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Gnóthaí Réigiúnacha, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta
Department of Arts, Heritage,
Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs



REIMAGINE MOUNTRATH

A Sustainable Community Plan

April 2023



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Introduction



1. Introduction



1.1 Background

Mountrath Town Strategy Group contracted urbanARQ Ltd., partnering with Connect the Dots and RealSim, in 2020 to deliver a public consultation for Mountrath Town to develop policies and projects that will impact the economic, social, infrastructural, visual and on-going development of the community. The process was also supported by Laois Leader, LCDC, Laois Partnership Company and Laois County Council.

The sustainable development plan to emerge from this engagement process aims to stimulate interest and provide guidance for residents, community groups and businesses within the community. It will inform an overall shared vision to benefit local and national policy makers such as Laois LCDC, Laois County Council, Laois Partnership, Failte Ireland, and SEAI to name a few. The following report outlines the methods, results, feedback, and conclusions of the multifaceted consultation process.

1.2 Scope of Project

The overall project comprises of two elements. Lots 1 and 2. The aim is to provide a path for the regeneration and upliftment of Mountrath as a town whilst also maintaining its sustainability.

Lot 1 is the development of the Sustainable Community Plan which includes the identification of proposals and actions for the enhancement of Mountrath town and it's community. The plan seeks to engage with the community at large to ascertain wants and needs that will have a direct impact on the local context. Lot 2 is an evolution of Lot 1 insofar as the youth engagement part of the community survey. As part of the scope, this involves the investigation and outline design for the development of a Youth Centre in Mountrath. As part of the investigation, the survey carried out will serve a basis for the design and development of the Youth Centre, including the identification of a suitable site within the context of Mountrath Town.

Overall, the plan will complement the ongoing Statutory County Development Plan of Laois County Council and will take due cognisance of European, National, Regional and Sectoral plans, including in particular where the objectives of these plans might affect future funding streams.

1. Introduction



1.3 Study Area

Mountrath is a youthful town - 23% of the towns population, 2016 CSO. Their input in to the sustainable ways they would like the town to develop will be critical to the entire plan.

Towns are ever changing and evolve in line with macro economic influences but primarily with the vision and ambition of it's people. The challenge set before us here is how do we want Mountrath to grow and prosper in a way that is sustainable not just for the next 5 or 10 years but for the generations to follow. The study area encompasses the analysis and assessment of the townscape as it stands, development potential and regeneration opportunities that exists. Additionally, the community at large, of which the younger generation will also form a crucial part of the study, which will supplement the basis for the proposed development of the Youth Centre.

Mountrath is a resilient town. Some signs of positive momentum as listed below:

- The local community school with over 690 students which 25 years ago struggled to survive with less than 100 students.
- The regeneration of the local Bridgidine convent into a business and community activity hub, a model for any community building regeneration project and
- The success of Mountrath Sawmills, a long established local business rejuvenated over the past 25 years by local man Mark Sheeran, recently recognised by the University of Limerick for his outstanding achievement in business.

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. The aim of the sustainability plan is not to create new business but to provide a template for the sort of healthy and supportive environment where the people of Mountrath, young and old can realise their potential.

