

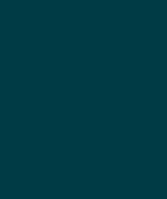
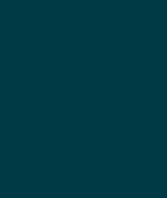
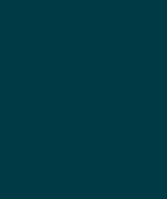


Comhairle Chontae Uíbh Fhailí  
Offaly County Council



# Offaly Heritage Plan

2023–27



## Introduction

The Offaly Heritage Plan sets out the work of Offaly County Council working in partnership with groups and agencies to deliver heritage projects within the county. This is the 5th Heritage Plan for County Offaly. It is written in the context of the national Heritage Plan, **Heritage Ireland 2030** launched in February 2022; the Heritage Council preparing its Strategic Plan during 2022; and the drafting of the 2nd Creative Ireland plan for Offaly in 2022. The previous Offaly Heritage Plan 2017-21 (extended to 2022) was incorporated into the objectives of the **Offaly County Council Corporate Plan 2019-24**. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which set out a 15-year plan to achieve the goals which provides the context for the plan.



The Heritage Council established the Heritage Officer Programme in 1999. The Offaly Heritage officer post was established in 2000 and has received salary and programme support from the Heritage Council annually since then. While the Offaly Heritage Plan is county specific it does relate to the objectives of the Heritage Council with whom there is very regular contact through programme initiatives, funding and training programmes.

## What is included in Heritage?

The categories listed in Ireland's 1995 Heritage Act are **buildings, monuments, archaeological objects, heritage objects, architectural**

**heritage, flora, fauna, wildlife habitats, landscapes, seascapes, wrecks, geology, heritage gardens and parks, and inland waterways.** These all refer to tangible heritage. Eight years after the commencement of Ireland's Heritage Act, UNESCO adopted the inclusion of intangible cultural heritage into the meaning of heritage. This is intended to speak to the



importance of the sense of place and of memory, and of pride and appreciation of what has gone before. To take the examples of the shrine of Lemanaghan or the Durrow High Cross these are specific objects and at the same time they are wrapped up in the cultural memory of the people living in these parishes.

For many projects, a multiplicity of disciplines is required to work together to establish the full significance and value of every aspect of heritage involved and how each element can be considered and managed. An important function of the County Heritage Office is to pull these disciplines and expertise together and thereby ensure a holistic approach to Offaly's cultural patrimony. An example here is the conservation of the masonry ruins of medieval churches where the natural heritage of nesting birds, bats, plants and pollinators need expert intervention to plan the methodology and timing of the conservation of the churches by conservation engineers, ecologists and architects.



## The Role of the Offaly Heritage Forum

The Offaly Heritage Forum is a non-statutory group established by Offaly County Council to provide advice, support and partnership on the preparation and implementation of the Heritage Plan. The forum meets four times a year and subgroups meet for specific project guidance. The forum has proved invaluable over the past twenty years, bringing a wide range of expertise to the fore and providing the format for much exchange of information and partnerships. The current membership of the forum is set out below.

### **Member Representing Organisation**

**Cllr Eamon Dooley** Strategic Policy Committee chair, Offaly County Council

**Teresa Ryan Feehan** Birr Historical Society

**Brian Caffrey** BirdWatch Ireland

**James Condrón** Planner, Offaly County Council

**Rachel McKenna** Conservation Architect, Offaly County Council

**Bridget Horan** Farming Organisations

**James Scully** Offaly History

**Pat Foley** Offaly Public Participation Network

**Lisa Shortall** Offaly Archives

**Christine Byrne** Slieve Bloom Rural Development

**Fiona Devery** Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland

**Julie McLoughlin** Bord na Mona Energy Ltd

**Aidan Reynolds** Coillte

**Eoin Coogan** Coillte

**Louis Byrne** Waterways Ireland

**Colm Malone** National Parks and Wildlife, East and North Offaly Ranger

**Margaux Pierrel** National Parks and Wildlife, South and West Offaly Ranger

**Caimin O'Brien** National Monuments Division, Dept Housing

**Maura Allen** Offaly Local Development Company

**Basil Mannion** Water and Communities Office

**Amanda Pedlow** Offaly Heritage Officer, Offaly County Council

## Consultations Held for Preparation of the Offaly Heritage Plan 2023-27

This plan is the result of engagement and discussions with those involved with heritage who were in a position to participate during the spring and summer of 2022. The plan sets out a range of actions which will be the focus of work for the next five years, based on funding, partnerships and the facilitation of projects amongst all those involved.

