



Abbeyleix Sustainable Communities Plan



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PART ONE CONTEXT

1 Context

1.1 Abbeyleix

Abbeyleix is a planned 18th century town located in South County Laois within the plain of the River Nore. It has a relatively intact morphology comprising narrow plots and period buildings. The context height and heritage fabric has also remained relatively undisturbed by insensitively scaled developments or infill, reflecting its status as a Heritage Town.

The modern town of Abbeyleix dates to the late eighteenth century, when the then major landowners in the area, the de Vescis, decided to relocate the existing village away from the marshy river bank, and to found a new town at its present location. The new town was formally planned in a cruciform shape, with an architecturally unified streetscape. A wide linear main street, with a central Market Square and planted lime trees, formed the spine of the new town.

The market place was established immediately to the north of the principal crossroads which today still acts as the pivotal centre of the town. The main commercial area is centred on Main Street and Market Square with residential areas concentrated on the southern portion of Main Street, Stucker Hill to the north, New Row/Balladine Row to the west and Ballinakill Road to the east.

The basic layout of the town's streetscape has remained relatively unchanged up to the present day. The retention of the essential character of the original estate settlement has resulted in Abbeyleix being recognised as an important heritage town, and the relationship of the town to the estate and its pastoral setting, is recognised as an essential part of the character of the town as a whole.



Aerial view from east



Aerial view from north



Aerial view from south-east



Abbeyleix and surrounding context

1.2 The sustainable communities plan

1.2.1 Scope and purpose of the plan

The aim of the plan is to build on the positive aspects of the town's natural setting and topography, its links to the wider landscape and environs, its natural and built heritage and its diversity and mix of uses, in order to make it a more attractive place to live, work and visit.

The main objectives of the Abbeyleix Sustainable Communities Plan are:

- To establish a “shared vision” for the future of Abbeyleix;
- To set out policies, projects and practical guidance on the management and enhancement of the Public Realm in Abbeyleix;
- To set out policies, projects and practical guidance on the management and conservation of the architectural heritage, taking the Heritage Town status of Abbeyleix into account;
- To identify practical measures to maximise quality of life for residents and to enhance the town's economic potential in terms of tourism development;
- To provide guidelines for the development of similar plans in other areas with Abbeyleix as a case study.

Abbeyleix suffered for many years from serious traffic congestion. This situation has recently changed significantly, with the opening of the M8 motorway, which bypasses the town. Significant volumes of heavy goods traffic still uses the Main Street, however. While the by-passing of Abbeyleix has resulted in considerable challenges to local businesses, the community has already begun to respond positively to these challenges. Laois County Council is already working closely with the community to progress these projects and the proposed plan will complement and help to consolidate these initiatives.

The Abbeyleix Sustainable Communities Plan represents one part of a broader process marrying ‘top-down’ with ‘bottom-up’ community initiatives, and, as such, will be used to help prioritise actions and as a platform for the community to pursue its wider aim of developing a model town, with particular focus on community engagement. As such the plan will bring together a wide range of existing projects that the community has sought to initiate to date, such as walking and cycling routes, together with detailed recommendations for improving the public realm and the re-use of heritage buildings that will help to revitalise the town centre and its economy, and the Main Street in particular. It is the community's expectation that the plan will act as a spring-board for a wider range of community driven initiatives.

1.2.2 Approach

Planning plays an important role in shaping places to make them more sustainable. It seeks to do this by:

- Agreeing a vision and securing consensus about what the place should be like;
- Drawing on the wider landscape, promoting green infrastructure and biodiversity;
- Enhancing character and culture including built and natural heritage;
- Encouraging a vibrant range and mix of town centre uses and locally sustainable economies;
- Enlivening spaces;
- Facilitating sustainable access and movement.

1.2.3 Sustainable communities

Sustainable communities are places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, offer equality of opportunity and good services for all.

They are:

- Active, inclusive and safe - fair, tolerant and cohesive with a strong local culture and other shared community activities;
- Well run - with effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership;
- Environmentally sensitive - providing places for people to live that are considerate of the environment;
- Well designed and built - featuring a quality built and natural environment;
- Well connected - with good transport services and communication linking people to jobs, schools, health and other services;
- Thriving - with a flourishing and diverse local economy;
- Well served - with public, private, community and voluntary services that are appropriate to people's needs and accessible to all;
- Fair for everyone - including those in other communities, now and in the future.

Although the plan touches on several of these goals, its primary focus is on improvements to the public realm and the existing built heritage, and how these can contribute to the overall viability and vitality of the community and its local economy.

1.2.4 Limits of the plan

The scope of the sustainability agenda is increasingly broad, covering aspects of place as well as the local community and its economy. Accordingly it is recognised that, while the projects and proposals identified by the plan will positively impact on all of these aspects (directly and indirectly), its scope is necessarily constrained to aspects that the community, in conjunction with Laois County Council, has the potential to implement. Other, broader aspects of the sustainability agenda, such as renewable energy, for example, are outside of the scope of this plan, and will need to be pursued in parallel with the plan.

In this context it is hoped the plan will provide an impetus for the community to prepare future plans with a broader sustainability agenda.

1.2.5 Priorities

To become more sustainable, Abbeyleix must become more healthy, attractive and economically viable, while simultaneously reducing its effect on the environment and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The priorities for sustainable places are:

Energy – to reduce energy demand and develop a renewable energy portfolio;

Waste – to plan for sustainable waste management;

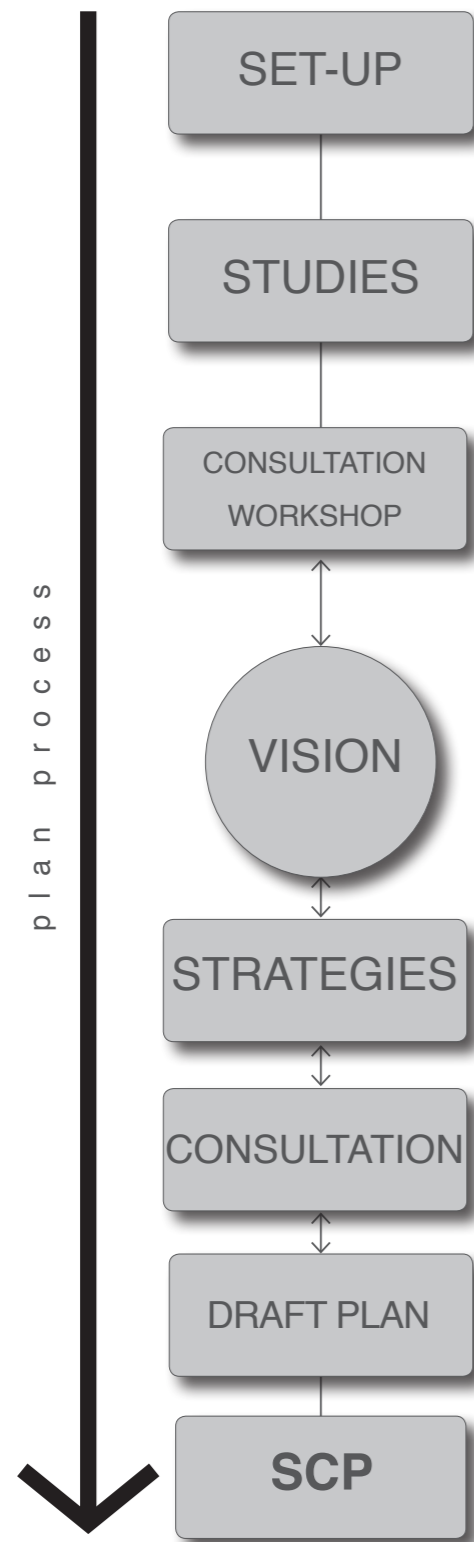
Water – to manage surface water and flood risk and encourage more sustainable use of water;

Transport – to encourage public transport walking and cycling and reduce car use;

Green infrastructure – to integrate green infrastructure into urban areas;

Public space – to maximise the potential of public space.

1 Context



Public and stakeholder consultation as key stages in the development of the ASCP

1.2.6 Consultation

Community involvement is an essential element creating a vision for sustainable communities and in delivering sustainable development. The Sustainable Communities Plan is guided by an agreed vision of what the place should be like. The vision has been informed by a thorough understanding of the place, established through consultation and underpinned by a set of core principles for its development.

In developing the vision for Abbeyleix, the planning authority is committed to ensuring that local communities will have the opportunity to shape the vision and how that vision can be achieved, have the opportunity to participate in the process of generating the vision, strategy and specific plan policies, and to be involved in development proposals.

A consultation plan based on the project proposal and subsequent inception meeting and discussions with the project steering group was prepared.

Each stage of the public consultation process was overseen by the steering group, which included the chair of the Abbeyleix Business and Community forum (ABC), the chair of the Tidy Towns committee, as well as representatives from the Laois County Council Planning, Heritage and Community Development Sections.

1.2.6.1 Public call for submissions

A public call for submissions was advertised in the local press on February 22nd 2011, including an invitation to a public workshop, held in Heritage House on the 9th March, 2011. Key stakeholders and community groups were contacted by letter inviting submissions and participation in the workshop.

1.2.6.2 Interviews

A long-list of consultees was compiled for the purposes of completing stage one, and agreed with the steering group. This comprised representatives from statutory agencies (local authority officials, elected members, service providers, etc); sectoral groups such as education (schools), environment and health; culture, heritage and tourism; local businesses and services; local interest/ community groups and individuals. Contact was also made via phone, email or written letter as appropriate.

Forty letters were issued to local community groups and representatives together with a further eight statutory and semi-state bodies.

Structured interviews were held with the Abbeyleix Business and Community forum, Bog Committee, Tidy Towns Committee, Laois County Council roads design section and forward planning section, Laois Partnership and elected members.

1.2.6.3 Community workshop

Thirty seven people attended the workshop. The workshop was facilitated by the consultant team and observed by Laois County Council Heritage Officer.

The workshop was structured around a detailed programme to cover five main elements:

- Cognitive mapping exercise.
- Focussed group discussions about what it means to be a sustainable community.
- Identifying positive features of the town and its environs and how these can be improved.
- Identifying negative features of the town and how these can be addressed.
- Key projects with the potential to transform Abbeyleix.

Attendees were split into working groups of 5-7 people and each group was asked to address these questions and to present their findings to the group as a whole. The workshop organisers acted as facilitators within individual groups to encourage discussion and help nominate a group representative for presenting the outcome of the work.

Groups and individuals were supplied with base mapping at different scales, large format paper and markers and encouraged to present their findings visually / spatially using diagrams as well as words.

The output of each group was presented by a nominated member of each work group to the group as a whole.

An overall report on stakeholder submissions was collated under appropriate sub-headings and reported to the steering group together with observations. Common concerns and aspirations that emerged from this process were summarised and outlined. The submissions have informed the vision and strategies and the preparation of the draft Sustainable Communities Plan.

The consultation process to date has demonstrated a high degree of willingness on the part of the community, and especially local community groups, to participate and to engage pro actively with the planning process.

Sustainability

Participant's ideas about what it means to be a sustainable community varied widely, however they illustrate a substantial degree of support for a localist agenda, with particular emphasis on the need for local businesses, local food production, local employment and living opportunities, local energy production and the quality of the local environment. In addition, there is a recognition that these sorts of initiatives should be locally driven.

Identifying positive and negative aspects

A diverse range of issues and opportunities have been raised. In broad terms the strength of the local community and its constituent organisations was highlighted, together with an acknowledgement of the importance and high quality of certain local amenities, heritage assets, and the surrounding landscape, balanced with the desire for all of these aspects to be consolidated and enhanced.

Concerns also varied, including depopulation of the town centre, vacancy, viability of town centre businesses and shops, lack of broadband, lack of walking and cycling opportunities, lack of local employment opportunities, water quality issues, traffic and parking issues, habitat loss and lack of open green space in the town centre.

Addressing negative aspects

Ideas for addressing issues of concern focussed on encouraging greater residential occupation of the town centre and use of vacant properties, disabled access, better signage and way-finding, improved car parking, traffic calming (particularly HGV traffic), improving the pedestrian environment, walking and cycling routes, stimulating local businesses and local food production and marketing, the potential for festivals and tourism. Preferred projects included a tourism information centre, a bog interpretative centre, re-use of the former railway line for walking and cycling, an enterprise centre, cinema and tourism promotion and promotion of tourism opportunities such as weddings etc.

Developing draft strategies

The issues and opportunities raised by participants in the Workshop were collated by the project team to inform its understanding of the Abbeyleix and to develop its recommendations for strategies and key projects. Strategies included projects and actions with non-spatial implications, such as marketing and branding, alongside specific improvements to the public realm and related initiatives with implications both for the public realm, heritage buildings, tourism and economic viability etc.

1.2.6.4 Presentation of draft strategies and projects

A second advertisement was placed in the local press inviting attendance at a public presentation of the draft plan strategies and proposals, which was held in Heritage House on 18th April 2011. The presentation by the project consultants was followed by a questions and answers session and was observed by representatives of the Council. Presentation boards were also displayed and these were subsequently placed on display in the Abbeyleix library and on Laois County Council's website. Members of the public were invited to make submissions on the draft plan.

Four written submissions were received. Two of these were primarily concerned with loss of car-parking associated with proposals for widening footpaths in the vicinity of Market Square. The third submission relates primarily to concerns about the potential impact on Temperance Street of any future development to the south-east of the Main Street, if used as a point of access to these lands. The fourth submission broadly welcomed the plan, noting, for example, that the Market Square "needs to be reclaimed for the community", however it raised concerns about proposed footpath widening. It also raised concerns about elements of proposals impacting on private property, but, notwithstanding this, suggested the scope of the plan should be broader than the public realm.

Subsequent to the public presentation the Steering Group also invited the Abbeyleix Community Resilience Group to make a submission. This presentation highlighted the broader scope of the sustainability agenda in terms of renewable energy and local food production, as well as the limited potential of the sustainable communities plan to address these aspects. It was agreed with the Steering Group that the plan should sit within a wider process of community engagement with broader sustainability issues of this kind.



Images from the community consultation workshop

1 Context

1.2 Planning and development context

1.2.1 Regional planning guidelines

Abbeyleix is designated as a Service Town in the Midland Regional Planning Guidelines. Service Towns perform an important retail, residential, service and amenity functions, especially for their local hinterlands. The RPGs envisage development of such towns needs to be focused on consolidation and better matching of development with supporting infrastructure.

1.2.2 Draft Laois County Development Plan 2012-2018

Abbeyleix is designated as a Service Town within a 'stronger rural area' in the draft Laois County Development Plan 2012-2018 settlement hierarchy. Service Towns are so designated, because they are important resources for their hinterlands, providing community and infrastructural facilities and services and the population base to maintain them. As such, Abbeyleix performs an important retail, residential, service and amenity function for local, essentially rural hinterland, and supports the upper tiers of the urban hierarchy, including the principal towns.

Abbeyleix has experienced high levels of population growth over the last census period, and its development now needs to be increasingly aimed at consolidating growth matched to the development of social and physical infrastructure.

This means that the transition between the town and its rural hinterland will need to be carefully managed while allowing any future growth to take place as a compact, planned and sustainable urban extension to the existing fabric.

In this context the plan recognises the historic function of the town's market square in providing an arena for farmers to sell agricultural products locally and that local markets represent an opportunity for the resurgence of the local economy with ready access to customers and spin-off benefits to local businesses, however this needs to be balanced with the need to counteract the negative effect of vacant and underutilised town centre buildings.