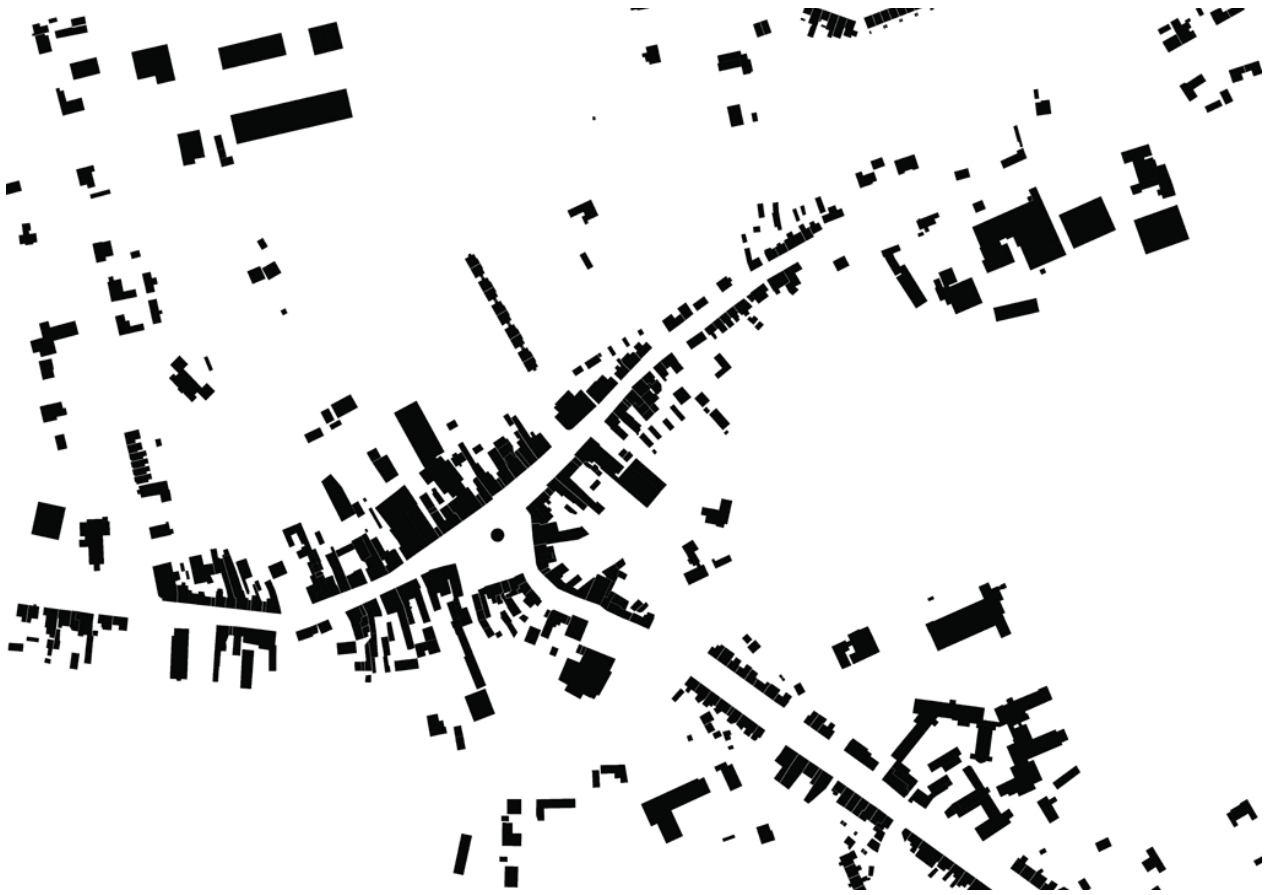


Figure 01 - Mountrath Figure Ground Analysis

2

Methodological Approach



2. Methodological Approach



2.1 Contextual Research

The town of Mountrath is located in County Laois, Ireland, at the foothills of the Slieve Bloom Mountains. The town is situated on the R445 and also connects it to nearby towns such as Portlaoise, Roscrea, and Tullamore. Mountrath has a population of circa 1,700 people.

Mountrath has a rich history dating back to the early 17th century when it was founded by the Coote family. The town grew in importance during the 18th and 19th centuries due to its location on the main road between Dublin and Limerick. It was an important stopover point for travellers and became a centre for trade and commerce.

Mountrath has a network connecting a number of Regional Roads, the R423 Portarlinton-Mountrath Road, R430 Carlow Town-Mountrath Road and the R440 Birr-Mountrath Road converging on the town. This road network provides the town with a high degree of regional connectivity, including easy access to both the M7 Dublin-Limerick Motorway and the M8 Dublin-Cork Motorway.

In recent years, there has been some development in the town, including the construction of new social and private housing estates. However, Mountrath has remained relatively unchanged. The town itself is provided with a range of amenities, including Mountrath Amenity Park in the centre of town, Mountrath Golf Club, St. Fintan's GAA and there are a number of walking routes within and surrounding the town. Today, Mountrath is a quiet and peaceful town, known for its friendly community and rural charm. The town has a number of local businesses, including shops, restaurants, and pubs, as well as several community organisations and sports clubs. Additionally, there appears to be a number of vacant commercial and residential premises sporadically located throughout the town.

Mountrath is designated as a 'Service Town' within both the Laois County Development Plan and the Regional Planning Guidelines for the Midland Region and it provides an important retail, residential, service and amenity function for the local context and support for the Principal Town of Portlaoise. Mountrath is provided with zonings for the provision of additional Residential, Commercial, Enterprise and Employment, Industrial, Community-Educational-Institutional and other sustainable development in the future.

2. Methodological Approach



2.2 Community Audit

The community engagement process commences with the audit of the local environment and community at large. This included the gathering information and feedback from the community to assess its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. This process helped identify areas for improvement, highlight community assets, and develop strategies for enhancing community well-being and sustainability.