The focus of the heritage office is to work collaboratively and to

deliver through partnership and by providing project support, aiming to build capacity through working with local communities across the county and linkages with agencies.



**Basis for Discussions** - The actions in the plan have to be within the scope of the partners involved to deliver what may be achievable. Actions are focused on what the Offaly Heritage forum and partners can progress. The plan works alongside the objectives of the Offaly County Development Plan.

Actions that require national policy change or government action are outside the scope of this plan are not included although they may be desirable. It is noted that many actions from County Heritage Plans nationally provide collective data which can then inform government action.

## Two-Stage Public Consultation

**Part One** - In order to frame the five-year plan, a presentation was given by the Heritage Officer on the work of the last plan period from 2017-21 (extended to 2022). This was in order to provide an overview and scope of the work undertaken and to assist with submissions.

- The plan preparation was discussed at the two **Offaly Heritage Forum** meetings on 24 February and 28 April 2022.
- A presentation was made to the **three Municipal District** meetings followed by discussions on actions taken and ideas for the next plan period.
- A meeting was held with **Comhairle na nOg**, facilitated by Offaly Local Development Company in their offices on 8 March 2022.
- A presentation and discussion was offered to all heritage groups and in person meetings were held with **Clara Heritage** Group on 31 March, **Shinrone Heritage** Group on 13 April and **Offaly History** on 25 April 2022. It is noted that a number of groups are not yet meeting post-Covid 19.
- There was an **open invitation to evening zoom calls**, two on the wider heritage plan and one call specifically on biodiversity which was open to all and included attendance by the **Laois Offaly Irish Wildlife Trust**.
- **Social media posts** and emails to those on the **heritage email list** were sent inviting submissions and queries.

In total there was engagement with over 220 people.

### Feedback from Phase 1 Consultation - Key points

- The last five year plan was short, concise and **clearly set out** what the focus was.
- The priorities were **easily communicated**.
- The plan was **flexible** to accommodate emerging needs and community projects.

- There is a wide range of work being undertaken and the preparation of the new five year plans allows communication and assessment of work done in the previous plan period.
- The **enabling and support of volunteer work** is a key aspect of the work of the heritage office.
- The **publications** supported by the Heritage Office over the past 5 years are an invaluable resource for the county and this should continue.
- The **County Archive Service** developed by Offaly History with the support of Offaly County Council is a major achievement and highlights the advantage of a focused plan.
- Much more needs to be done across all sectors to tackle the **biodiversity crisis**.
- The government programmes for **Town Centres**; the **Community Monuments Fund**, and **biodiversity** are all a welcome increase in investment and focus.
- The development of YouTube videos on the **Wildflowers of Offaly** have had over 90,000 views and brought information straight to many users. With the return of in person events this focus on line access to heritage was requested to be continued
- The provision of almost five hundred articles, via **Offaly History's twice-weekly blog**, on the county of Offaly's history and culture demonstrates the benefit of collaboration. There is a broad base of contributors from home and abroad. These articles now reach approximately 2,000 people a week, or almost 400,000 since the commencement of the 4th Plan in 2017.

**Part Two** - the draft plan was presented to the **Planning SPC June meeting** and was approved to go out for public comment until 26 August 2022. Amendments were made and the plan is now submitted to the September Offaly County Council meeting for approval.