1.2.2.1 Draft Abbeyleix town plan

The Abbeyleix Town plan is being prepared as part of the Development Plan review, and includes land use zoning and other objectives. The review will be informed by the recommendations of the Abbeyleix Sustainable Communities Plan.

1.2.2.2 Architectural heritage

A detailed study of the Architectural Heritage of the town was carried out in 2010, and based on this report, an Architectural Conservation Area covering much of the urban area of Abbeyleix has been proposed in the draft Laois County Development Plan (2012 - 2018).



Abbeyleix town in context showing principal attractions within a 10km radius

1.2.2.3 Landscape character assessment report

Abbeyleix is located within a landscape type characterised as 'lowland agricultural' (adjacent to an area of peatland) in the draft County Landscape Character Assessment. This is described as generally flat pastoral land with significant field sizes bordered by deciduous hedgerows and trees.

In terms of urban fringe, the defining characteristics include the radiating road routes on which development has taken place in a ribbon-type physical form. Individual sites are often suburban in design and their more formal and sculptured character does not usually integrate sympathetically with the overall landscape context. The report also notes the impact of urban pressure



Abbeyleix town showing built-up areas

on the landscape. Preserving a clear transition between the town and its hinterland will therefore be central to securing the future identity and heritage character of the town.

Another characteristic of this Landscape Character Type is the frequently disused or underused nature of former agricultural lands, which are now zoned and set aside for future development.

Killamuck Bog south of Abbeyleix (now known as Abbeyleix Bog), accessible from the N77, was ceded to the Community of Abbeyleix in order to provide an amenity for the town. This offers opportunities for developing a 'green' framework/infrastructure for the town's public realm, for creating unifying green linkages through the town, and for enhancing the public realm by developing those resources, and, notably, enhancing the relationship between the town and the surrounding countryside.

1.2.2.4 Westlands Masterplan

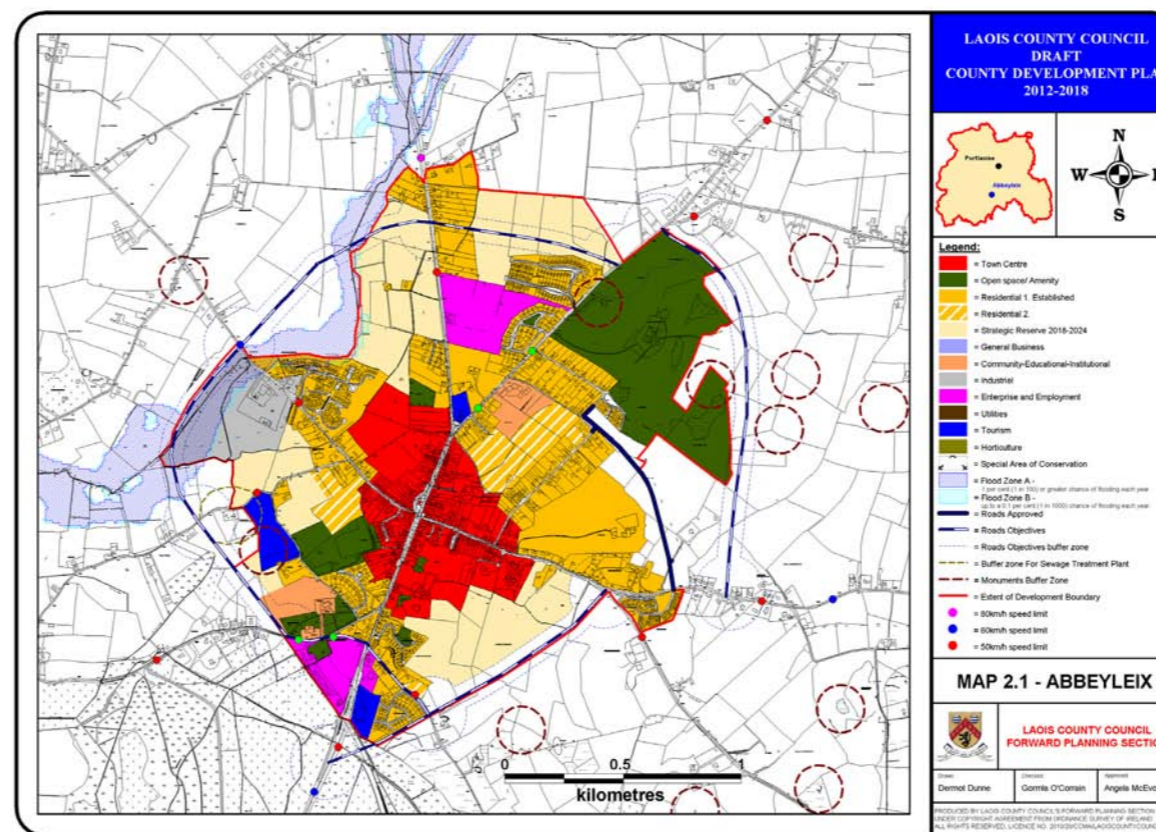
Subsequent to the adoption of the Abbeyleix Town Plan 2006-2012, significant development pressures emerged that prompted the Council to prepare a masterplan covering an area of approximately 27.5 hectares to the west of the town centre. The masterplan includes a portion of the main street however it focusses on back-land development opportunities.

The plan sets out a vision for creating a compact and vibrant extension of the town centre and supporting objectives relating to permeability, sense of place, activity and green links.

The spatial expression of these is articulated in the plan by dividing the area into four main character areas, each with their own spatial and functional objectives. Potential links and points of entry into and within the lands is tentatively indicated, including two points of access from the Main Street and Market Square respectively.

1.2.2.5 Knocknamoe masterplan

The Knocknamoe masterplan covers an area of 3.2 hectares of backland behind the east side of the main street. The plan was also prepared by Laois County Council in 2008 as an objective of the Abbeyleix Town Plan, however it was not endorsed by the elected members. The plan identifies a number of potential points of access off the main street and via Temperance Street. The plan envisages a number of town centre type uses and sheltered housing. There is a planning application for a primary medical health care facility on part of the lands, which, at the time of writing, is the subject of an appeal to An Bord Pleanála (ref. PL11.238284).



Draft Abbeyleix Town Plan (source: Laois County Council Draft Development Plan, 2006-2012)

1 Context

1.3 Understanding the place

1.3.1 Historical context

As described in the ACA report the history of Abbeyleix as a town originated with building of a church that was re-founded as a Cistercian abbey during the 12th century, and the granting of lands to the abbey corresponding to the modern parish of Abbeyleix. The large land holding of abbeys, together with the large number of labourers needed to farm the land is cited as an important impetus the development of nucleated settlements in the medieval period.

When the abbey was dissolved in the 16th century, it passed to the Earls of Ormond, who used it as a base until it was burned by the Earls of Desmond. Nothing survives of it today.

The lands passed to the de Vesce family in 1750, who are believed to have established their residence on the site of the former abbey in 1773. Due to the marshy ground conditions there, the de Vescis decided to level the original settlement and to construct a new town in its present location. Abbey Leix House is located to the southwest of the town, and was designed by English architect James Wyatt, originally for Lord Knapton and later the 1st Viscount de Vesce. The house was built between 1773 and 1778, to a typical

Georgian 'box' plan, but was elaborated to designs by Thomas Wyatt (James Wyatt's nephew) during the 1840s. A mid 19th century wing was subsequently modified in the 1990s, during which time the entire house was restored by its present owner, Sir David Davies.

The economic benefits of having a market town was recognised by 'improving' landlords and the de Vescis encouraged the growth of commercial activity such as markets, milling and textiles, centred on the market house.

The town subsequently benefited from the diversion of the Dublin to Cashel mail route through the town. Following the negative impacts of the famine in the 1840s, the arrival of a rail connection in 1867 facilitated its economic recovery. The economic fortunes of the town declined once more with the closure of the railway and its textile industry during the 20th century but, notwithstanding the replacement of thatch with slate roof coverings early in the 19th century, its basic morphology and streetscape have changed little since the 1840s.



Historical growth: 1800s



Historical growth: 2010s



Historical growth: 2010s + Westlands and Knocknamoe masterplan areas and proposals for orbital routes contained in draft Abbeyleix Town Plan



Historical views of the main street - note shared use of carriageway

1.3.2 Landscape context and character

The town of Abbeyleix is situated at the interface of a wide flat plain of predominantly agricultural lands and low rolling hills on the edge of the Castlecomer Plateau. The flat plain extends northwards to the foot of the Slieve Blooms and south as far as Durrow. The town is located between heights of 92-133 metres above sea level and is 2.5km approx from the banks of the Nore River. The Gloreen Stream (a tributary of The Nore) and its floodplain skirt the town to the west and north. The town is bounded to the south by; forested areas, Abbey Leix Demesne and Abbeyleix Bog.

Notable landscape features of the town are its back lanes and older agricultural laneways (some possibly predate the development of the town). In particular the laneways;

- to the Catholic Church from Main Street, Stucker Hill and the Ballinakill Road,
- the laneway from Main Street to Father Breen Park,
- the walk past the Sexton's House and through Church Grove, and
- the rural laneway that runs from the Ballacolla Road around the south west of the town to the Mountrath Road.

As the town has historically developed along the cruciform plan of streets and then later along the radial routes significant areas of agricultural land remain in close proximity to the town centre and in the case of Woodville Stud directly adjoin Main Street.

There are many significant tree groups in the town. It is likely that this planting was undertaken within a short period of time from the founding of the town and represents another planned aspect of the town's development. Today these tree stands have matured and are a significant aspect of the landscape character. The predominant species are Beech and Scots Pine with Lime planted within the curtilage of the Catholic Church and a Lime Avenue framing the entrance to the Church of Ireland. The lower Main Street (from the Market Square to The Fountain) was lined with Lime trees; these were possibly contemporaneous the planting of Lime trees in the church grounds. A number of the tree groups are set on low hills; The Grove and the Three Ladies Hills.

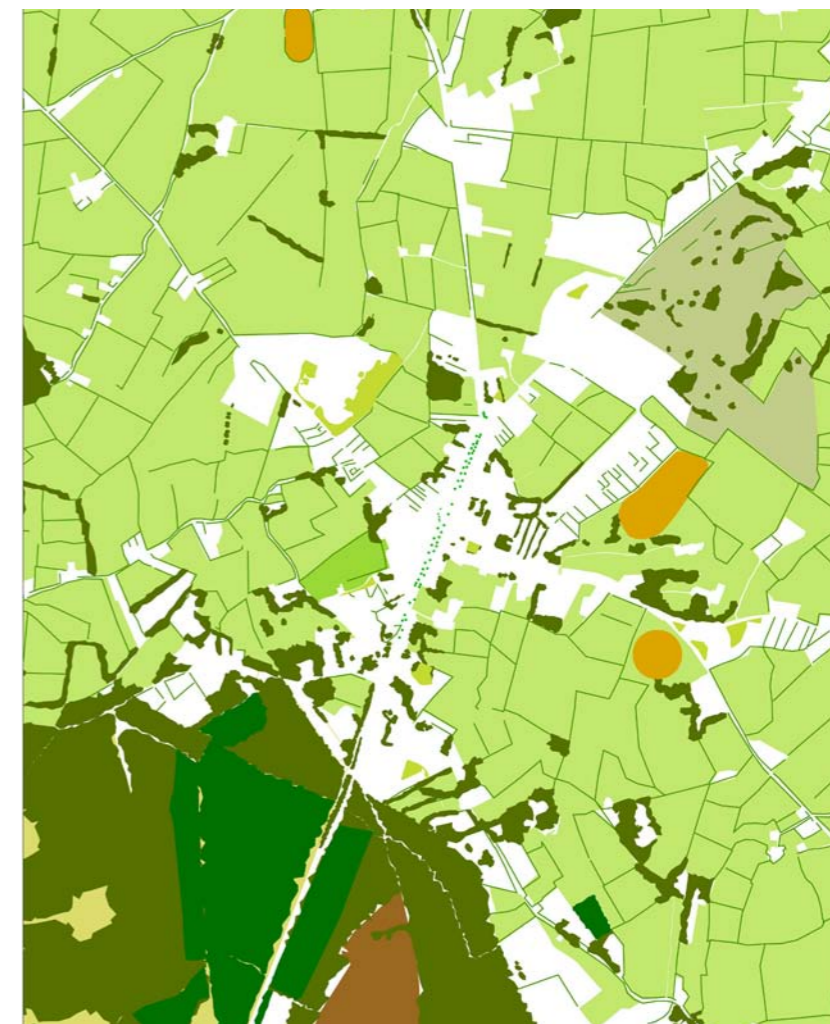
The grounds and environs of the Church of Ireland (including the South School, Sexton's House and Vicarage) forms an area of high landscape amenity considerably distinguished in character from the Main Street. The buildings are set within a generous curtilage of parkland landscape and gardens. Boundaries are enclosed with well-crafted Limestone walls.

The environs of the Catholic Church are also a notable area of high visual amenity. The bell tower of the church is very prominent in the skyline of

the town and is deliberately located on the axis of the Portlaoise road. The adjoining burial grounds have many mature trees including large Hollies and are enclosed with Limestone walls. The church is situated on the grounds of a former Brigidine Convent. The Convent gardens are today occupied by Dove House and its sensory gardens.

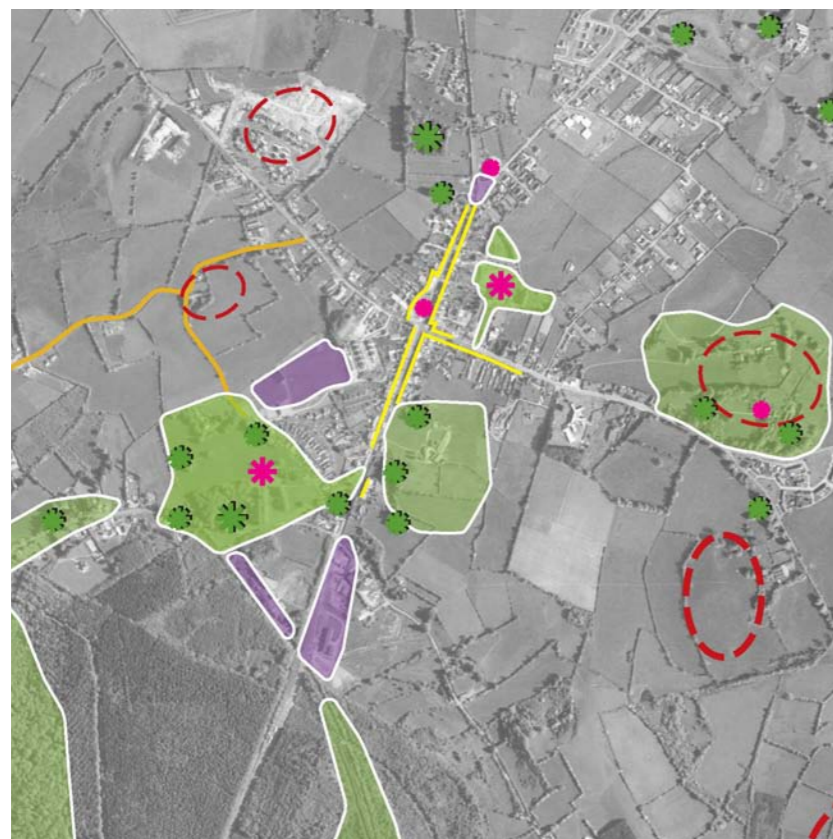
On the periphery of the town many of the significant tree groups are on the grounds of large Country Houses; Glenban, Allworth, Rathmoyle (Abbeyleix Golf Club), Thornberry (no longer extant) and Woodville. The grounds of the country houses and their tree groups form an attractive edge to the town looking outwards and when approaching the town from the rural hinterland.

