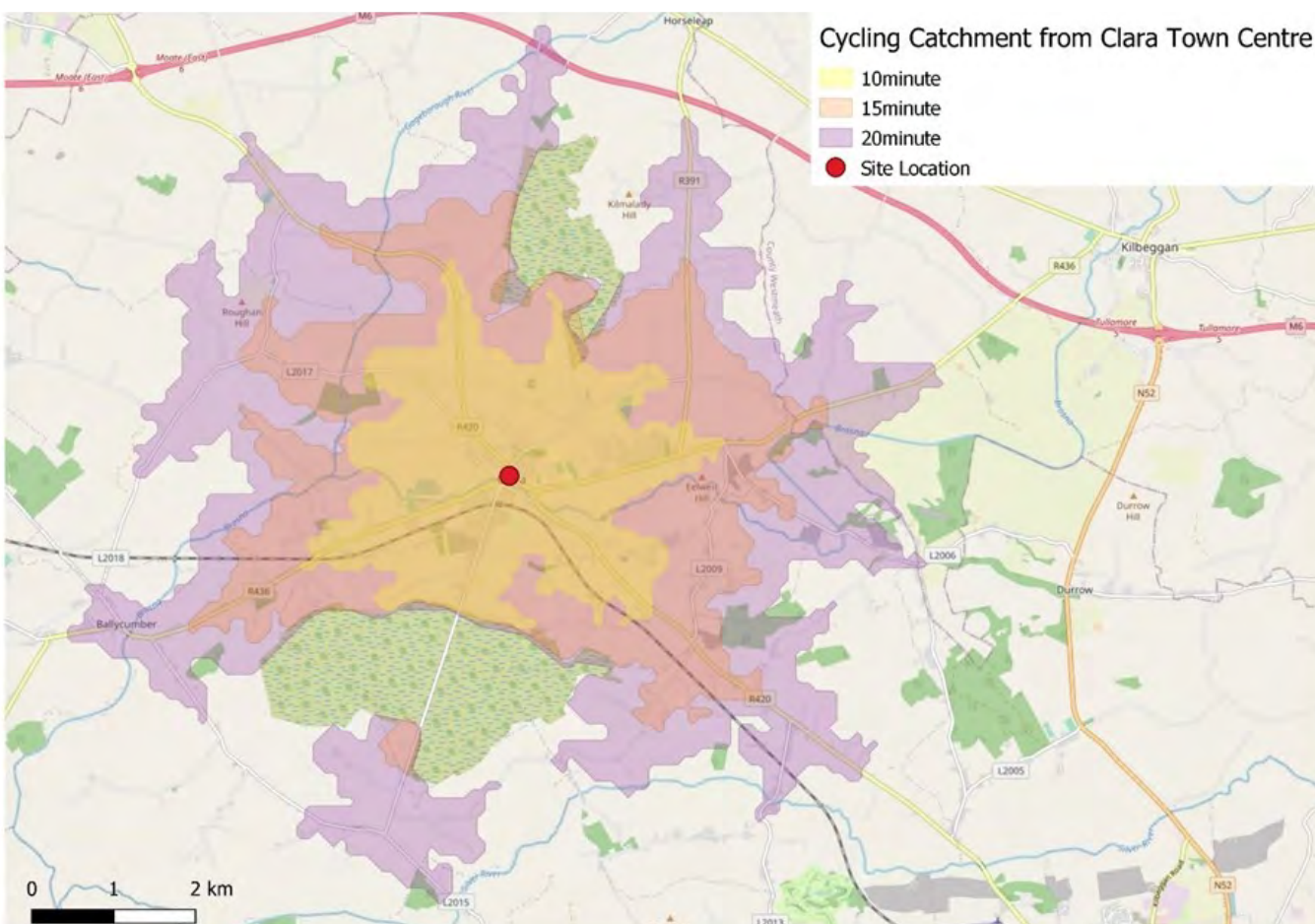
## Existing Cycling Infrastructure

There are currently no dedicated cycle lanes within the town. There is scope for improvements to provide cycle facilities, cycle parking and cycle priority at junctions along the existing roads leading to the town centre to connect the residential areas, GAA pitch, library, schools and wider recreational areas. The prevalence of roundabouts and wide junctions at intersections within the town also create safety issues for cyclists.

The County Development Plan 2021-2027 identifies the location of potential cycleways along Kilbeggan Road and Church Street.

The Cycling Catchment map at Figure 2.24 shows that the full town is within a 10 minute cycling distance.

Figure 2.24 Cycling Catchment - Clara





## Existing Public Transport Services

Clara town is currently served by the following public transport services:

- Irish Rail
- Bus Éireann
- Flagline Coaches
- Local Bus Links

Clara Train Station is located to the south of the town centre within walking distance of the full extent of the town. The station is on the main Dublin to Galway and Dublin to Westport/ Ballina line, offering regular services to Dublin (9 no. per day), Galway, Westport and Ballina as well as other important settlements such as Athlone, Tullamore, Portarlinton and Ballinasloe.