## Human Resources to Deliver the Offaly Heritage Plan 2023-27

- The **Full time heritage officer** working with the **Offaly Heritage Forum** co-ordinates the delivery of the county heritage plan. The part-time administrative support in 2021 and 2022 has enabled increased delivery of projects.
- **Grade 1 conservation architect** with the Council leads on delivering the Built Heritage Investment Scheme and Historic Structures Funds programme with part-time administrative support. The architect has led on the folly conservation programme in Offaly for the past five years having published Flights of Fancy in 2017 and is currently in the final stages of producing a book on vernacular houses and fixtures and fittings, the culmination of a number of years' research and work.
- The **Offaly Library Service** deliver a range of engagement programmes including Creative Ireland and Heritage Week which raise awareness and appreciation of our heritage. They are currently working with Irish Life and Lore to host over 300 oral history recordings commissioned by the Offaly Heritage office on the Local Studies pages of [www.offaly.ie](http://www.offaly.ie)
- **Volunteer Engagement** - the heritage sector has considerable volunteer and community engagement from the historical societies to the individuals that record biodiversity to the authors that research and publish in this area. This expertise is an invaluable asset for Offaly's heritage.
- The **Climate Change committee** within Offaly County Council is progressing and awareness throughout the Council of the **All-Ireland Pollinator plan** (adopted by Offaly County Council in spring 2020) has led to a range of management practices being altered across the county along with greater awareness of the role of biodiversity for a stable society.

- **Offaly Tourism** are very active in promoting the built, natural and cultural heritage sites that can be visited in the county.
- The appointment of **Biodiversity Officers** for each local authority is part of the Programme for Government and the increased work that could be achieved with this additional post would be very significant.
- The Heritage Council runs a comprehensive programme called **Heritage In Schools** which provides a panel of trained specialists to engage with national schools across the country. The Heritage office provides links to this programme for schools. Therefore a school's programme is not repeated as an objective in the Heritage Plan.



## Key Areas of Change for the 2023-27 Offaly Heritage Plan

The serious and urgent agenda of addressing the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate crisis underpins this plan. **Climate change and biodiversity loss**, ecosystem collapse and extinction need to be considered with every project or action. There is now a widely acknowledged acceptance of these interlinked challenges and the need to consider this for each project undertaken.

Integral to this is the increased focus on the use and function of **town centres**; their carbon footprint and the need to conserve and reuse existing buildings.

All three of these areas have led to a number of Government programmes which provide great opportunities for Offaly.

In the past five years funding has become available through the following new schemes;

- **Community Monuments Fund** Under the National Monuments Service, Dept of Housing - 100% funding up to a maximum of €85,000 per project. Introduced in 2020, four projects have received funding in 2022.
- **Historic Towns Initiative** Led by the Heritage Council. 80% funding up to €200,000. Noting €220,000 was received for Birr Courthouse conservation works in 2021.
- **Local Biodiversity Action Plan** Fund (led by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Dept of Housing). 85% funding with c €50,000 allocated in 2022
- **Peatlands Community Engagement** Fund. Led by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Dept of Housing. St Brendan's Community School received funding for the Killaun boardwalk in 2022 under this programme.

- **Decade of Commemorations** – for the period 2016–23. Administered by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. €56,000 received in 2022 and delivered in partnership with Offaly History.
- **Creative Ireland Programme** Delivered by a cross-departmental team in Offaly County Council, co-ordinated by the heritage office for the past six years, with funding from Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. €145,161 for county programming in 2022 with additional funding programmes for Older Age (€27,650) and Cruinniu na nOg (€30,000).
- **Just Transition** – a joint Laois–Offaly project on the conservation of medieval churches. €748,000 was allocated for the conservation of 3 churches in Laois and 3 churches in Offaly from 2021–23. The churches are Monasteroris in Edenderry MD Kilbride (Ballycowan) Tullamore MD and Kilmurryely in Birr MD.
- **Heritage Council Stewardship Fund** – 75% funding with €15,000 allocated to Offaly County Council vernacular architecture programme in 2022.

The number of new programmes introduced between 2017 and 2023 demonstrates the need to have flexibility to deliver projects as funding becomes available.





## **Funding continued at an increased level through the following programmes**

- **Heritage Council - Heritage Plan funding** 75% funding. €37,000 received in for 2023.
- **Built Heritage Investment Scheme** (administered by Offaly Council Council with funding from Dept of Housing). The Budget in 2022 is €126,400 supporting works at 27 project sites.
- **Historic Structures Fund** (previously Structures at Risk) is administered by Offaly County Council with funding from Dept of Housing. In 2022 three Historic Structures Fund projects are being supported through €101,000 of grant aid.