There are also significant tree groups along the Ballacolla Road from the Church Grove to Old Town including a stand of mature trees within the soft verges at Old Town. The town's tree groups described above can be considered in the wider context as part of the landscape of Abbey Leix House and the de Vesci estate.



Landscape and vegetation

1 Context



Top: landscape character areas
Bottom: Areas of high visual amenity (green), low visual amenity (lilac), prominent buildings (violet), and prominent tree groups (green)

1.3.3 Natural heritage

Habitat mapping for Abbeyleix was carried out on behalf of the Council in 2010. The study identified four principal habitats and networks:

- EN1 - Abbeyleix Bog-Estate woodlands
- EN2 – Gloreen Stream and tributaries
- EN3 – Abbeyleix golf course
- EN4 – Abbeyleix Church graveyard

The significance of the habitat mapping is to highlight the ecological significance of the environs of the town which has informed proposed proposals for walking and cycling routes as part of a green infrastructure network, and should be used to inform future detailed proposals affecting these areas, to ensure that such proposals do not negatively affect their ecological integrity.

1.3.3.1 EN1 - Abbeyleix Bog-Estate woodlands

This ecological network is located to the south of Abbeyleix Town and is described in the report as linking some semi-natural habitats and important linear habitats such as mature tree-lines to the Abbeyleix Bog area and to the adjacent mixed woodland in the Abbey Leix Estate.

The overall Abbeyleix bog area is considered to be of national ecological value as it contains examples of habitats listed on Annex I of the EU habitats Directive such as degraded raised bog and active raised bog (a priority habitat). The site also contains a notable intact example of 'lagg vegetation' along the eastern margin and intact examples of this transitional bog habitat are now rarely found around Irish raised bogs, therefore significantly raising the ecological value of this site. The value of the overall area is significantly enhanced by mature woodland that surrounds the bog including some developing wet woodland and bog woodland on former cutover bog.

The habitats found in the eastern part of the Ecological Network of are high local ecological importance as they form an important corridor through mainly farmland and contains small areas that are likely to act as wildlife refuges.

The mature trees in the tree-lines (WL2) along the Abbeyleix-Ballinakill Road (Thornberry House) are likely to act as an important feeding area for bats.

The area west of the Abbeyleix Bog is dominated by plantation woodland in Abbey Leix Estate and has medium local ecological value (D). Additional habitats such as the woodland around the South School, adjacent mature-tree-lines (WL2) and stone work around the church and grave-yard (BL1) have a high local ecological value. This is particularly because these habitats link urban elements of Abbeyleix Town to the Abbey Leix Estate via the Lord's Walk.

The small mature woodland on the mounds of Ladies Hill are also a prominent landscape feature of the town and provide a wildlife refuge, (although woodland development was relatively poor). Mature trees in this area are also a particular feature of the landscape of Abbeyleix Town.

This Ecological Network is important as it provides connectivity from urban parts of Abbeyleix Town to Abbeyleix Bog and onwards to the River Nore candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC) which is a protected habitat designated under the European Union Habitats Directive. Wetland habitats provide for flood attenuation and the bog acts as a carbon sink. The semi natural features of the landscape are important visual amenities around Abbeyleix. The Lord's Walk passes through this EN and is a public right of way that provides an important walking route linking the Church of Ireland to Colman's Road.

1.3.3.2 EN2 – Gloreen Stream and tributaries

This Ecological Network is rated as being of local importance and extends from the northern boundary of the town boundary to the mid-west section and follows the Gloreen Stream and its main tributaries. This stream/small river is also part of the River Nore catchment and links to the River Nore about 1.5 km west of the town boundary. The water quality within this stream has been rated by the EPA as of moderate quality with Q-values of 3-4. The EN also includes adjacent riparian features such as hedgerows and some tree-lines that have been planted along the stream, wet grassland in flow-lying areas adjacent to the stream that are part of the floodplain, and other small features such as patches of woodland and scrub.

1.3.3.3 EN3 – Abbeyleix golf course

This network is located in the north-eastern part of the Abbeyleix Local Area and contains habitats that have a low-moderate local ecological value. The EN takes in all of the golf course and includes Rathmoyle House. It contains mature mainly exotic broad-leaved and conifer trees. The golf course comprises amenity grassland with these scattered trees and some patches of mixed mature woodland. The golf course also contains small patches of more recently planted conifer plantation and mixed plantation (immature woodland) that are generally densely planted and have poor woodland development at present. The newer section of the golf course also contains some scrub on undeveloped land.

Another feature of interest is a small stream/drain that flows along the southern boundary. This water-course links to EN4 and flows under Abbeyleix Main Street.

However, the site also includes patches of conifer plantation, mixed plantation and mature mixed woodland that all provide cover as wildlife refuges. The

mature conifer and broad-leaved trees in the golf course are also an important visual feature of the landscape.

1.3.3.4 EN4 Abbeyleix Roman Catholic Church graveyard

The small network is located in the northern part of Abbeyleix. It includes a small stream/drain and associated hedgerows that link to the Abbeyleix Roman Catholic Church graveyard and to the Sensory Gardens. This ecological network links directly from urban Abbeyleix into adjacent farmland.

The stream/drain is channelised and is a continuation of the stream/drain noted in EN3 and also links to EN1 via the underground link through Abbeyleix Main Street. The stream/drain is quite small and narrow and there is relatively poor riparian development. It flows along fields boundaries and this area is of interest as it is farmland that has been enclosed by developed urban land.

The Abbeyleix Roman Catholic Church graveyard contains some mature trees and also some old stonework with old buildings and stone-walls. The graveyard is managed as amenity grassland. The boundary is planted with mature trees including Horse Chestnut and Sycamore.

The Sensory Gardens are located in an old walled garden that was part of a convent. It is a small area containing lawns, exotic shrubs and planted flowerbeds and borders. The gardens also contain some mature trees. The main objective is to provide sensory interest to persons with intellectual disability by using many different types of plants and shrubs in the gardens. These gardens also attract common song birds.

1.3.4 Land use

A visual land use survey carried out as part of the study shows that there is a strong residential presence on the main street, particularly along the approaches to the market square. Retail and other commercial activity is focussed around the square and immediately to the south of the junction of the main street with the cross roads. Although vacancy rates appear to be generally low, there are a number of significant and prominent buildings that are vacant and appear to be at risk. In addition, it is noteworthy that many of the occupied commercial and retail premises appear to be marginal. There are several vacant upper floors in evidence, however it is similarly the case that many buildings that appear to be in residential use are in somewhat poor condition, and/ or occupied by older people. A more comprehensive survey would be required to verify the accuracy of these observations, however.

Outlying areas are predominantly residential in use, including a number of 'suburban' style housing developments and patchy ribbon development on the approaches to the town.

An important objective of the plan is to support the viability of both the commercial and residential functions of the Main Street as well as its heritage fabric, and to reduce the impact of 'leap-frogging' developments that have the potential to undermine the viability and vitality of the town centre.



Landuses along the Main Street (ground floor)

Building maintenance issues

1 Context

1.3.5 Public open space

The primary civic space of the town is the Market Square. Significant improvements were undertaken to the square as part of the renovation of the Market House building (Abbeyleix library). A hard landscape pedestrian apron now surrounds the library and space is available for a weekly farmer's market and festivals. North of the Library is a memorial fountain to the 2nd Viscount de Vesce.

A unique feature of Abbeyleix is that the sports clubs share a common facility; Father Breen Park. The park incorporates a full size GAA pitch, soccer pitch, all weather pitch, all weather tennis courts and indoors sports halls. The park also incorporates a crèche and crèche play area. The character of the park is functional and there is little evidence of a design informed approach.

A fountain dedicated to the 3rd Viscount de Vesce sits within a very small railed green space at the southern end of Main Street. There is a small sculpture park on the Ballinakill Road adjoining The Citizens Advice Bureau and Temperance Street. The grounds of Heritage House have been set out as a small park and incorporate a substantial children's playground of very high quality in play equipment and overall design.



View of junction showing right hand turning lane and car parking bays

1.3.6 Access and movement

The primary vehicular access to the town is via the N77 (former N8), which follows the main street in a north-south direction. This route is bisected by the R430, which passes through the centre of the town south of the Market Square, before splitting into the R432 to the east of Knocknamoe. The town is also entered from the north-east via the R425, and from the southwest via the R433.

The recent by-passing of the town by the M8 has reduced through traffic volumes through the town by approximately half, however significant volumes of heavy goods vehicles continue to use the Main Street in order to avoid the M8 toll. Moreover, the overall reduction in congestion has facilitated speeding by HGVs, which has been highlighted numerous times as a concern of residents and stakeholders.

The main parking resource for the town centre is along the Main Street, in a combination of parallel and head-on parking bays. There is public access to the Roman Catholic church car-park, however this is not publicly owned. Some local businesses, notably Supervalu, operate their own back-land car-parks, however access to these is extremely restricted due to the general continuity of street buildings.



HGV traffic using the Main Street

Pedestrian movement is also focussed on the Main Street, however footpath widths are extremely constrained in some places due to the above mentioned car-parking arrangements as well as the width of carriageways and turning radii, particularly at the crossroads/ vicinity of Market Square. There is also a network of laneways behind the main street, as described above. Concerns have been raised about access for disabled people to parts of the public realm (e.g. Market Square) as well as access to several protected structures that are publicly accessible (e.g. the bank and post office).



The extent of the footpath network highlighted in pink, with secondary lanes shown in yellow

1.3.7 Urban form

The character of the historical town centre derives from a combination of its cruciform urban structure - comprising the main street and secondary cross streets - and urban grain - the density and pattern of long and narrow plots that are occupied by a variety of historical street buildings from different periods and of different styles that define and enclose the street.

The centre of the town is marked by a crescent of 19th century buildings that enclose the former Market House - a free-standing pavilion type building that acts as a landmark and a focal point on the north side of the cross roads. Each end of the main street forks and is marked by a 'visual stop' or book-end feature in the form of the former school (Heritage House) at the northern end and by a monument at the southern end. The alignment of the fork which corresponds to the Portlaoise Road is aligned with the bell-tower of the Roman Catholic Church, an important landmark in the town.



Principal elements of urban structure, form, building frontage, urban grain, nodes, landmarks and views

PART TWO STRATEGY

2 Strategy

2.1 Strategies for sustainable communities

Sustainable communities are places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, offer equality of opportunity and good services for all.

Sustainable communities are vibrant, with thriving local economies, a strong sense of place and respect for their built and natural environment.

Vibrant communities are:

- Inclusive and fair;
- Healthy and safe;
- Aware and involved; and
- Has a strong sense of identity and civic pride.

Thriving local economies are:

- Vital;
- Diverse;
- Integrated; and
- Well branded.

Places with a sense of place and respect for the environment are:

- Characterful;
- Attractive;
- Environmentally sensitive; and
- Well connected.



It is an objective of the plan to promote features of other successful places, such as spill-out space for outdoor eating

2.1.1 Community

Abbeyleix has an extensive and active network of community groups and organisations, with a good range of community infrastructure.

Under provision of sports facilities has been identified as a key concern for Abbeyleix. There is a significant land bank adjacent to the existing playing fields with potential room for expansion, subject to agreement with the adjoining land-owner. There may scope for the Council to purchase the lands or to investigate the potential for a land-swap, subject to the any substitute lands meeting sustainable development criteria in respect of their location. It is recommended that a broader civic infrastructure audit should be carried out to identify existing and future needs, including sports and recreation.

Several of the town's key buildings that are open to the public (e.g. bank and post office) are not sufficiently accessible to all. There are also access issues in relation to parts of the public realm. Acknowledging the challenge of making older buildings more accessible without irrevocably damaging their architectural and heritage character, it is recommended that an accessibility audit should be carried out (building on Laois County Council's audit of property under its own control), with a view to incorporating its recommendations in longer-term public realm improvements. Some parts of the public realm have also been identified as feeling unsafe after dark, namely the stretch of road between Heritage House and the school, and the pathway leading from the main street to the youth club.

The town has a relatively good range of community services however it currently lacks primary health care services. There are currently two active development proposals for primary health care facilities adjacent to the town centre. Care should be taken to ensure that such facilities are designed and constructed to the highest standards and, above all, that they are well integrated with the fabric of the town including pedestrian and cycle links to the town centre.



It is an objective of the plan to promote features of other successful places, such as outdoor events and festivals

Abbeyleix has excellent links to the surrounding countryside including some historic laneways and rights of way. Some of these, however, are not well signed to visitors and there is potential to connect some of these pathways together to provide more extensive walking and cycling opportunities, including loop walks. There is potential for these routes to provide onward connections along the route of the former rail line and the planned inter-urban cycle route from Abbeyleix to Durrow.

There is also potential to improve access to the bog and sections of the railway line. Proposals for walking and cycling are summarised on the accompanying diagrams.

While the strength of the town's community spirit is remarkable, there is a perception that a relatively small number of residents are doing a disproportionate amount of the 'heavy lifting'. To address this, it is suggested that such groups could investigate the potential of social networking media to try to broaden awareness and involvement of a wider segment of the community in local affairs. The current lack of broadband internet services is a major impediment to this and other initiatives that should be prioritised.

There may also be scope to introduce greater awareness of importance of community involvement and sustainability issues in the broad sense to local schools through extension of the existing programme of Resilience training.

The plan has the potential to foster several, but not all, aspects of sustainable communities, and, consequently, focusses on physical aspects of the public realm - place - and the natural and built environment that contribute to making successful places...



It is an objective of the plan to promote features of other successful places, such as street-life and improved provision for walking and cycling

Sustainable communities are places with...

A vibrant local community that is:

Community 	Inclusive and fair Tolerant and cohesive Accessible to all Fair to everyone, including those in other communities Considerate of future generations	Healthy A range of public, private, community and voluntary services that are appropriate to people's needs Opportunities for sports and leisure, walking and cycling Safe, with low levels of crime and anti-social behaviour, community friendly policing	Aware and involved Effective and inclusive participation representation and leadership	Has a strong identity A strong sense of identity and civic pride
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A thriving local economy that is:

Economy 	Vital A flourishing and diverse local economy An economically viable town centre Local job opportunities	Diverse A close grain of compatible land uses Variety and choice Appropriate and adaptive re-use of buildings	Integrated Good services and communications Strong links to the rural hinterland, the region and the national economy	Well branded Marketing
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A strong sense of place and respect for the environment:

Place 	Characterful A strong sense of place, local identity and character	Attractive Featuring a high quality built and natural environment Activated and well used public realm Appropriateness of size, scale, density, design and layout that complements local character A tidy and clean public realm Well maintained building fabric, respectful of the town's heritage character	Environmentally sensitive Considerate to the environment Minimise climate change Make efficient use of resources Enhance biodiversity Locally sourced food	Well connected Good public transport connections, linking people to jobs, schools and health services Well managed traffic with an appropriate level of parking Green infrastructure
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2 Strategy

2.1.1.1 Summary of priority projects and actions: community

- Undertake a civic infrastructure audit.
- Undertake town centre accessibility audit.
- Reserve land for expansion of existing sports facilities.
- Prioritise upgrade of existing walking and cycling routes and proposed additional connections (note potential for Fáilte Ireland support for looped walks).
- Seek early implementation of proposed Abbeyleix to Durrow cycling route.
- Investigate innovative ways to broaden awareness and involvement in community affairs and participation.
- Promote further education and awareness of sustainability issues.