Bus Éireann Route 73, Waterford - Athlone – Longford, is operated twice a day in each direction, stopping in Clara at Church Street Bus Stop and St. Brigid's Church bus stop.

Route 818 Athlone to Tullamore operated by Flagline coaches (private company) also operates a service running four times daily connecting Clara to the settlements of Athlone and Tullamore.

TFI Local Link Route 840 Banagher to Tullamore, operates an all week service, with frequency during weekdays being 2hrs 40 minutes and weekends 3hrs 15 minutes with stops at Church Street Bus Stop and the Train Station.

Figure 2.25 Existing Bus Stop Locations and Train Station



## Existing Road Infrastructure

### Road Network Conditions

The primary roads serving Clara are the R420 in a south east to north west direction and the R436 in a east to west direction. These roads connect Clara with nearby towns and the M6 Motorway to the north at Junctions 5 and 6.

The aforementioned approaching roads serving Clara are generally in good condition and are relatively wide. It is considered the approaches to Clara would benefit from a Gateway entrance treatment.

In the town centre, the roads are generally two-way carriageways presenting a reasonable width with the exception of a number of pinch points on the two bridges situated over the Brosna River and Egan's Lane.

### Traffic Surveys

Automatic Traffic Counts (ATC) were undertaken by NDC (National Data Collection) in 2019 on two sites in Clara town, which are shown on the map below at Figure 2.26. Table 2.5 provides information regarding the annual number of vehicles in a 7-day average. The total includes heavy vehicles which account for a small amount of the overall traffic, as shown by the percentage figures.

### Public Car and Bicycle Parking

A review was undertaken of existing public car and bicycle parking provision within Clara with the following key points summarised:

Figure 2.26 ATC Locations - Clara



Table 2.5 Annual Number of Vehicles in a 7-day Average - Clara

Traffic Data	54A - Bridge Street	51 - R436
No. of Vehicles 7-Day Average	1,407	3,306
Two-Axle Truck/Bus	3%	8%
Three-Axle Truck/Bus	1%	0.1%

- Majority of streets/roads offer free parking on both sides with the exception of some sections in the Town Centre and areas closer to junctions.
  - Clara Library offers free public car and bicycle parking (c.36 no. car spaces). Train Station has 35 no. parking spaces including spaces for EV charging. Currently, there is no bicycle parking provision available at the Station.
  - There are no other off-street car parks within the town, apart from private parking spaces located at workplaces, schools, the GAA club and St. Brigid's Church for example.
- (e.g. traffic counts, pedestrian counts, Air Quality, car parking occupancy) and Qualitative Data (community feedback surveys).

### **Transportation Analysis - Key Findings**

- **Clara has a compact, walkable Town Centre with recent public realm improvements on Church St & Main St.**
- **Vast majority of the town's population is located within a 15 minute walk of the Main Street and a 10 minute cycle.**
- **Majority of trips made as car passengers are school trips, with twice as many students being driven as walking to school.**
- **Offaly CDP 2021-2027 (Clara Town Plan) supports the development of a Relief Road. Clara Town Plan sets out objectives to maintain and improve accessibility to and within the Town Centre, improve connectivity and permeability, and promote more sustainable modes of transport including green infrastructure and linkages.**
- **'Clara Town Centre First Masterplan Blueprint' provides parking and traffic recommendations including the provision of a Relief Road, off-road car parks, traffic management, increase of public transport services and the development of the Clara-Streamstown Railway Line greenway.**
- **Prioritisation of integrated transport and land use, supported by investment in public transport, active travel networks and shared, low carbon mobility options will improve people's travel choices and support safe, sustainable and healthy lifestyles.**
- **Clara strongly benefits from its location on the strategic rail network.**

### **Clara Relief Road**

Provision is made within the extant CDP for a Relief Road to the west of the Town Centre from Moate Road (R420) to the Ballycumber Road (R436). Such a scheme could facilitate a new one-way system within the Town Centre, creating additional space for new cycling network infrastructure.

### **One Way System Option**

It is considered that this proposal should be further explored through an Options Study to determine which is the preferred one-way system to be implemented in the Town Centre to provide a calmed traffic environment and more space for pedestrians and cyclists while also facilitating public amenity improvements. A pilot one-way system could be trialled prior the implementation of the final scheme. This could be undertaken as a rapid build scheme, with bolt down kerbs, planters, street furniture, bollards and temporary traffic management. Throughout the course of the inception and implementation of the one-way system trial, consultation and engagement should be undertaken. A Monitoring and Evaluation Report could be prepared to assess the outcomes of the trial, with quantitative data

# Sustainable Placemaking

## Introduction

Clara is situated within the north west area of County Offaly and is designated as a 'Town' in the county's settlement hierarchy as set out with the extant County Development Plan 2021-2027.

The town is located equi-distant between the cities of Dublin and Galway (being c.100 km due west of Dublin and c.115 km due east of Galway). At a county level, Clara has relative proximity to 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. The settlement of Clara benefits from proximity to strategic transport infrastructure comprising the Train Station (see Figure 2.27 for historical image) and the M6 Motorway.