## **Opportunities**

- Funding towards biodiversity officers during the life of the next plan which is being administered by the Heritage Council with support of the National Parks and Wildlife Service.





## Actions Proposed for 2023-27

### 1. Offaly County Council Projects with Heritage Officer involvement

The introduction of the **Creative Ireland** programme in 2017 has brought resources to exploring heritage through different media, and particularly in partnership with artists, which has facilitated a whole range of engaging creative heritage projects.

This approach was piloted with the arts, heritage and architecture offices in 2014 with the Secrets of Offaly project. A considerable range of projects has been delivered over the past 5 years and the news of the continuation of this national programme (2023-27) for a second five-year term is very welcome.

The **Decade of Centenaries** from 2017-23 has provided substantial funding to research, remember and commemorate the events of 100 years ago in Offaly. For much of this sensitive area of work the Council partnered with a range of historians under the umbrella of Offaly History and a valuable body of work has been built up consisting of publications, blogs, youtubes, lectures and archival resources.

The **Offaly Climate Change team** was set up in 2020 and meets on a monthly basis with participation from across all departments.

### Actions Proposed

- Continue with active participation on the Offaly County Council **Creative Ireland** team.
- Close out the **Decade of Centenaries** programme in 2023
- Continue to work on the **Offaly Climate Change** team
- Provide heritage advice on a wide range of **County Council projects** that may arise during the plan period.

## 2. Biodiversity

Biodiversity is our life-support system and it provides us with ecosystem goods and services, such as clean water, carbon sequestration, healthy soil, air quality, pollination, food and medicines, timber, and fibre for material.

There is a large number of state bodies and funding streams involved in starting to tackle the biodiversity crisis in Offaly. This plan focuses on the role of the County Council and the projects the Council can lead out on with the resources currently available.

If a biodiversity officer is appointed during the course of this plan this area will be revisited and expanded.

### Actions Proposed

- **Active management of Council owned lands for biodiversity enhancement.** Increasingly the management of lands for biodiversity is being considered. Much of the Council's land bank is purchased for specific purposes such as housing. There is c .8 hectares of a land bank at Syngefield Demesne, Birr which is part of the old demesne and has a castle site at its core, adjacent to the Camcor River. It is proposed to manage this site for biodiversity with public access.
- Promotion of the **All Ireland Pollinator Plan** adopted by the Council in Spring 2020
- **Supporting the recording and submitting of records** to the National Biodiversity Data Centre. This can range from facilitating and hosting workshops, to providing equipment for recorders to supporting Bioblitzs. The inputting of these records assists with tracking the impact of climate and habitat change.
- **Control of invasive species** with particular focus on Japanese, Himalayan and Giant knotweed and Himalayan Balsam. Considerable work was done in the previous plan period to get the knotweeds and Himalayan balsam under control. The aim is to maintain this over the current plan period.

### 3. Partnering with Local Communities and Societies

Working on heritage projects, ranging from the Tidy Towns network to Historical Societies.



**Local communities and societies** are best placed to glean local knowledge and be aware of what is special to their sense of place. However planning projects, getting the appropriate permissions, applying for funding and delivering works can be a challenge and the aim for the heritage office is to provide support to groups throughout this process.

Many years of work are paying off for a number of the consistently hard working **Tidy Towns Groups** in Offaly. This culminated in 2021 with Geashill winning Ireland's Tidiest Village; Tullamore winning a Gold medal in its category and Birr a Silver Medal. Both Birr and Geashill Tidy Towns have won the National All Ireland Pollinator Special Award in the National Tidy Towns competition. In 2022 Birr was

asked to take part in the Best Kept - North South competition which is an acknowledgement of progress made in recent years.

#### Actions Proposed

- Continue to work with **local community groups and societies** to plan and implement heritage projects specific to their area of interest.
- Support the **Tidy Towns Network** in the extensive natural and built heritage aspects of their work programmes and entry forms for the National Tidy Towns competition.