2.1.2 Economy

The economic fortunes of the town have waxed and waned, according to its accessibility and its resultant ability to integrate with those of the wider world. The town benefited from the diversion of the Dublin to Cashel mail route through the town and subsequently the railway during the 19th century, however the closure of the railway had a significant negative effect on trade. More recently, the town benefited from passing trade generated by the route of the former N8 Dublin-Cork road through the town however through traffic, particularly heavy goods vehicles, also had significant negative environmental effects.

The recent by-passing of the town by the M8 has reduced traffic volumes but while this has greatly improved the quality of the pedestrian environment, it has also posed challenges to local business. The high cost of maintaining

signage quoted by the privately operated motorway company has also been cited as an issue, resulting in inadequate flagging of the presence of the town as a destination. In addition, a significant volume of HGV traffic seeking to avoid the M8 toll still uses the main street, thereby reducing the positive effect of the by-pass.

The town lacks any large-scale employer, it no longer has a rail connection, and, in contrast to its past reputation for milling and textiles, is not now associated with any particular product or industry.

There is a wide range of locally owned and operated small unit retail operating in the main street. While vacancy rates in the town centre are relatively low, several such businesses appear marginal. There are two small convenience shops on the main street however “leakage” of potential spend to Portlaoise has been identified as being one of the most significant threats to the vitality of the town centre. There is also a notable decrease in commercial activity north of the market square compared to south of it, including some key protected structures that are currently vacant and at risk of falling into disrepair.

The viability of the town-centre, and the Main Street in particular, is further compromised by the apparent failure of older terraced building typologies to meet modern expectations, particularly those of families with children, compared to suburban alternatives. A town centre ‘health check’ prepared using the Heritage Council’s methodology, would provide a greater depth of understanding about the current state of businesses and leakage.

The natural and built heritage of the town, has been identified by the community as offering a great deal of potential to develop the tourism economy, however there are currently a number of factors preventing it from realising its full potential. These include a lack of marketing and awareness of the town, a limited accommodation offer, lack of walking and cycling opportunities, and a lack of major attractions.

In order to address these inter-related concerns it is recommended that the town should prioritise the following actions:

The town should seek to align itself with a particular industry or product that has the potential to provide significant local employment opportunities as well as being a potential attraction in its own right. It is suggested that artisan food products drawing on locally sourced ingredients would have a potential synergy with the existing farmer’s market, existing town centre buildings and/or existing ‘country houses’, local restaurants and tourism.

This type of product, (e.g. cheese, cured meats etc.), could also have spin-offs for marketing the town nationally and globally and increasing scope for related festivals and events in the town.

There is also scope for introducing a tourist information resource in the town centre. The library ‘shopfront’ would be a suitable location for such a facility, which could be automated.

In order to address the retail imbalance it is recommended that the convenience retail offer may need to be expanded. It is vital to the sustainability of existing local businesses and to the character and continuity of the main street, however, that any such development should be as closely integrated with the fabric of the town, walkable, and with limited vehicular access directly from the main street. Ideally this would incorporate an existing frontage to the Main Street so as to improve footfall past existing locally owned businesses, and should be encouraged to source a proportion of local produce.

The vitality of the town centre would also be boosted by the sensitive adaptation and re-use of key buildings for local enterprise, such as shared office space and/or local arts and craft producers. The former de Vesci Arms/Abbeygate building would be particularly well suited to this type of initiative. Such initiatives are currently hampered by the lack of broadband access, however.



It is an objective of the plan to promote features of other successful places, such as farmer’s markets and street life



It is also recommended that funding should be sought to restore the building frontages to Market Square to the highest possible standards including a pilot project demonstrating best practice in adapting existing an vacant building(s) for live/ work and/ or mixed uses, including how such buildings can be made more relevant to 21st century needs and expectations as well as more environmentally sound.

2.1.2.1 Summary of priority projects and actions: economy

- Undertake town centre ‘Health Check’ study.
- Seek new uses, including locally based enterprise for existing vacant town centre premises (note potential for community-led initiative for adaptive re-use of Abbeygate building supported by LEADER programme).
- Seek funding to carry out pilot project for the adaptive re-use of existing town centre live-work building typology (potential for investigating the feasibility and potential funding of locally sourced artisan food production in town centre and/ or ‘country houses’).
- Align the town with high quality locally sourced artisan food product(s) and seek to incentivise through Enterprise Ireland, Laois Partnership and County Enterprise Board support.
- Increase retail convenience offer in suitable town centre location (subject to assessment of retail impact).
- Commission marketing/ branding strategy.
- Provide tourist information resource in library shopfront.
- Broaden events calendar e.g. Vintage festival, food festival.
- Prioritise broadband availability.



Existing routes

2.1.3 Place and environment

2.1.3.1 The Town Loop

The town walking network can be greatly enhanced by connecting the existing walks together. This can be achieved by adding key short interconnecting routes; thus creating a single town walking loop for residents and visitors alike. Two key linkages are critical in achieving this:

Balladine to Heritage House; via The Grove. This will link the existing residential communities more directly with the local schools and with Heritage House and its facilities (e.g. play area).

Link from Abbeyleix Bog to The Lord’s Walk via a section of the dismantled rail-line and/or a section of the existing forest.

The sum of the parts would thus be a Town Loop that has the potential to link all of the major heritage and visitor attractions of the town and improve pedestrian connectivity within the town for its residents. The Town Loop would also bring into focus and better connect the community with some of the environmental amenities of the town and its environs in particular; Abbeyleix Bog, The Grove and Collin’s Bog. As far as is practical the Town Loop should be universally accessible, however limitations may arise where gradients of existing routes exceed those recommended for wheelchairs.



Completing the loop

2.1.3.2 Green Infrastructure

The Green Infrastructure of Abbeyleix can be greatly improved by strengthening existing planning policies and tools and by undertaking a series of public realm and green infrastructure projects:

- Enhance and expand the town’s Green route Network.
- Support the on going development of Abbeyleix Bog as a biodiversity and community resource.
- Improvement to green spaces within the town, including; Balladine, The Northern Bookend and The Southern Gateway.
- Protect the rural characteristics and traffic calmed nature of laneways; Tullyroe and Rathmoyle.
- Enlarge and enhance Father Breen Park.
- Strengthen existing planning and heritage policies pertaining to existing groups of mature trees and limestone wall boundaries.
- Strengthen existing planning and heritage policies pertaining to the landscape and curtilage of large country houses; Glenban, Allworth, Woodville and the Vicarage.

2.1.3.3 Abbeyleix Bog

Abbeyleix Bog is under the custodianship of the Abbeyleix Bog Restoration Group, whose objective is to conserve and restore the bog habitats, to develop the potential of the Bog as a centre for environmental education and to maximise community involvement in developing the site’s potential for additional uses.



Extending the network

2 Strategy

The Abbeyleix Bog Restoration Group are presently seeking to undertake a feasibility study on the future management and development of the bog as a biodiversity and tourism resource; such as walking routes, interpretative boards, access etc., which it is an objective of the plan to promote (See www.abbeyleixbog.com).

2.1.3.4 Green route Network

A hidden aspect of Abbeyleix is its attractive network of off-road footpaths, forest trails and rural laneways. Of particular note are:

- The linkages to the Catholic Church from Stucker Hill, Ballinakill Road and Rathmoyle.
- Walking route from the Sexton's House and Church of Ireland linking up with the Lord's walk.
- Narrow rural laneway which loops from the Sexton's House to the Mountrath Road / New Row / Balladine. This is an attractive walk along a rural laneway that is naturally traffic calmed by virtue of its narrow width and shortened sight lines. There are very few entrances onto the laneway and to the west are open views of the agricultural hinterland of the town.
- Abbeyleix Bog - route along the embankment of the dismantled rail-line.

2.1.3.5 Landscape loops

The 'town loop' can be interconnected with longer walking and cycling routes into the surrounding landscape, looping through significant hinterland landscapes and providing longer and more challenging walking and cycling routes:

The Old Town loop follows the footpath along the Ballacolla road from Church Grove passing the entrance to Abbey Leix Demesne and arriving at Old Town, notable for its collection historic farmhouses and outbuildings, limestone walls and mature deciduous trees (contemporaneous with the Church Grove and many of the fine tree groups of the town). From Old Town one returns back to town via Tullyroe along a narrow rural laneway. The rural laneway is naturally traffic calmed and there are views of the many tree groves in the town and the bell tower of the Catholic Church.

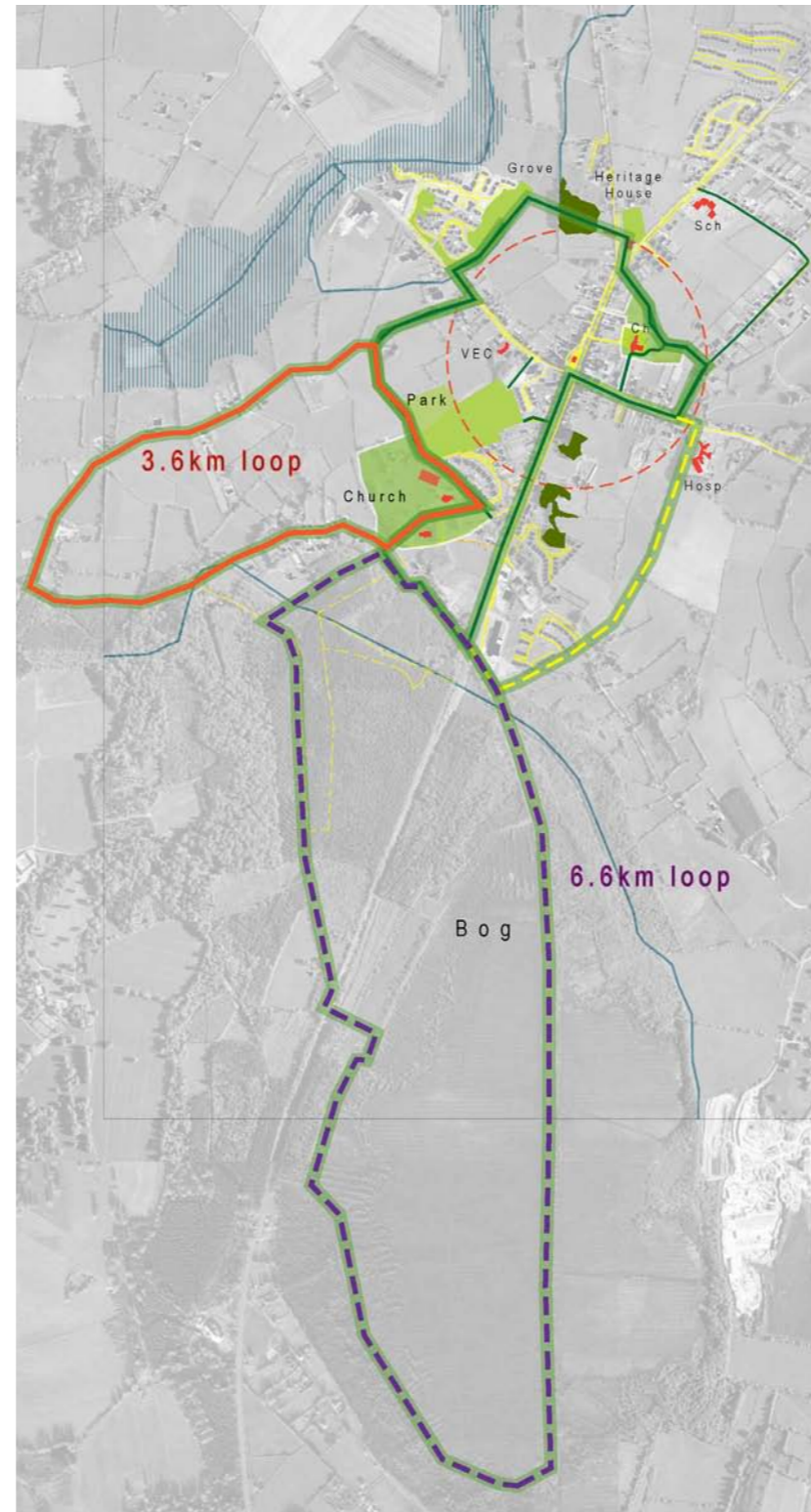
Distance: 3.6km

Accessibility: Universally Accessible

Bog Loop; entered from the Cork Road this loop can follow the embankment of the dismantled rail-line to the south end of the bog and returning along the western edge of the bog, crossing the Cork Road and connecting with the Grallow Forest road. Following the forest road as far as the Lord's Walk and returning to town or to the Bog.

Distance: 6.6km

Accessibility: Gentle gradient. Accessibility potentially limited by surface conditions such as the edge of the bog and forest road.



Landscape loops (note: the illustrated routes follow existing public laneways and routes however any parts of the proposed routes under private ownership would need to be subject of consultation and agreement with the owner)

2.1.3.6 Long distance walking and cycling loops

From Lord's Walk to Abbeyleix Bog. Follow the rail-line embankment as far south as Killamuck; a notable collection of historic 'estate' cottages (Bluegate Cottages) set within small holdings. From Killamuck to the Cork Road and northwards as far as the Grallow Wood Road. Follow Grallow Wood road to its end (Ballacolla Road) turn left for Old Town and return to Abbeyleix via Tullyroe (distance: 9.8km).

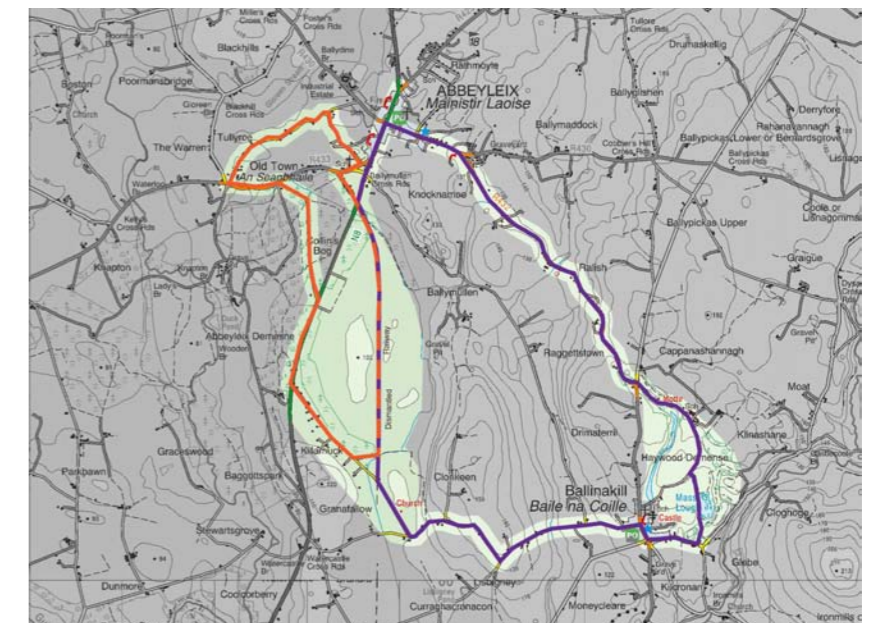
From Market Square to Abbeyleix Bog, along the rail-line embankment as far south as Killamuck. Turn right for Clonkeen and at next two 'T' junctions turn right and continue eastwards to Ballinakill village. Pass through village and take next left into Heywood Demesne. Pass northwards through Heywood Demesne. Exit Heywood Demesne and return to Abbeyleix via the R432 (distance: 14.6km).