## Geography & History

In relation to its geography, Clara is situated on a plain (which provides its meaning in Irish being 'Clóirtheach') with the River Brosna flowing through the town. Of significance is the Clara Bog Nature Reserve which is internationally renowned in ecological terms having been previously nominated for UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

Clara has an industrial history which is largely associated with the Goodbody family who moved to the town in 1825 and developed the country's largest jute factory. This gave significant employment in the district from 1864 onwards (for around 700 workers) and ran as a very successful business for the next hundred years<sup>33</sup>.

Figure 2.27 Historical Images of Clara<sup>32</sup>



The town also was known for having other industrial premises such as flour mills, distilleries, breweries and food processing. In 1881 St. Brigid's Church (see Figure 5.1) was constructed with the spire later added in 1930<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> [www.offalyhistory.com](http://www.offalyhistory.com)

<sup>33</sup> [www.offalyhistoryblog.wordpress.com](http://www.offalyhistoryblog.wordpress.com)

<sup>34</sup> [www.buildingsofireland.ie](http://www.buildingsofireland.ie)

Clara Bog Nature Reserve



## Clara Today

Clara provides important retail, residential and service functions for its inhabitants and local hinterland with linkages to the larger settlements of Athlone and Tullamore which have significant importance as designated by the RSES. The town is also connected via the strategic motorway and rail networks to the cities of Dublin and Galway.

Clara had a population of 3,336 persons as recorded by the 2016 Census. The town experienced a population increase of c.3% over the census period 2011 to 2016. While 2022 Census data has yet to be released specifically for Clara, the population of the Clara Electoral Division at 2022 rose by c.6% (preliminary results) over the period 2016 to 2022, and it is therefore expected that the population of the settlement of Clara will also increase.

Clara is considered to have a young population with c.57% of its population aged 39 years or younger. Residents who had retired (taken as above 65 years) accounted for c.13% of the overall population.

Clara has many key resources available to its resident population including its train station, swimming pool, community centre and library. Clara Library provides a welcoming and accessible space for community engagement, research, education and recreation, and was awarded the first Age Friendly Charter for Offaly Libraries in 2019.

In line with national public library strategies and **Offaly Libraries Interim Development Plan 2022 – 2023: Creating Collaborative Communities**, Offaly Library Service is committed to developing and expanding Clara Library as a dynamic, innovative and welcoming

cultural destination at the heart of its community.

Clara has a rich sporting tradition. The GAA club grounds are located on Kilbeggan Road with the soccer club grounds situated on Kilbride Road. Offaly County Ladies team have their playing facility located at Bretland Park on Ballycumber Road.

## **Education**

Regarding educational attainment, c.10% of Clara's residents have achieved an 'Ordinary/Bachelor's Degree' which aligned with the State average with a further c.3% of residents attaining a Postgraduate level qualification.

Clara is located in proximity to the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) campus situated in Athlone which has road and rail network connectivity to Clara. TUS offers a range of Third Level courses of study in subjects including Business, Accounting, Engineering, Education, Nursing, Pharmaceutical Science, and Biotechnology for example.

The TUS campus offers access to Clara residents to achieve Third Level qualifications and to secure high quality employment. Having a young and well educated workforce with access to Third Level institutions such as TUS is a positive economic factor for Clara and can provide a base for future growth.

## **Employment & Industry**

As per the 2016 Census, c.45% of the workforce in Clara were recorded as being 'At Work'. The highest percentage of Clara's residents were recorded as being in employment in the 'Manufacturing Industries' group at c.23% with a total of c.21% of employees holding a senior/managerial role (such as Directors, Managers, Senior Officials, Professional and Technical roles etc.). Clara residents generated a significant salary value to

the County that was c.€42.3 million per annum (as at 2016).

Given the largest industry group that Clara residents belonged to was 'Manufacturing'. It is considered that this sector is an economic strength for the town with employers such as Paltech and Thrace Synthetic Packaging Ltd already well established. Given the presence of such operators there may be opportunities for Clara to establish itself as a 'manufacturing hub' within the County and wider Midlands Region which could create synergies with other employment sectors (for e.g. IT/tech, R&D) to deliver future growth for Clara.

Within today's manufacturing sector, automation and robotics are being increasingly utilised to produce goods. TUS offers an undergraduate Automation and Robotics Engineering course of study and potentially linkages could be created between the manufacturing sector in Clara and TUS to promote the sector. Economically, the town centre can also benefit from sector growth through increased wage spend on local goods and services by residents and employees for example.

## **Heritage**

Clara has a historic character which is evident by the number of heritage buildings and protected structures that potentially offer the possibility of renovation and repurposing for new uses.