## 4. Built Heritage

There are 1,428 protected structures in County Offaly. Each year the Built Heritage Investment Scheme is advertised and owners are supported through the funding programme by the conservation architectural team.

In 2021 Birr Courthouse came into the Council's ownership from the OPW. Emergency works to weather proof the building were undertaken in 2021 through the Historic Towns Initiative and Historic Structures Fund and project planning is ongoing with Birr 20:20 for the conservation works needed to bring the courthouse back into use.

### Actions Proposed

- Continue to provide information and supports to owners of protected structures and administer the **Built Heritage Investment Scheme** and the **Historic Structures Fund**.
- Work with the Regeneration Team on **URDF, RRDF and Town Centre First** projects.
- Carry out **Streetscape Surveys** to assess building condition and usage. If the resources become available this information could lead to **Collaborative Town Centre Health Check** programmes spearheaded by the Heritage Council.
- Collate data and liaise with owners to prepare applications to the **Historic Towns Initiative**.
- Develop and implement proposals with the **Destination Towns** programme team

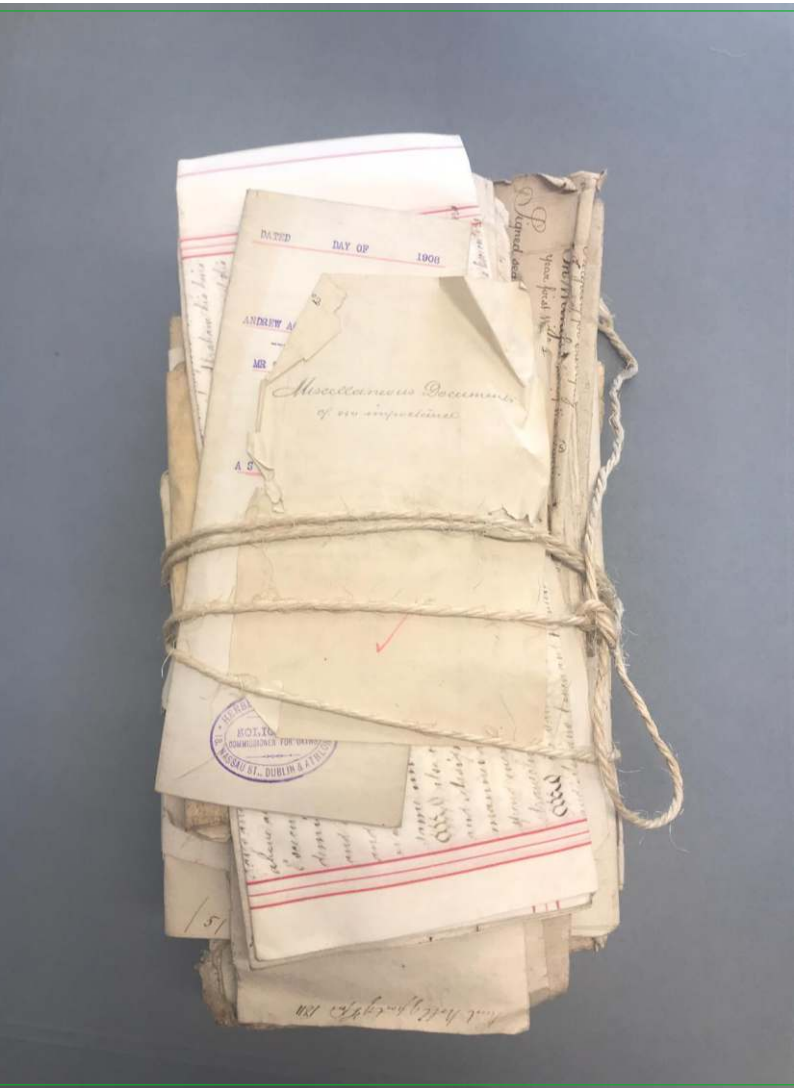


## 5. Documenting Heritage

The public consultation process strongly commended the work done by all the partners to develop the **County Archive Service** run by Offaly History along with the publication supports provided for a range of books documenting Offaly's heritage. The need to record oral histories was a consistent theme in the feedback.