The first step in implementing the Town Loop and landscape loops will be preparing a map with all existing routes shown. This map can double up as a visitor and/or heritage trail map. The distances of each loop route should be given along with information on accessibility and ground conditions. This map should be available for view and download from websites.

The loop routes should be way marked with discrete way and distance markers.

The loop network can be added to incrementally over time as resources allow and agreement can be reached with landowners and residents affected.

Assistance in developing the Town Loop and Landscape Loops may be available from the National Trails Office and Laois Tourism.



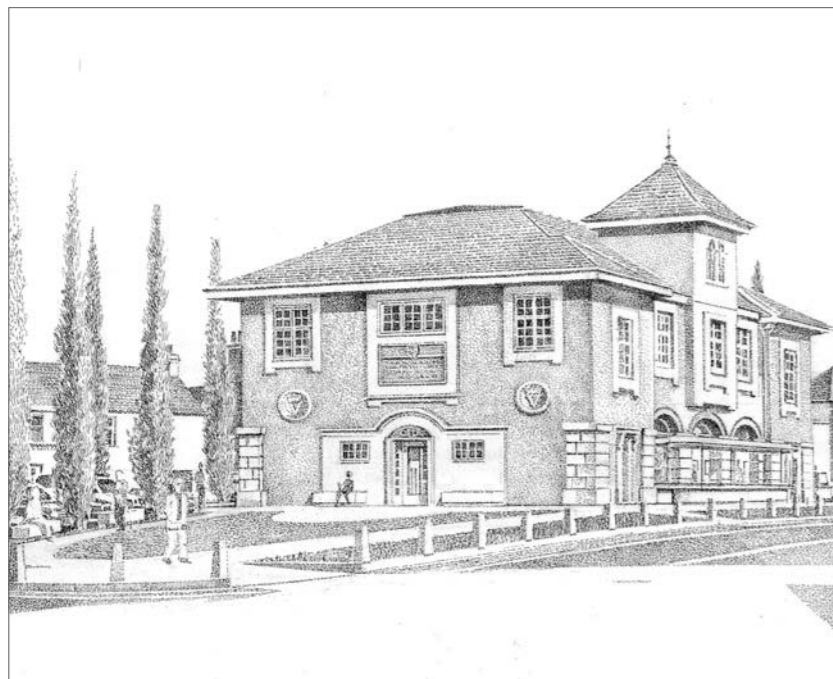
Long distance cycling routes

2.1.3.7 Built heritage

Protecting and enhancing the town's unique character, environmental qualities and sense of place will serve to strengthen the heritage status of the town and consolidate its economic and tourism potential. The Abbeyleix Tidy Towns Committee is particularly active in promoting the maintenance of the existing public realm, however there is considerable scope for the buildings that define and enclose the public realm to also be improved.

A visual appraisal of the individual buildings lining the main street carried out as part of the Sustainable Communities Plan study identifies issues of maintenance, up-keep and quality that provides a resource for interested groups such as the ABC forum and the Tidy Towns Committee to encourage building owners to improve the visual appearance of their premises and to remove insensitive modifications. There is potential as part of this to implement a coordinated colour scheme on parts of the Main Street.

The urban structure of the town depends for its character and sense of place on the existing 'street wall' of fine grain buildings and plots that enclose the street, together with its cruciform layout marked by a central node and landmark in the form of the market square and market house, and by a fork at each end. The southern fork is marked by a historic memorial, whereas the northern fork is of poor quality from an urban design or landscape point of view. The approach from Dublin towards this node also aligns with the spire of the Catholic Church.



Sketch of Abbeyleix Library by Pete Hull, courtesy of de Blacam and Meagher Architects

2.1.3.8 Public realm

Significant improvements to the public realm were carried out during the 1990s however the design prioritised car parking ahead of pedestrian movement, and cars now visually dominate long stretches of the main street. The corollary of this is that significant stretches of the footpath along the main street are constrained.

The use of 'cobble-lock' paving materials also compromised the quality of the scheme to some extent. More recently, improvements to the market square that were carried out in conjunction with the conversion of the market house to a library, utilise higher quality natural materials however there remains significant local anxiety with the loss of any on-street car parking spaces. This has reduced the area available to host events such as the farmer's market, and also separates it visually and physically from the space as a whole, which is enclosed by the buildings on both sides of the street that define this most pivotal part of the town.

The pavement opposite the market square is particularly narrow, and constrains pedestrian movement and activity. There is also potential for the privately owned space on the north-east side of the junction and the buildings fronting this space to be improved.

Since the re-classification of the N8 passing through the town to the N77, there is scope to review the pedestrian phase crossings to facilitate greater ease of pedestrian movement across the arms of the junction and to discourage through HGV traffic.



Proposed traffic calming on the main approaches by means of planned traffic calming gateways will also help slow incoming HGV traffic, while in the interim it is suggested that further de-classification from the national hierarchy to local status would facilitate the introduction of an axle ban in combination with a review of the overall width of the carriageway. It is suggested that these initiatives should be prioritised ahead of the orbital relief routes currently indicated in the draft town plan and that the need and appropriateness of these proposals should be reviewed.

Taking into account the lack of funding necessary to implement a comprehensive overhaul of the public realm in the short to medium term, it is recommended that public realm improvements within the town centre should be focussed on the space to the fore of Heritage House (the northern 'bookend'), the area surrounding the library (the crescent and market square), the southern approach to the town and Balladine. Improvements outside of the town centre should prioritise walking and cycling routes. Longer term public realm objectives should utilise high quality natural materials and should seek to re-balance the function of the street as a place in its own right by improving the pedestrian environment, maximising pedestrian space and activating the street by encouraging uses to 'spill out'.

A review of parking usage carried out as part of this study supports the view that there is more than adequate parking provision in the town centre. In the interim it is suggested that this should be verified by a more comprehensive access and movement study with a view to gradually reducing on-street provision, in combination with accessibility improvements. The competition for car parking in parts of the town centre, such as at the two convenience outlets, may be alleviated in the short term by better management, including measures to encourage long stay users to park elsewhere.

2 Strategy

2.1.3.9 Sequential development

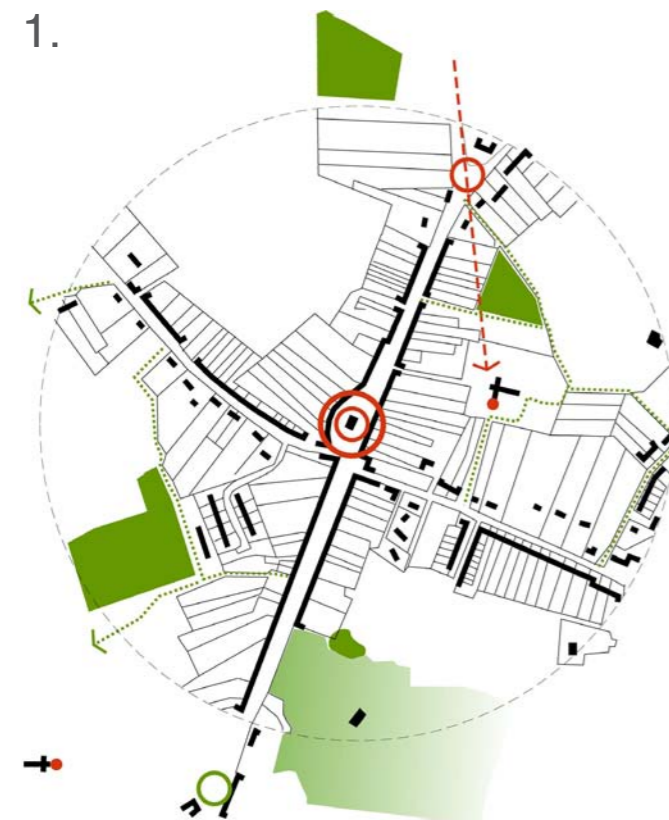
The character of the town has been eroded in the past by a combination of ribbon development on the approach roads and by 'suburban' style housing estates on the periphery, that have leap-frogged town centre sites. In recent years comprehensive development has been curtailed by inadequate sewage treatment capacity, and it is now timely to review development priorities in the wake of changed economic circumstances and to encourage a more sustainable approach to development. As part of this strategy, it is recommended that an energy audit of the town should be conducted, together with a review of the feasibility of incorporating the ducting necessary to incorporate district heating as part of future public realm improvements.

The four 'arms' of the town enclose significant land banks that are within walking distance of the main street. At present access to these lands, and in particular to the rear of existing plots lining the street, is severely constrained. This limits the potential to productively re-use existing buildings and land and the backs of plots and to develop the lands sequentially outwards from the town centre. The plan proposes a sequential development strategy that prioritises the rehabilitation of existing vacant buildings and plots, infill and 'on-plot' / mews type developments ahead of green field developments. It is recommended that the historic grain of plots should be protected from amalgamation in the first instance, and that coordinated vehicular access to the rear of plots via the regional roads should be encouraged rather than new vehicular access off the main street, as such openings could severely compromise the heritage character of the street.

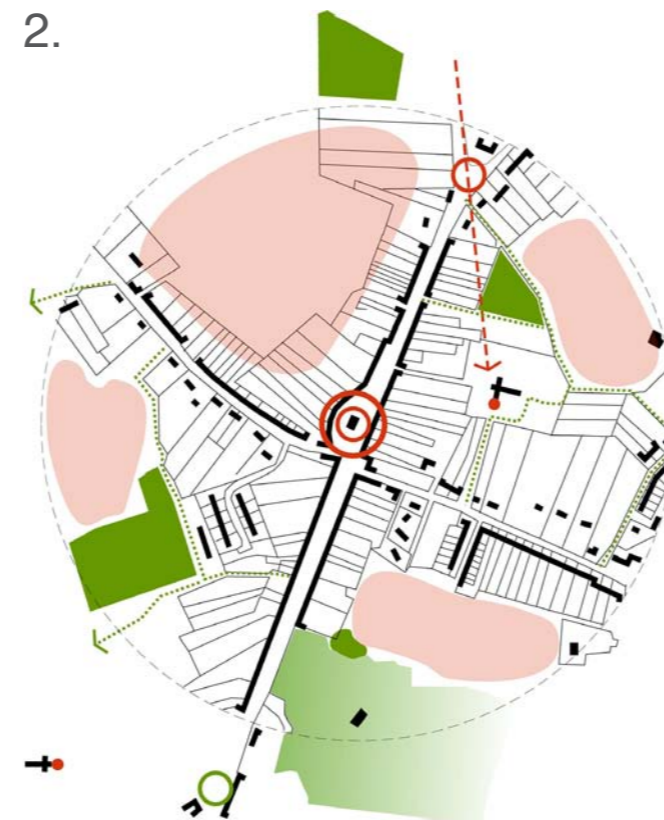
2.1.3.10 Summary of priority projects and actions: place and environment

- Encourage voluntary maintenance and visual improvements to identified buildings.
- Investigate potential for coordinated streetscape colour scheme.
- Issue notices under s59 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000, in respect of any protected structures identified as being endangered due to neglect.
- Carry out public realm improvements/ footpath widening at identified town centre locations.
- Seek re-classification of the Main Street (N77) to local status.
- Secure early implementation of traffic calming measures at town approach roads.
- Review pedestrian crossing phase at market square junction to facilitate pedestrian crossings.

Sequential development strategy (indicative)



Protect existing heritage fabric, views and close grain of plots: focus public realm improvements on southern approach, Heritage House, Market Square and laneways

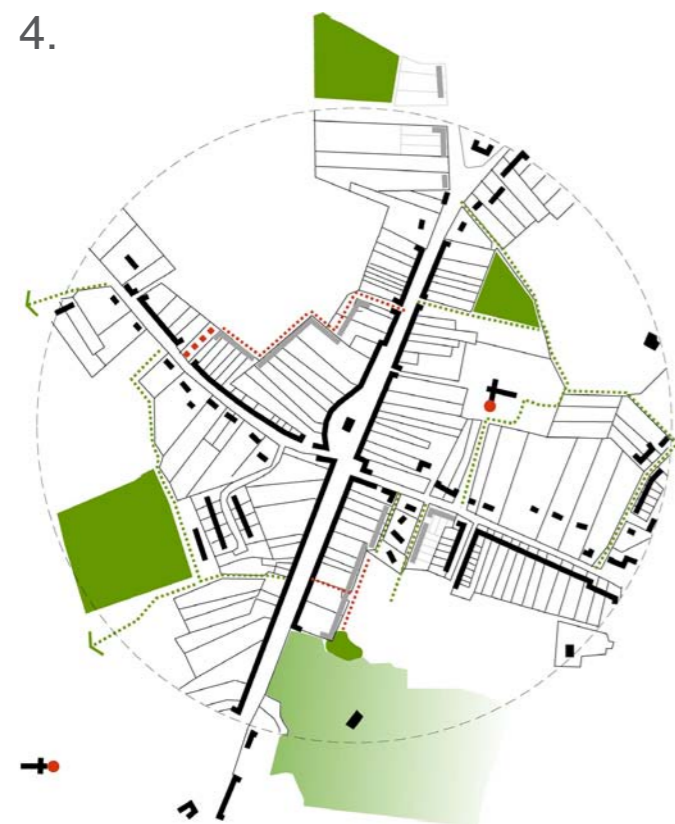


Strategic land-banks within walking distance on the town centre

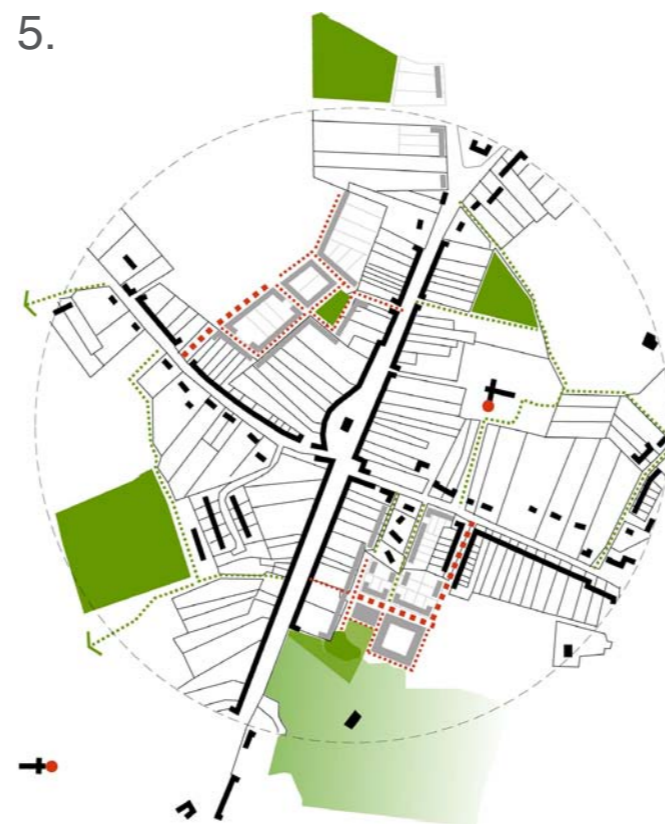


Prioritise adaptive re-use of existing vacant buildings and plots for mixed residential and commercial uses

- Review proposed orbital routes.
- Undertake town energy audit.
- Carry out traffic and parking study to review on-street parking allocation and potential for improved management regime for market square area.
- Protect existing plot subdivisions and seek to replicate elements of close grain plot layouts in new development proposals.
- Implement a sequential development strategy that prioritises adaptive reuse of existing buildings and plots.