The Charlestown Mill grain store building, shown overleaf, is one such example (as identified by the Clara Town Plan). The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (NIAH) describes the building as a three storey, eight bay former grain store built in 1853 by the Goodbody family. Although now in a poor state of repair, this building remains structurally sound and attests to the building skills at the time of construction. This proud building stands

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<sup>35</sup> <https://www.buildingsofireland.ie/buildings-search/building/14802016/kilcoursey-clara-co-offaly>

as a reflection of the industrial heritage of Clara, once a thriving industrial town<sup>35</sup>.

The heritage sector can deliver potential placemaking and economic benefits through the renovation, repurposing and re-use of its old buildings that can reinforce Clara's evident historic character, particularly its industrial heritage. This sector can play an important role in the regeneration of the Town Centre.

A potential avenue for Clara to explore in relation to the promotion of its industrial history is through the 'European Route of Industrial Heritage' (ERIH). The ERIH, which is supported by the EU, represents a network of over 2,200 industrial heritage sites across Europe. The ERIH seeks to raise public awareness of the values of the man-made environment (cultural landscape and architectural heritage), highlight the economic resources of this heritage for sustainable development, and to encourage voluntary work to protect and preserve this heritage<sup>36</sup>.

Membership of the ERIH has many advantages including, *inter alia*:

- Opportunity of co-financing for promotional activities within the Creative Europe Programme.
- Opportunity to exchange experience and good practice with similar sites within the ERIH network.
- Access to experts' database.
- Free publicity: The ERIH network and its experiences are presented throughout the year by ERIH Board members at a range of international conferences, seminars and promotional meetings attended by regional, national and European decision makers and journalists.

## **Culture & Tourism**

In terms of culture/tourism, the second annual 'Clara Music and Literary Festival' took place in August 2022 in Clara House, Bridge Street. A children's arts festival, known as 'Hullabaloo' was held in November 2022 across the County with workshops taking place in Clara. Similar to heritage, the cultural sector can also bring increased vibrancy to the Town Centre through the running of festivals for example (music, food and literature for instance) that can attract visitors to Clara along with associated economic benefits.

Clara Library offers a wide variety of free cultural and community events programmes for all age groups and supports local engagement with many literary and creative opportunities. Quality broadband and ICT provision such as self-print facilities also prove popular with local people and tourists visiting the area.

Clara Bog is a tourism asset to the Town and the development of the Clara Bog Visitor Centre in 2010 and 1km boardwalk in 2017 has served to promote this natural asset. Clara Town Plan sets out that, "*the provision of a footpath for the full 2km stretch between Clara Bog, the town and its visitor centre and the investigation of the feasibility of providing an additional boardwalk on Clara Bog to the east of the public road are major objectives*".<sup>30</sup>

The town has a number of well known persons which include professional golfer Shane Lowry (winner of the 2019 Open Championship and 2009 Irish Open) and Brian Cowen who served as An Taoiseach from 2008 to 2011.

## **Town Centre Enhancement**

Clara has recently benefited from the Phase 2 Renewal Scheme which included street enhancement works to Main Street, Church Street, and Egan's Lane. Works provided for, *inter alia*, the improvement and upgrade of

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.erih.net/about-erih/erih-history-and-goals>

existing controlled pedestrian crossings, installation of a new pedestrian crossing, lining of on-street parallel parking areas, provision of a new kerbed verge and planting (Church Street), provision of street furniture, remodeling of the junction of Egan's Lane and the Square and the junction of Egan's Lane with Bridge Street, restriction of traffic on Egan's Lane to one-way outward from the Square and marked out parking on Egan's Lane.

As referred to in the Local Projects section of Chapter 1, Offaly County Council have been awarded €100,000 by the Department for Rural and Community Development under their Town and Village Renewal Scheme project (2022 Streetscape Enhancement Measure). This funding will be used for the improvement of properties (painting works) located on Church Street, River Street and Main Street. This funding and the associated improvement of properties will further assist with town centre enhancement in Clara.

### **Unoccupied Properties**

As of December 2022, Offaly County Council completed an audit of unoccupied properties within Clara. The audit findings reveal that just over half (c.52%) of all unoccupied properties in the town are centrally located on Main Street, Bridge Street, River Street and Church Street.

These unoccupied properties affect the vibrancy and vitality of the town centre and their occupancy and re-use for, *inter alia*, residential, retail, commercial and/or community uses, for example, can assist with the regeneration and consolidation of Clara's town centre which aligns with the objectives of the Town Centre First Policy.

### **Development Activity in Clara**

Recent development activity includes planning approval for 38 no. dwellings at Raheen (Part 8 scheme) along with the construction of a 450m

section of footway from Clara Bog Visitor Centre to the Clara Bog Nature Reserve. Clara has received funding for streetscape enhancement of properties on Church Street, River Street and Main Street, as mentioned, as well as financial assistance for a new river walk at Clashawaun.

In August 2022, a residential scheme comprising 44 no. units was approved by Offaly County Council at lands at Kilcoursey. A planning application was submitted in February 2023 for a further residential scheme, also in Kilcoursey, for 25 no. units. Lands encompassing and situated north of Drayton Villa on Kilbeggan Road have been identified in a masterplan proposal for new residential development and a post-Primary School.