### Actions Proposed

- Continue to support the **County Archive Service** developed and run by Offaly History and supported by the Council.



- Support and commission appropriate **high quality publications** on Offaly's heritage.
- Work with communities to **record oral histories** and in particular the recording of the industrial heritage of the peatlands.
- Work with **Bord na Mona** and communities to record and document the evolution of the peatlands as commercial harvesting ceases.



## 6. Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites

There are over 4000 archaeological sites in Offaly, well documented on [www.archaeology.ie](http://www.archaeology.ie) and protected under the National Monuments Act. Until the introduction of the **Community Monuments Fund** in 2020 it was however very challenging for private owners to access conservation expertise to guide them on how best to manage a monument in their ownership or to fund conservation works. The introduction of this programme has been a considerable breakthrough.

The work done during the 3rd Offaly Heritage Plan in surveying the **Offaly castle sites** with Caimin O'Brien of the National Monuments Service has provided an invaluable baseline of data for this work.

In addition the heritage office joined with the Laois Heritage office and secured **Just Transition** funding for the conservation of a medieval church in each Municipal District. This is a three year programme from 2021-23.

Climate change is accelerating the fading of inscriptions of memorials and associated symbols in burial grounds. This makes the need all the more pressing to publish the inscriptions with their locations. Experience has shown that this is best done by local historians and researchers who know the local family names. A number of memorial recording projects and publications were supported over the previous plan period.



## Actions Proposed

- **Medieval churches** – conservation of the medieval churches, preparation of management plans and access (medieval churches are predominantly in Offaly County Council ownership).

Three churches are part of the Just Transition funding programme being run jointly with Laois County Council for 2021-23 – focusing on conservation and pollination. Works are currently underway at Monasteroris, Kilbride (Ballycowan) and Kilmurryely near Shinrone.

- Continue the **maintenance programme** for the medieval church and graveyards previously conserved.
- **Monument Conservation** – work with the owners of archaeological sites to conserve the structures utilising the **Community Monuments Fund**.
- **Memorial Recording** work with local communities to record and publish the memorials in their burial grounds.
- **Liase with the OPW** on the plans for the management of Clonmacnoise, Durrow, Rahan, Gallen and Seir Kieran monastic sites, parts of which are in state ownership.



## 7. Access to heritage

Access to heritage sites and information is an essential role and very open ended. Evidence supports the effectiveness of place-based learning and engaging communities through activities. There is unlimited potential here, however with the current staff resourcing the three events listed will be the main focus for the next five years.

### Actions Proposed

- Coordinating and management of **in person events** such as **Heritage Week, Offaly Naturalists' Field Club** programme including the annual summer school, **Annual Offaly Heritage Seminar** in November profiling the year's projects and awareness of Offaly's heritage through all appropriate means.
- **Online Information** - 2020 and 2021 covid restrictions pushed many projects to have online access to information and saw the introduction of the **Wildflowers of Offaly** series led by John Feehan which now has over 90,000 views. The Offaly Heritage youtube channel now has over 1,470 subscribers. The Offaly History website and blogs are developing weekly.
- The heritage section of **[www.offaly.ie/heritage](http://www.offaly.ie/heritage)** is kept up to date
- **Social Media** Offaly Heritage has an active Offaly Heritage Facebook page and a twitter account which is less active due to time constraints. 3,489 people follow Offaly Heritage as of September 2022.

## Timeframe for the Preparation of the Offaly Heritage Plan 2023-27

### **2022**

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| Early February        | Heritage Forum discussion and ideas  |
| March to April        | Present key projects from the last 5 years – online and in person<br><br>Invite email / written submissions<br><br>Publish times for public meetings and special interest groups on request. |
| End April             | Close public consultation  |
| May                   | Draft Heritage Plan for June SPC   |
| Mid-June – Mid-August | Public consultation for the Offaly Heritage Plan 2023-27   |
| September             | Final Plan to County Council meeting   |
| Autumn                | Publish the Offaly Heritage Plan 2023-27   |