4. Prioritise infill of existing vacant plots and encourage rear access to plots to permit mews type live work and compatible commercial enterprises



5. Sequential and phased development of strategic land-banks outwards from town centre with permeable routes and onward connections. Minimise disruption of existing building lines along the Main Street.



6. Further sequential and phased development of strategic land-banks outwards from town centre with permeable routes and onward connections to Balladine and wider landscape connections.

2 Strategy

2.2 Priority public realm projects

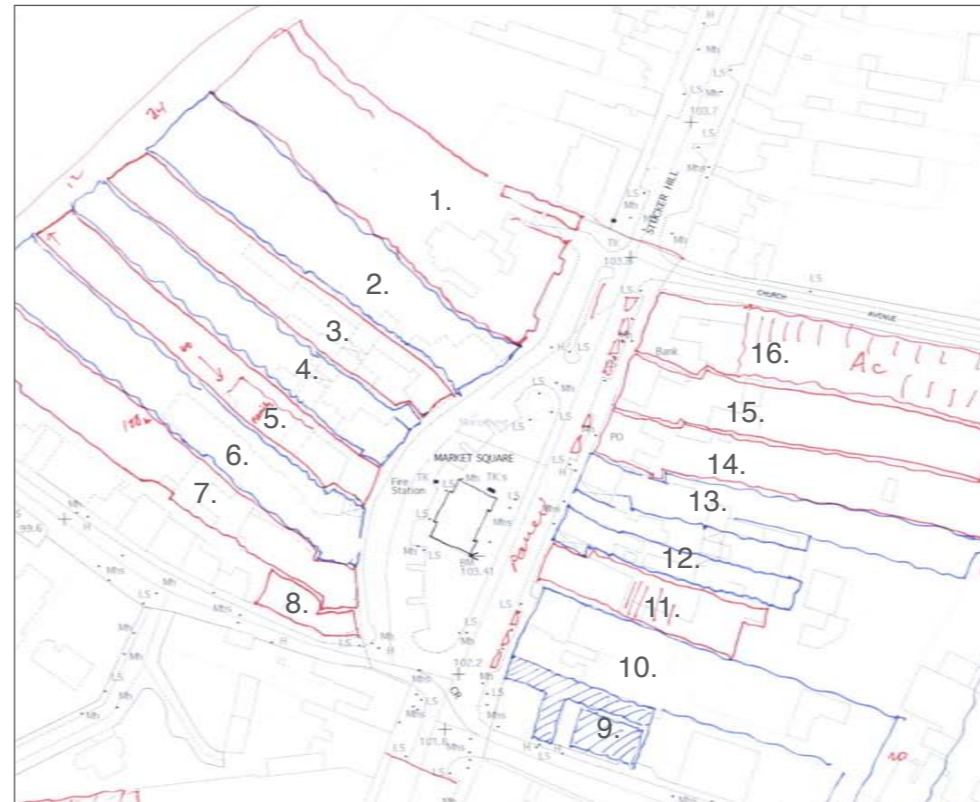
Suggested projects to improve the public realm in Abbeyleix are outlined in the following sections. However, before any action could be taken on these or other projects, further, more detailed studies, design and costing would be required. In addition, detailed consultation with all those likely to be affected by the proposals would have to be undertaken.

The inclusion of a project here does not imply its approval or suggest it will be undertaken. In addition, projects proposed by Laois County Council or representatives of the local community would be subject of statutory consultation measures set out in the Planning Acts and Regulations.

2.2.1 Restoring the crescent

An objective of the plan for Abbeyleix is to conjure in the imagination a plan for conservation of its buildings. It is recommended the Crescent and the Market Square be selected to lead this new imagining of the town and that (3-5) buildings could be acquired and developed as model conservation projects along the lines of the examples of towns mentioned below.

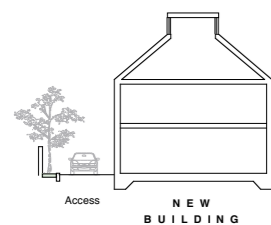
Dunkeld in Scotland, San Danielli in Italy and Epernay in France, are exemplars of what might be possible in the town of Abbeyleix. Dunkeld is a town in which streets of very early buildings have been restored to National Trust standards. San Danielli, a small town in Italy invented, through its small rural holdings, an economy based on the idea of a challenge to the city of Parma to make a world wide reputation for Prosciutto ham. In Epernay near Reims in France, the Avenue de Champagne is lined with beautifully restored houses that are the flagships for fine wine marketing.



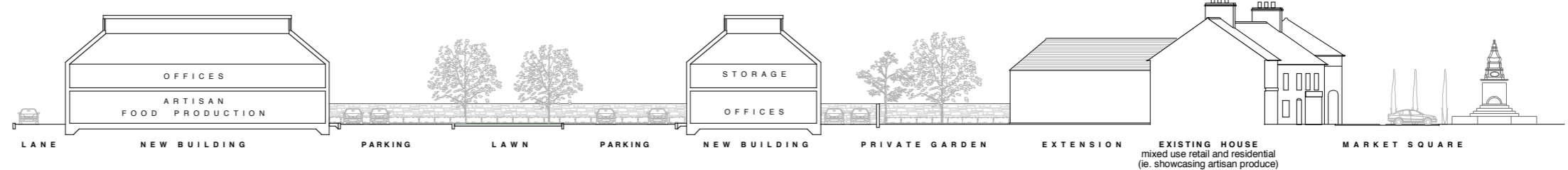
A small study of the plan of the Crescent and Market Square Abbeyleix highlights the extraordinary plans of the buildings on the Crescent. Their plots are generally in excess of 100m deep and vary in width from 12m to 24m. The potential for development is extraordinary. The buildings have commercial uses on the ground floor with family accommodation over and service archways to their back yards and gardens. It is proposed that all of the buildings on Market Square should be raised to the highest classification of conservation, including the buildings and their curtilage.



Indicative plot study



Indicative short section through typical plot (not to scale)



Indicative long section through typical plot (not to scale)

2 Strategy

2.2.2 The Market Square

The Market Square is a pivotal 'set-piece' in the town's urban form that represents the heart of the town in geographic and symbolic terms, however it is failing to live to its image or its potential as such. Although the library and its immediate surrounds have been restored to very high standards, the surrounding buildings and public realm in the vicinity of the square are constrained by a combination of on-street parking and narrow footpaths.

Former use of the Main Street as a national primary route prioritised traffic and parking over pedestrian movement and created an imbalance between the function of the street as a 'link' as well as a 'place' in its own right. This has left a legacy of a relatively hostile environment for pedestrians and a lack of space for ground floor uses to 'spill out' onto the street. In the light of changed circumstances, the need for local businesses to be made more attractive and the town's ambition to market itself as a tourist destination and as a 'heritage town', it is recommended that public realm investment should be focussed on improving the amount and quality of space for pedestrians in the vicinity of the square.



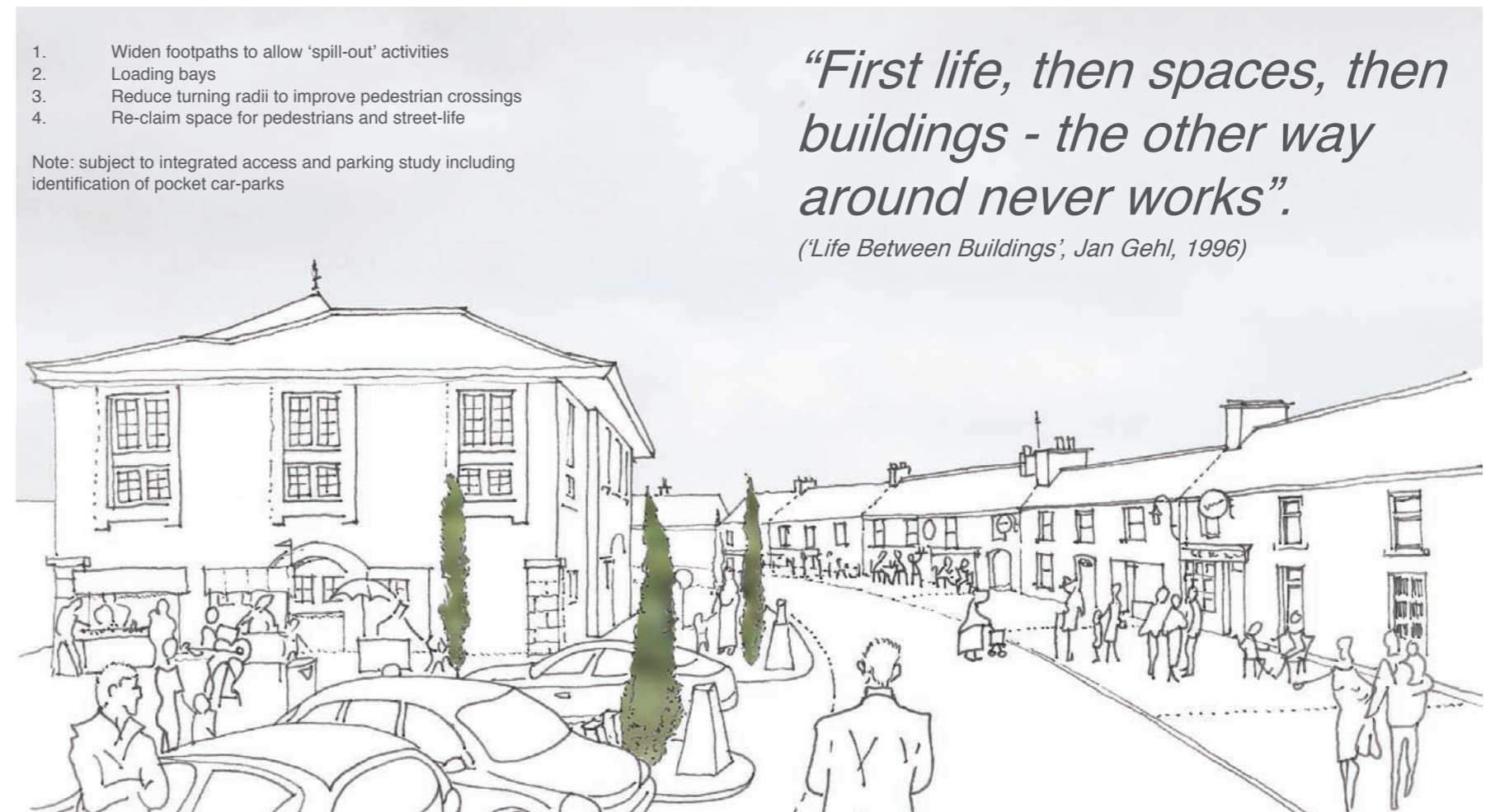
Indicative plan of Market Square as proposed

This would primarily involve widening footpaths along the crescent (west) and east sides of the street and by reducing turning radii at the junction of the Main Street with the cross streets. It is also recommended that the area of enclosed space on the north-east corner of the junction should be opened and incorporated into the wider public realm.

This proposal would involve a loss of some existing car parking spaces however it appears many of these spaces are being used for long term stays and, as such, are not contributing to the viability of the businesses they front. Rather, it is suggested that they are, in fact, constraining the potential of these businesses. It is therefore recommended that a comprehensive parking and access study should be undertaken in order to verify the situation and to explore ways and means to manage parking in the town centre more effectively.

This may involve the identification of alternative pocket car parks, and in this regard it should be borne in mind that the proposed sequential development strategy advocates opening up mews type laneway access to the rear of plots to accommodate commercial enterprises and off-street parking for business owners that will alleviate parking pressure on the street.

As outlined in section 2.2 above, all of the potential projects described in this section would need to be preceded by further, more detailed studies, design and costing, to facilitate further consultation in advance of being implemented. Projects carried out by the Local Authority would also be subject to the statutory consultation measures set out in the Planning Acts and Regulations.



Indicative sketch of Market Square crescent as proposed

1. Widen footpaths to allow 'spill-out' activities
2. Loading bays
3. Reduce turning radii to improve pedestrian crossings
4. Re-claim space for pedestrians and street-life

Note: subject to integrated access and parking study including identification of pocket car-parks

"First life, then spaces, then buildings - the other way around never works".

(Life Between Buildings, Jan Gehl, 1996)



Indicative sketch looking towards Market Square as proposed

2 Strategy

2.2.3 The northern 'bookend'

The triangular space on Stucker Hill at the junction of the Ballyroan and Portlaoise Roads marks the northern terminus or 'bookend' of the town Main Street and therefore should be considered as an integral part of the heritage townscape. The present visual character of this space is poor and reflective of a traffic intersection with wide carriageways, wide corner radii and over scaled signage. In addition the hard landscape treatment to the island space does little to lift the appearance of the space. The visual clutter of trees and signage in the space also interrupts the vista of the church bell tower when viewed from the Portlaoise Road and of the front of Heritage House when viewed along Main Street, and thus picturesque aspects of the town's planning have been hidden.

The core concept is to make the space an attractive 'bookend' to Main Street and arrival gateway to the town by undertaking a comprehensive redevelopment of the public realm:

1. Open up views of the Church Bell tower and of the front of Heritage House (when viewed from Main Street). This will require some tree removal and the removal of some signage.
2. Soften space at road intersection by replacing paving with lawn.
3. Bookend space can form part of the proposed 'town loop'.
4. Radii at road junctions tightened and road carriageways narrowed to calm traffic and improve pedestrian access and comfort. Rationalise signage; replace road signage with column mounted finger post signage. Relocate pieces of sculpture to garden of Heritage House.

As outlined in section 2.2 above, all of the potential projects described in this section would need to be preceded by further, more detailed studies, design and costing, to facilitate further consultation in advance of being implemented. Projects carried out by the Local Authority would also be subject to the statutory consultation measures set out in the Planning Acts and Regulations.



Indicative plan of Main Street 'book-end' as proposed



Indicative sketch of Heritage House 'book-end'

2 Strategy

2.2.4 The southern 'gateway'

The southern approach to Abbeyleix along the Cork Road is contained by a mosaic of deciduous and coniferous forestry planted tight to the road boundaries. As the forested area dissipates, the visual character becomes disjointed and unattractive. The east side of the road is fronted by the Abbeyleix Manor Hotel, a commercial premises and a service station. The west side of the road is enclosed by dense woodland planting to the embankment of the old road alignment. There is considerable scope to improve the visual presentation and amenity of this area as a large portion of the roadside verge and the old road are in public ownership. Any aspects of the proposals relating to land in private ownership would be subject of discussion and agreement with land owners.

In addition to being a gateway to the town, this area is also the gateway to Abbeyleix Bog and potentially new green-routes to the Lord's Walk via Collin's Bog.

A series of public realm improvements that can be undertaken incrementally or as a single project are as follows:

1. Introduce soft landscape verge and planting to the front of commercial premises.
2. Thin out woodland planting (from 1 metre to 4 metre centres approx) in order to; allow the woodland flora to develop and diversify, provide visibility into and under the tree canopy and improve the sense of light as one arrives into the town.
3. Remove existing 'Cypress' treeline and replace with line of Beech or Lime trees.
4. Rationalise the vehicular entrance to the Hotel by extending the soft landscape verge.
5. Possible additional walking route; to link Abbeyleix Bog with The Lord's Walk.
6. Possible forest trail.