### **Green / Open Space**

As set out within the Clara Town Plan, existing open space provision consists primarily of the Fair Green, a small existing open space area along the River Brosna adjacent to Charlestown Bridge and a number of playing pitches with additional areas around Kilcoursey Castle and the Goodbody's Reservoir. As mentioned, playing pitches for Clara GAA and soccer clubs are situated on Kilbeggan Road, Ballycumber Road and Kilbride Road.

### **Draft Architectural Conservation Area Report**

A report is currently being prepared and a public consultation process is required to be carried out for a proposed ACA.

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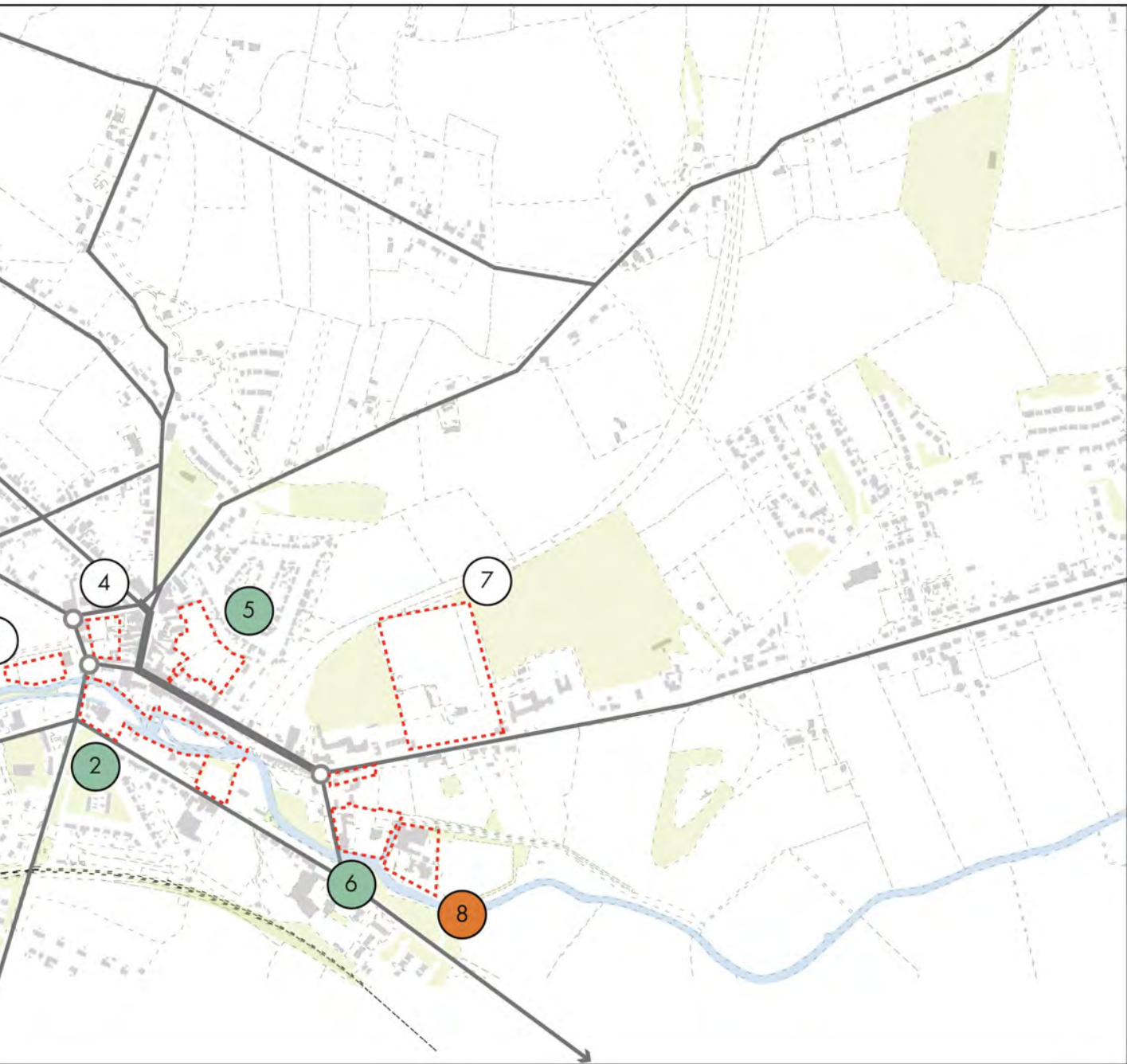
<sup>37</sup> Proposed Architectural Conservation Area, Clara Co. Offaly, 2022, pg. 5.