As outlined in section 2.2 above, all of the potential projects described in this section would need to be preceded by further, more detailed studies, design and costing, to facilitate further consultation in advance of being implemented. Projects carried out by the Local Authority would also be subject to the statutory consultation measures set out in the Planning Acts and Regulations.



Indicative plan of southern 'gateway' as proposed



Indicative sketch view of southern 'gateway' as proposed

2 Strategy

2.2.5 Balladine

The existing green space adjacent to Balladine should be considered as a priority for environmental improvements. The small stream or mill race has a very low flow rate and has been fenced off. It is possible the stream has been polluted by agricultural runoff and /or storm water runoff. The green space should be subject to a comprehensive redesign and improvement, having cognisance of the limited resources available for regular maintenance and the opportunities for biodiversity enhancement. It is recommended that works should include the following:

1. Investigate the potential for restoring the mill-race with stream bed widening and realignment and the introduction of riffles to improve flow of water and water quality.
2. Continue pedestrian path through open space as part of the Town Loop and connect to Heritage House via The Grove.
3. Establish riparian vegetation; including native marginal aquatics e.g. Bulrush and Iris.
4. Groves of woodland planting (Beech, Pine and Oak) on the hilltops to reflect historic planting elsewhere in the town (The Grove, Ladies Hill etc.).
5. Open areas to be managed as meadows of wildflower and native grasses with mown paths and clearings for recreation.

As outlined in section 2.2 above, all of the potential projects described in this section would need to be preceded by further, more detailed studies, design and costing, to facilitate further consultation in advance of being implemented. Projects carried out by the Local Authority would also be subject to the statutory consultation measures set out in the Planning Acts and Regulations.



Indicative sketch view of Balladine environmental improvements as proposed

PART THREE DELIVERY

3 Delivery

3.1 Implementation

3.1.1 Setting out roles and responsibilities

Effective leadership is required to link vision to delivery. The plan is intended to coordinate community interests and as such the implementation of the plan as a whole will need to be driven by the community to a large extent, however some leadership will also need to come from the local authority, underpinned by professional as well as political commitment, particularly for projects affecting, or affected by, the public realm. Places where high quality development has been delivered tend to share one or more of the following characteristics:

- A proactive local authority;
- A dedicated delivery organisation;
- An influential project promoter acting within a supportive organisation; or
- An ‘enlightened’ developer(s).

Several of the public realm projects will therefore be publicly led, however projects arising from community initiatives and business interests will need to be privately led. In other cases public-private partnerships may be appropriate.

It is recommended, therefore, that Laois County Council should give serious consideration to supporting a dedicated implementation group to set priorities, obtain funding, maintain community contact and monitor progress.



The implementation group should comprise:

- A representative(s) of Laois County Council;
- Abbeyleix Business and Community forum (including traders);
- Tidy Towns Committee.

The role of the implementation group may be expanded as and when projects outside of the direct scope of the plan, for example relating to broader sustainability concerns, are brought forward.

3.1.2 Establishing priorities

Implementing the plan in full will require substantial works and investment over the short medium and long term. This requires priorities to be established in terms of potential project costs and benefits and their likely timescales, so that delivery (and expectations) can be managed effectively.

Given the current state of the development market and reduced capital budgets, opportunities for public-private partnerships should also be explored, particularly in terms of their potential to un-lock properties for suitable business and/ or community initiatives.

The priorities identified here relate to those projects and actions described in the plan. Other priorities relating to wider sustainability objectives remain to be identified and driven by the community of Abbeyleix.

3.1.2.1 Short term priorities

In the short term, it is recommended that further studies are needed to establish feasibility, and that ‘quick wins’ should be prioritized in order to maintain the momentum established through the consultation progress. On this basis, the following relatively low cost initiatives should be prioritized in the short term:

- Civic infrastructure audit;
- Accessibility audit;
- Town centre ‘Health check’;
- Town energy audit;
- Integrated parking, access and movement study;
- Traffic calming;
- Identification and removal of street clutter (including from building facades);
- Façade colour scheme;
- “Facelift” schemes for derelict/ vacant premises;
- Development management;

- Trails;
- School’s participation;
- Events; and
- Tourist information and marketing.

3.1.2.2 Medium and long term priorities

Significant development may need to take place to improve the economic viability of the town generally, and to lever medium and longer term priority projects such as the proposed comprehensive restoration of buildings fronting the crescent for new businesses etc. However these projects on their own and in combination, have the potential to deliver a great deal of benefit to the economic and tourism potential of the town. It is hoped, in this regard, that the proposed pilot projects will serve to create an example that will stimulate private sector investment.

In the interim (short to medium term) works that will facilitate and benefit from these projects taking place should be investigated, particularly the potential for re-use and rehabilitation of significant protected structures:

- Restoring the crescent (pilot projects);
- Selective footpath widening at Market Square;
- The southern ‘gateway’;
- The northern ‘bookend’;
- Balladine environmental improvements;
- Sequential development strategy.

3.2 Funding opportunities

There are a variety of funding mechanisms available to support the implementation of the plan, however they are limited in scope. Therefore full implementation will require a combination of pro-active approaches including significant private investment:

- Fáilte Ireland/ NDP
- Department of Environment, Communities and Local Government
- Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht
- Heritage Council Grants Scheme
- Grants scheme for the conservation of protected structures
- Laois County Enterprise Board
- Enterprise Ireland
- Laois Partnership
- Development contributions scheme

Strategy	Key projects	Rank	Note
Community	Undertake civic infrastructure audit.	High	Particular emphasis on future needs including sports and recreation facilities.
	Undertake town centre accessibility audit.	High	Local authority obligations under Disability Discrimination Act etc.
	Reserve land for expansion of existing sports facilities.	Med	Include in town plan review.
	Identified walking and cycling routes and proposed additional connections.	High	Potential for Failte Ireland support for looped walks.
	Seek early implementation of proposed Abbeyleix to Durrow cycling route.	Med	Existing proposal.
	Broaden awareness and involvement in community affairs and participation.	Med	Hampered by lack of broadband.
	Promote further education and awareness of sustainability issues.	Med	Potential expansion of Resilience programme into local secondary schools.
Economy	Undertake town centre 'Health Check' study/ assessment of retail need and leakage.	Med	Note Heritage Council methodology, potential for support.
	Seek new uses for existing vacant town centre premises.	High	Potential for adaptive re-use of Abbeygate building supported by LEADER programme.
	Pilot project for the adaptive re-use of existing town centre live-work building typology.	High	Investigate feasibility and funding of locally sourced artisan food production in town centre and/ or 'country houses'.
	Align the town with high quality locally sourced artisan food product(s).	High	Seek to incentivise through Laois Partnership and County Enterprise Board support.
	Encourage location of significant convenience outlet in suitable town centre location.	Med	Subject to impact assessment and sustainable location. Preferentially same to source a proportion of produce locally.
	Commission marketing/ branding strategy.	High	Specialist consultants and Failte Ireland input required.
	Provide tourist information resource.	Med	Potential for automated facility in library shopfront.
	Broaden events calendar e.g. Vintage festival, food festival.	High	Potential for temporary pedestrianisation of part of Main Street.
	Prioritise broadband availability.	High	
Place and environment	Encourage voluntary maintenance and visual improvements to identified buildings.	Med	
	Investigate potential for coordinated streetscape colour scheme.	Low	Potential 'quick win'. Coordinated approach needed.
	Issue notices under s59 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000.	Med	(In respect of any protected structures identified as being endangered due to neglect).
	Carry out public realm improvements at identified town centre locations.	High	Focus on entrance to town from north and vicinity of market square.
	Seek re-classification of Main Street (N77) to local status.	Med	Subject to NRA agreement.
	Secure early implementation of traffic calming measures at town approach roads.	High	Calming 'gates' planned.
	Review pedestrian crossing phases to facilitate pedestrian crossings.	Med	Focus on junctions at market square.
	Review need/ appropriateness of proposed orbital routes.	High	Consider omission from town plan.
	Implement town centre park project.	Low.	Potential to incorporate allotments.
	Undertake town energy audit.	Low	Investigate feasibility of future infrastructural provision for District Heating.
	Carry out traffic and parking study to review on-street parking allocation.	Med	Potential for improved management regime for market square area.
	Protect existing plot subdivisions.	High	Seek to replicate elements of close grain plot layouts in new development proposals. Consider inclusion of DP policy.
	Sequential development strategy.	High	Prioritise adaptive reuse of existing buildings and plots. Consider inclusion of DP policy.

Summary of priority projects and actions

3 Delivery

There is also considerable scope for business interests to foster partnerships through corporate vehicles such as Business Improvement Districts (BIDs). BIDs are companies set up by and on behalf of communities, businesses and Councils to establish revenue streams. The principal benefit of BID type schemes is to ensure that funds raised through the scheme are directly re-invested in the area. Alternative mechanisms include local development vehicles (LDVs) or trusts, that can coordinate initiatives and investment.

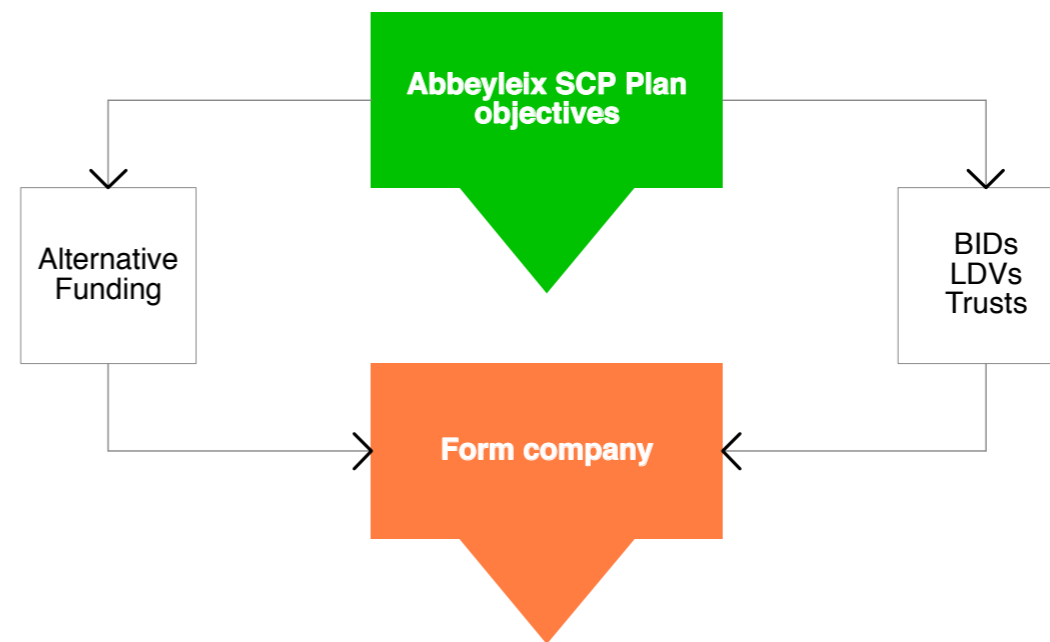
The growth in BID and LDV type approaches elsewhere reflects a general decline in the availability of central government funding for locally based projects, and a recognition on the part of local communities and businesses that they can directly effect the measures they pay for. This requires the commercial sector to literally buy-in to the vision for the place, by tapping into the creativity and entrepreneurship that already exists in the community. This approach may be of particular relevance where public funding support is required to be matched by private and/ or community investment. Wider sustainability objectives will require a combination of 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' initiatives, as they will require support of national agencies but will need to be driven by the community.

3.3 Monitoring progress

Monitoring should take account of baseline data prepared at the pre-plan and the plan preparation stages in order to establish sufficient indicators against which progress can be measured later. The proposed additional studies will also significantly add to the quality and scope of baseline data that can be used to monitor progress and to lever funding.

Monitoring should be undertaken by the implementation group on an annual basis and take place account of:

- the main physical, economic, social and environmental characteristics of the town centre, including the vibrancy and vitality of the main street as established by the proposed town centre health check;
- the principal purposes for which land in the area is used as established by the land-use study;
- Building and façade condition as established by the main street façade appraisal;
- Communications, transport and traffic (including accessibility by public transport) as established by the proposed access and parking study.



Process



Projects



Indicative summary flow-chart showing potential for community driven implementation strategy

Strategy	Key projects	Rank	Progress update
Community	Undertake civic infrastructure audit.	High	
	Undertake town centre accessibility audit.	High	
	Reserve land for expansion of existing sports facilities.	Med	
	Identified walking and cycling routes and proposed additional connections.	High	
	Seek early implementation of proposed Abbeyleix to Durrow cycling route.	Med	
	Broaden awareness and involvement in community affairs and participation.	Med	
	Promote further education and awareness of sustainability issues.	Med	
Economy	Undertake town centre 'Health Check' study/ assessment of retail need and leakage.	Med	
	Seek new uses for existing vacant town centre premises.	High	
	Pilot project for the adaptive re-use of existing town centre live-work building typology.	High	
	Align the town with high quality locally sourced artisan food product(s).	High	
	Encourage location of significant convenience outlet in suitable town centre location.	Med	
	Commission marketing/ branding strategy.	High	
	Provide tourist information resource.	Med	
	Broaden events calendar e.g. Vintage festival, food festival.	High	
	Prioritise broadband availability.	High	
Place and environment	Encourage voluntary maintenance and visual improvements to identified buildings.	Med	
	Investigate potential for coordinated streetscape colour scheme.	Low	
	Issue notices under s59 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000.	Med	
	Carry out public realm improvements at identified town centre locations.	High	
	Seek re-classification of Main Street (N77) to local status.	Med	
	Secure early implementation of traffic calming measures at town approach roads.	High	
	Review pedestrian crossing phases to facilitate pedestrian crossings.	Med	
	Review need/ appropriateness of proposed orbital routes.	High	
	Implement town centre park project.	Low.	
	Undertake town energy audit.	Low	
	Carry out traffic and parking study to review on-street parking allocation.	Med	
	Protect existing plot subdivisions.	High	
	Sequential development strategy.	High	

Summary of priority projects and actions with space for monitoring and updating progress

References

References

Abbeyleix Architectural Conservation Area Study, Abbeyleix Heritage Company, August 2010.

Abbeyleix Habitats Survey 2010, Laois County Council, October, 2010.

DEFRA. Definition and components of sustainable communities, DEFRA, March, 2005.

EU Ministerial Informal on Sustainable Communities, UK Presidency, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, March 2006.

Knight of Glin and Desmond Guinness, 2008. Great Irish Houses.

Knocknamoe Masterplan, Abbeyleix, Laois County Council, 2008.

Laois Draft County Council Development Plan, 2012-2018.

Westlands Masterplan, Abbeyleix, Laois County Council (undated).

APPENDIX

Report on consultation

Consultation elements

Steering group

Each stage of the consultation process was overseen by the steering group, which included two prominent local community representatives, the Chair of the Abbeyleix Business and Community Forum (an umbrella organization for a diverse range of independent groups and organizations), the Chair of the Abbeyleix Tidy Towns Committee and representatives of Laois County Council.

Public call for submissions and invitation to consultation workshop

A public call for submissions was advertised in the local press on February 22nd 2011, including an invitation to a public workshop, held in Heritage House on the 9th March, 2011. Key stakeholders and community groups were contacted by letter inviting submissions and participation in the workshop. The event was also advertised on the website of Laois Partnership.

Interviews

A long-list of consultees was compiled for the purposes of completing stage one, and agreed with the steering group. This comprised representatives from statutory agencies (local authority officials, elected members, service providers, etc); sectoral groups such as education (schools), environment and health; culture, heritage and tourism; local businesses and services; local interest/ community groups and individuals. Contact was also made via phone, email or written letter as appropriate.