# Clara - Town Plan Opportunity Sites



Figure 2.28 – Clara Town Plan Opportunity Sites



# Clara - Resource Infrastructure



Clara Train Station



Clara Swimming Pool



**Clara GAA Grounds**



**Clara Bog Visitor Centre**

# Clara - Opportunity Links







- Clara Bog Pedestrian Route 
- Railway Route Link 
- River Kayak Trail 
- River Brosna Pedestrian Route 
- Mainstreet River Link 
- Relief Road 



Figure 2.29 – Opportunity Links



# Clara - Transport/Physical Infrastructure Issues and Opportunities



Figure 2.30 Transport/Physical Infrastructure Issues and Opportunities



Site No.	Site Location
1	Clashawaun Jute Works
2	Erry Mill
3	Clara Bridge Site
4	Bridge Street Site
5	Infill Site
6	Charlestown Mill
7	Drayton Villa
8	Goodbody House

The transport and physical infrastructure issues and opportunities associated with the identified sites are summarised overleaf.



## Clara - Transport/Physical Infrastructure Issues and Opportunities

Site No./Location	Transport / Physical Infrastructure Issues Identified
<b>1. Clashawaun Jute Works</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Narrow footpaths along Clashawaun Road.</li> <li>• Lack of cycling infrastructure provision.</li> </ul>
<b>2. Erry Mill</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No issues identified as the site is in the Town Centre with access to good pedestrian facilities.</li> </ul>
<b>3. Clara Bridge Site</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Narrow and discontinuous footpaths along the adjacent streets.</li> <li>• Lack of pedestrian crossings to access this property.</li> </ul>
<b>4. Bridge Street Site</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Narrow and discontinuous footpaths along the adjacent streets.</li> <li>• Lack of pedestrian crossings to access this property.</li> </ul>
<b>5. Infill Site</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This site is to the rear of existing properties and the most suitable pedestrian and vehicular access should be identified by a feasibility study.</li> </ul>
<b>6. Charlestown Mill</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Narrow and discontinuous footpaths along Charlestown Bridge.</li> <li>• Lack of pedestrian crossings to access the mill.</li> </ul>
<b>7. Drayton Villa</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Narrow footpaths along Kilbeggan Road.</li> <li>• Lack of cycling infrastructure provision.</li> </ul>
<b>8. Goodbody House</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Goodbody House site is isolated with the main vehicular access from the R420 provided over an old bridge.</li> </ul>

Table 2.6 Transport/Physical Infrastructure Issues and Opportunities

<b>Opportunities</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within a 15 minute walking distance from town centre and a 5 minute cycling distance, this site could benefit from investment in walking and cycling infrastructure (active travel) including a crossing to connect both sides of the site.</li> <li>• The site is well connected to the east and the west along the R436 route.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If open to the public, this site could facilitate access to a potential River Brosna Pedestrian Route and River Kayak Trail which could also potentially connect the site with other amenities like the potential Railway Route Link.</li> <li>• The gates on Frederick Street could be used for vehicular access to the property.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The site is located in the town centre and it could benefit from investment in walking and cycling infrastructure (active travel) and traffic management measures.</li> <li>• If open to public, this site could facilitate access to a potential River Brosna Pedestrian Route and River Kayak Trail which could also potentially connect the site with other amenities like the Clashawaun Jute Works.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The site is located in the town centre and it could benefit from investment in walking and cycling infrastructure (active travel) and traffic management measures.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This site could present an opportunity to provide an off-street car park with access from River Street.</li> <li>• The site is located in the town centre and it could benefit from investment in walking and cycling infrastructure (active travel) and traffic management measures along River Street.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The site is located in the town centre and it could benefit from investment in walking and cycling infrastructure (active travel) and traffic management measures.</li> <li>• The site is beside the River Park Wildlife, this connection could be improved.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The site is located in the town centre and it could benefit from investment in walking and cycling infrastructure (active travel) and traffic management measures along Kilbeggan Road.</li> <li>• The site could be linked to the potential Railway Route Link.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriate vehicular access and walking and cycling infrastructure (active travel) should be provided with linkage to the Charlestown Mill site.</li> </ul>

# Clara - Transport/Physical Constraints

Constraint No.	Constraint Descriptor
1	Narrow bridges for traffic and pedestrians
2	Lack of off-street parking
3	Town Centre Traffic congestion
4	Public Transport: regional services low frequency
5	Lack of pedestrian crossings along desire lines
6	Narrow footpaths along the arterial roads