Forty letters were issued to local community groups and representatives together with a further eight statutory and semi-state bodies.

Structured interviews were held with:

- Abbeyleix Business and Community Forum,
- Bog Committee,
- Tidy Towns Committee,
- Laois County Council Roads Design section,
- Laois County Council Forward Planning Officer,
- Laois Partnership,
- Elected Members.

Community consultation workshop

Thirty seven people attended the workshop. The workshop was facilitated by the consultant team and observed by Laois County Council Heritage Officer.

The workshop was structured around a detailed programme to cover five main elements:

- Cognitive mapping exercise.
- Focussed group discussions about what it means to be a sustainable community.
- Identifying positive features of the town and its environs and how these can be improved.
- Identifying negative features of the town and how these can be addressed.
- Key projects with the potential to transform Abbeyleix.

Attendees were split into working groups of 5-7 people and each group was asked to address these questions and to present their findings to the group as a whole. The workshop organisers acted as facilitators within individual groups to encourage discussion and help nominate a group representative for presenting the outcome of the work.

Groups and individuals were supplied with base mapping at different scales, large format paper and markers and encouraged to present their findings visually / spatially using diagrams as well as words.

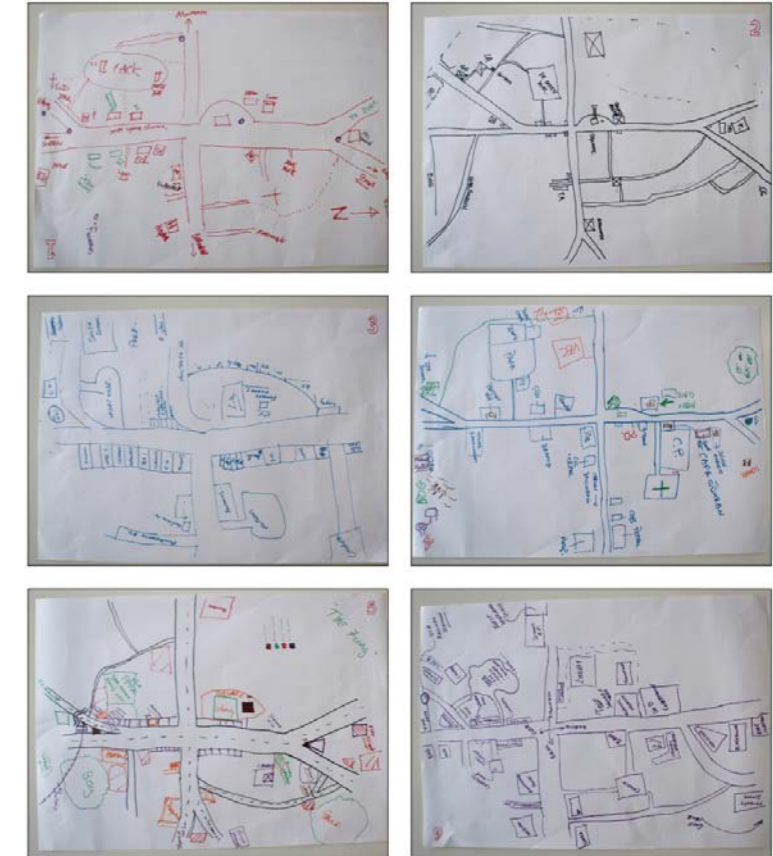
The output of each group was presented by a nominated member of each work group to the group as a whole.

The outputs of the workshop are summarised as follows:

Cognitive mapping exercise

The intention of this exercise was to encourage the participants to think spatially about the town and its environs, and to identify strategically significant elements: nodes, landmarks, edges etc. A blank sheet of large format paper and a variety of markers was distributed to each working group. The groups were asked to imagine the centre of the page as being the market square, and to draw a map of the town from memory, including those parts of the town considered important by the group.

The maps produced by each group focussed mainly on the town centre area, highlighting the cruciform morphology of the original 18th century street layout:



- landmark buildings (library, churches, bank building),
- parks, open spaces and recreation areas (town centre park, sensory gardens, playground, playing fields, golf course, bog),
- other community buildings and services (Garda station, hospital, Dove House, schools, Heritage House etc.),
- remnant features (former railway line) and
- individual shops and businesses.

What is a sustainable community?

The participants were asked to consider the key characteristics of a sustainable community and to list these in bullet form for presentation to the group as a whole. Recurring themes raised by the groups include the importance of being able to live and work locally (Including the town centre), self-sufficiency in food production and energy and participation in local government. The following is paraphrased from the groups:

Table 1

- People (leadership, voluntary groups, expertise, children's activities);
- Businesses and services (including the need for new businesses);
- Planning and development management (need for vision and community input);
- Heritage, tourism and culture (signage and marketing);
- Environment (preservation of landscape and amenities, addressing waste and water issues).

Table 2

- Local food production;
- Pride;
- Local employment opportunities;
- Town centre living and working;
- Sustainable transport;
- Local energy market;
- Community self sufficiency/ resilience;
- Sports and recreational opportunities.

Table 3

- Housing and employment;
- Waste and water;
- Renewable energy;
- Open spaces and walks;
- Farmer's market;
- Public toilets;
- Public transport;
- Broadband;
- Walking and cycling opportunities.

Table 4

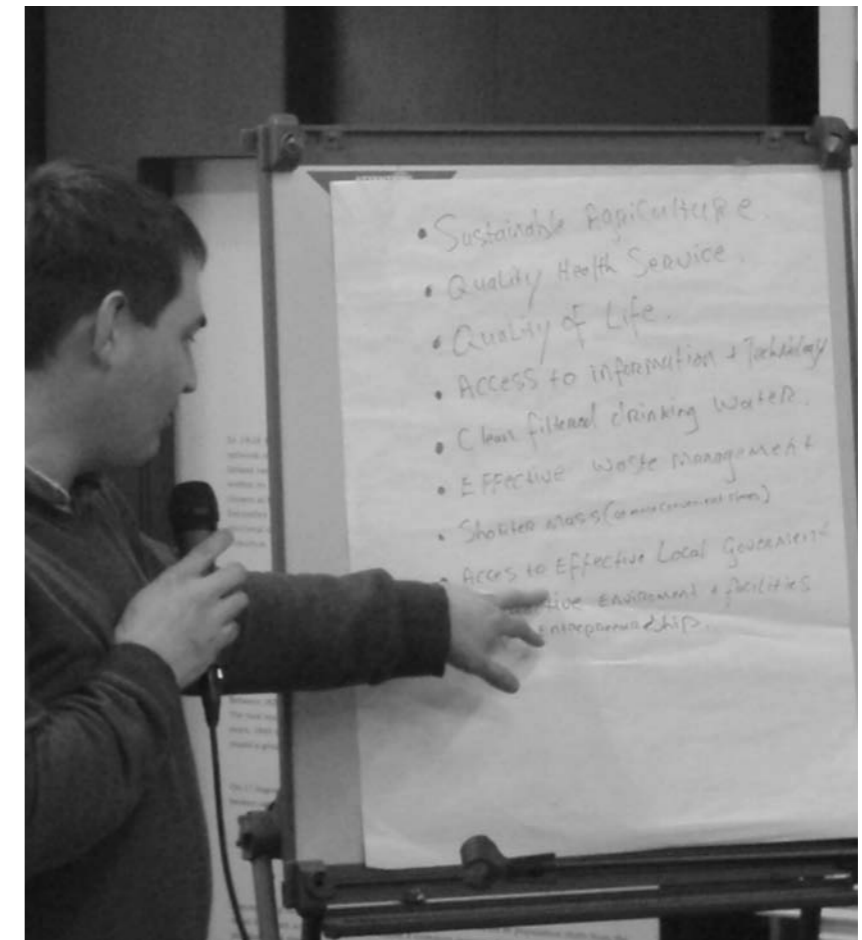
- Education in community resilience;
- Local food production;
- Participation in local government;
- Local currency and skills bank;
- Access to the countryside;
- Health network;
- Cultural/ heritage awareness.

Table 5

- Local business;
- 'Craic';
- Natural capital;
- Sustainable agricultural practices;
- Quality of life;
- Access to local government;
- Attracting local businesses.

Table 6

- Local business and recreation;
- Awareness and marketing;
- Broadening community awareness.



Identifying positives, negatives and opportunities

The groups were asked to consider social, economic and environmental positives and negatives, how positives could be enhanced and negatives eradicated. Lastly, groups were asked to identify a key project or projects that considered had the potential to transform Abbeyleix.

Due to overlap and commonality of issues raised, these are collated together for the purposes of this report.

The best things about Abbeyleix

Positive social aspects:

- Community groups;
- Community spirit;
- Services;
- Pride of place;
- Low crime/ deprivation levels;
- Family friendly;
- Playground;
- Hospital;
- Library;
- Churches;
- Youth centre;
- Dove House;
- Health centre;
- Clubs (e.g. fishing club).

Positive economic aspects:

- Strategic location;
- Good agricultural land;
- Small businesses;
- A 'model' town;
- Heritage assets;
- Heritage status;
- Farmer's market;
- Abbeyfest;
- Petrol stations (attracting business).

Positive environmental aspects:

- The park;
- The bog;
- Sensory garden;
- Clean industry;
- Streetscape/ heritage architecture and public realm;
- Country houses;
- Attractive shopfronts;
- Landscape;
- Monuments;
- Gardens (long plots).

How positives can be enhanced

- Enhancing positive social aspects:
- Promote education in sustainability (e.g. Resilience course);
- Promote town centre regeneration;
- Improve walking and cycling connections;
- Promote sporting and recreational opportunities.

Enhancing positive economic aspects:

- More restaurants;
- More locally produced goods;
- Better car parking signage for Church car-park;
- Better informational signage for passing traffic;
- More festivals;
- Marketing/ tourism brochure;
- Tourism information centre;
- Potential for period film set/ location;
- Promotion as a wedding destination;
- Promote live-work/ broadband;
- Look outside the immediate environs.

Enhancing positive environmental aspects:

- Bigger park;
- Better sewage and wastewater treatment;
- Community gardens;
- Recreation use of bog;
- Funding for maintenance of heritage fabric.

The worst things about Abbeyleix:

Negative social aspects:

- De-population of town centre;
- Local park at capacity;
- Lack of networking/ volunteering;
- Social exclusion;
- Lack of surveillance;
- Lack of night-time entertainment;
- Lack of public toilets;
- Vacancy;
- Drug abuse;
- Lack of activities for young people;
- Lack of walking and cycling routes/ information;
- Poor disabled access.

Negative economic aspects:

- Local businesses struggling;
- Vacancy;
- Lack of broadband;
- Lack of major employers;
- Lack of tourism plan;
- Lack of parking;
- Lack of coach parking;
- By-pass removed cars but not trucks;
- Lack of rail connection.

Negative environmental aspects:

- Heavy goods vehicles;
- Noise pollution (traffic);
- Local transport lacking;
- Poor water quality and wastewater treatment;
- Lack of central green spaces;
- Habitat loss;
- Litter and dog fouling.

How negatives can be eradicated

Eradicating negative social aspects:

- Encourage more residential occupation;
- Improve disabled access (e.g. surface of market square).

Eradicating negative economic aspects:

- More/ better signage;
- Bog interpretive centre;
- Improved car-parking arrangements.

Eradicating negative environmental aspects:

- Traffic calming;
- Enforcement against vacant properties;
- Developing and branding a sense of place.

Preferred projects

- Tourist information centre;
- Enterprise centre for local craft and design;
- Cinema;
- Walking and cycling route on old railway line (Abbeyleix to Kilkenny);
- Community skills bank;
- Pedestrianise main street;
- Pedestrianise Temperance Street;
- Equestrian based tourism.

The workshop was concluded by thanking the participants, outlining next steps and inviting them to attend the presentation of draft plan strategies and objectives.

Questionnaire

A short questionnaire was distributed at the workshop. 24 completed and partially completed questionnaires were returned. The findings of the questionnaire were as follows:

Male respondents:	62.5%	Female:	37.5%
Age profile?			
26-35:	21%	36-50:	46%
		51+:	33.34%
Residence within Abbeyleix?			
Rural Hinterland:	42%	Periphery:	29%
		Main St Area:	21%
Length of residence?			
20 years +:	65.2%	11-20 years:	21.7%
Heard about meeting?			
Letter:	50%	Word of mouth:	42%
Ever attended a similar workshop event before?			
No:	54%	Yes:	46%
Activities undertaken regularly within Abbeyleix?			
Shopping	83.3%		
Dining Café	75.0%		
Banking/Credit Union	75.0%		
Medical	66.7%		
Walk/Exercise	62.5%		
Library	58.3%		
Place of work	54.2%		
Park/Sports	54.2%		
Night life	50.0%		
School/Education	37.5%		
Heritage House	33.3%		
Church	33.3%		
Other	8.3%		

* Flip side of questionnaire completed by 19 respondents only

Typically access the town centre?

By Car : 70% By foot: 42% Cycle: 8%

Favourite Characteristics? Least Favourite Characteristics?

Heritage	12	Weak Broadband	4
Streetscape + Appearance	6	Traffic	3
Community Spirit	6	Parking	3
Park	4	Derelict Buildings	
Bog	3	Some proposed developments	
Morrissey's	2	Quiet shops	
Quiet nature of town	2	Insensitive shopfront design	
Heywood Gardens		Lack of sports ground space	
Pubs + restaurants		Lack of community Spirit	
Abbeyfest			
Hotel			
Youth Café			
Travel outside of Abbeyleix for leisure and entertainment? (no. of respondents in brackets)			
No	(6)		
Portlaoise	(9)		
Dublin	(6)		
Kilkenny	(4)		
Travel outside Abbeyleix for weekly shopping?			
No	(8)		
Portlaoise	(11)		
Dublin	(2)		
Regularly travel outside of Abbeyleix for walks, parks and/or play areas?			
No	(10)		
Durrow Woods	(4)		
Kilkenny			
Emo			
Ballyroan			

Slieve Bloom

Heywood

Cullahill

Castlecomer Discovery Park

Mountrath Park

Presentation of draft strategies and projects

A second advertisement was placed in the local press inviting attendance at a public presentation of the draft plan strategies and proposals, which was held in Heritage House on 18th April 2011. The presentation by the project consultants was followed by a questions and answers session and was observed by representatives of the Council. Presentation boards were also displayed and these were subsequently placed on display in the Abbeyleix library and on Laois County Council's website. Members of the public were invited to make submissions on the draft plan.

Four written submissions were received. Two of these were primarily concerned with loss of car-parking associated with proposals for widening footpaths in the vicinity of Market Square. The third submission relates primarily to concerns about the potential impact on Temperance Street of any future development to the south-east of the Main Street, if used as a point of access to these lands. The fourth submission broadly welcomed the plan, noting, for example, that the Market Square "needs to be reclaimed for the community", however it raised concerns about proposed footpath widening. It also raised concerns about elements of proposals impacting on private property, but, notwithstanding this, suggested the scope of the plan should be broader than the public realm.

Subsequent to the public presentation the Steering Group also invited the Abbeyleix Community Resilience Group to make a submission. This presentation highlighted the broader scope of the sustainability agenda in terms of renewable energy and local food production, as well as the limited potential of the sustainable communities plan to address these aspects. It was agreed with the Steering Group that the plan should sit within a wider process of community engagement with broader sustainability issues of this kind.