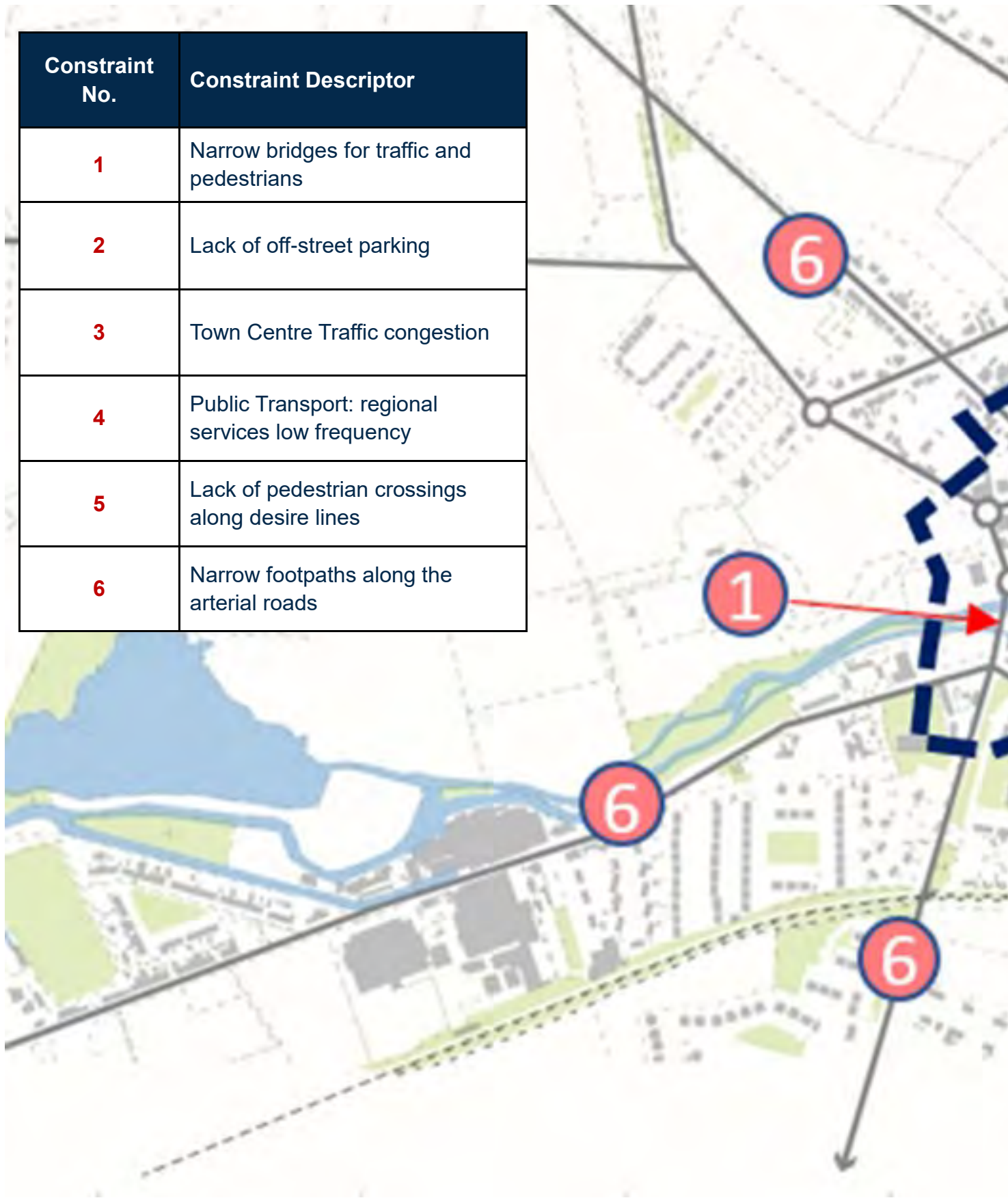
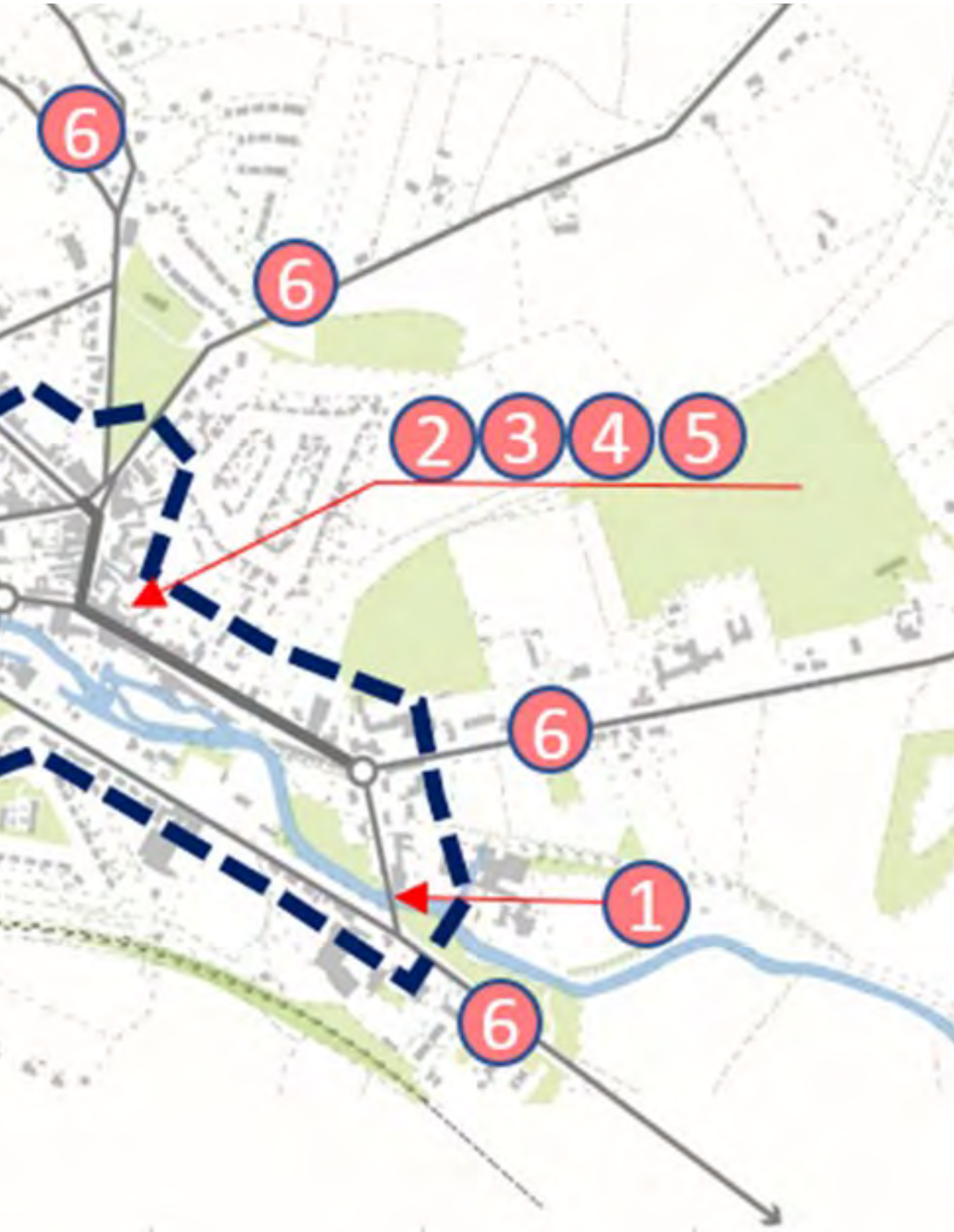


Figure 2.31 – Transport/Physical Constraints



## Clara - SCOT Analysis

As mentioned at the beginning of Section 2, the public consultation process and the baseline analysis work has provided a detailed

understanding of Clara. Consequently, this has allowed Clara's strengths, challenges, opportunities and threats to be identified

### Strengths

- A strong community spirit that is present in the Town.
- Residents who consider Clara to be a 'great place to live'.
- A rich industrial heritage with an interesting story to be celebrated.
- High quality blue and green natural infrastructure assets that are characterised by Clara Bog and the River Brosna.
- Recent street improvement works that provide a basis for further placemaking interventions in the Town Centre.
- Presence of heritage buildings and Protected Structures.
- A young population is resident within Clara with c.57% of its population aged 39 years or younger.
- A train station making the Town accessible for residents and visitors.
- Swimming pool as a resource strength for Clara residents and visitors.
- High levels of sporting success through the various clubs and organisations.

### Challenges

- Pedestrian and cycling infrastructure doesn't encourage sustainable movement/trips and needs to be upgraded.
- Dominance of private car use over sustainable modes of transport as highlighted by Census 2016 data.
- Town Centre traffic congestion and parking behaviours.
- Vacant / derelict buildings which make a negative contribution to the economic vitality of the Town Centre.
- Identifying project interventions to specifically accommodate elderly and young people.
- Generating increased vibrancy within the Town Centre.
- Creating more spaces for people in order to promote enhanced social interaction.
- Providing a diversity of uses within the Town Centre.

**Theme 1:** Community - A Town for People

**Theme 2:** Heritage Tourism

which are summarised below. Furthermore, this process has informed the development of the TCF Plan themes.

### Opportunities

- Historic buildings in the Town Centre present valuable opportunities for restoration and re-use for a mix of land uses - for example a remote working hub.
- Former industrial heritage sites and buildings offer the potential opportunity to bring forward a new tourism development use - linked to this is the opportunity to celebrate Clara's industrial heritage story.
- Undeveloped backlands can be developed in order to create a compact urban structure in Clara that can promote sustainable forms of development and movement.
- The former railway line presents an opportunity for a new greenway route that can deliver positive environmental and economic outcomes.
- With nearly one-quarter of Clara's population aged 14 or under, there is an opportunity to provide youth-orientated facilities for the Town's future residents.

**Theme 3:** Natural Infrastructure

### Threats

- Continued dominance of the private car for journeys, particularly short trips, will fail to encourage sustainable modes of transport and prevent placemaking enhancements.
- Feedback received from Clara's young people highlights they have limited facilities/spaces in which to interact - they are the future of the town and need to be suitably accommodated.
- Lack of required private investment in Clara and rural Ireland.
- At implementation stage, proposed project interventions require the involvement of various stakeholders at national, regional and local levels.
- Post-TCF Plan stage, proposed project interventions are dependent upon the availability of public funding streams to realise same.
- By doing 'nothing', 'nothing' will happen in Clara Town Centre.

**Theme 4:** Placemaking