It was important to engage with a diverse group of stakeholders, including community members, local businesses and the youth to the objectives to a more informed outcome. The process included the conducting surveys, focus groups, interviews, and site visits to gather information on various aspects of the community, such as demographics, economic conditions, infrastructure, social services, and cultural and youth resources.

Once the data was collected, it was analysed to identify trends, patterns, and gaps. This information was also critical in the production of the SWOT analysis to inform both the sustainable communities plan, including community development strategies and initiatives and the proposed youth centre.

In the context of Mountrath Town, the audit was a useful tool for assessing the town's overall health and identifying areas where improvements could be made. It also helped to engage community members, the youth and other stakeholders in the process of shaping the town's future as well as trying to formulate a mechanism to build a stronger, more resilient and sustainable community.

2. Methodological Approach



2.3 Asset Mapping & GeoModeling

Mountrath

Before any proposals can be made as to potential interventions and regeneration initiatives to help revive the town, we must first carry out a detailed mapping exercise to understand the towns current buildings, functions, and general activity.

To aid this exercise we employed the latest advances in 2D and 3D digital mapping integrated with available database information on buildings activity, and augmented with street level mapping and verification.

Although Mountrath is not (yet) a member of the Heritage Councils Collaborative Town Centre Health Check programme (CCTCHC), we endeavored to follow their asset mapping methodology. This allowed us to make informative comparisons between Mountrath and other towns which have had similar asset mapping exercises carried out. More information on the CCTCHC programme can be found on their website, <https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/projects/town-centre-health-check-programme>

Asset Mapping

For the Asset Mapping exercise we acquired the latest Geodirectory information from Laois County Council (Q1 2021 at the time of this exercise). Geodirectory combines information from An Post and Ordnance Survey Ireland on building activity. The map with overlaid geodirectory data is available on the following weblink and through the Street Map tab on the web link: <http://mountrath.realsim.ie/Map>

The latest population census for Mountrath (2016) shows there were 1772 people living in the town. The 2022 figures for the town have not yet been released but with an average 8% population increase across the country, we can now assume that this figure is close to 2000 people.

2. Methodological Approach



2.4 Community Engagement Programme

Connect the Dots & urbanARQ Ltd. worked together to deliver a public consultation for Mountrath Town to develop policies and projects that will impact the economic, social, infrastructural, visual and on-going development of the community. A public drop-in session and two in-person workshops (adult & youth) were launched with the support of Mountrath Town Strategy Group between 12pm-8:30pm on 17th August, 2021. Two public surveys, one for adults and one for youth/school children, were launched in coordination with the in-person events, both of which were made accessible from the 18th of June to the 13th of August inclusive. The events were held in Mountrath Town at the Market Square as well as the Amenity Park where members of the public were given the opportunity to provide feedback on detailed aspects of the town through survey questions, worksheets and interactive workshops.

Outreach & Communications

In order to effectively engage with the Mountrath community a poster and e-leaflet outreach campaign was designed and launched. A total of __ stakeholders from the Mountrath area were identified and contacted with e-leaflets, the survey and the event registration survey through a stakeholder research and mapping process led by Connect the Dots. In addition (although with overlap), the Mountrath Town Strategy Group reached a list of 99 stakeholders in preparation for the consultation events.

Youth & Adult Surveys

The surveys for adults and youth were promoted through the email, poster and leaflet outreach efforts of Connect the Dots and the Mountrath Town Strategy Group.

The adult survey received 375 views, 116 full responses, with a completion rate of 37.9%. The survey provided an opportunity for respondents to identify existing positives and negatives of Mountrath Town, voice any concerns or opinions regarding amenities, attractions and transport, suggest ideas and possibilities for the development and growth of the town and its community as well as give their input on preferable dates for the workshop events. A call-line was also included on the leaflets and posters for community members who wished to complete the survey over the phone.

2. Methodological Approach



The youth survey received 69 views and 26 responses with a completion rate of 61.9% and similar content to the adult survey. Both surveys were open from the 18th of June to the 13th of August inclusive.

A separate registration survey was also created for attendance at the drop-in event, the adult workshop and the youth workshop. Together with email outreach and e-leafleting, the survey sought to build public awareness, interest and ultimately attendance for the **consultation events** which took place on the following dates and times:

- 17th August 2021 @ 12:00 pm -17:00 pm - Drop-in
- 17th August 2021 @ 17:30 pm -19:00 pm - Youth Workshop
- 17th August 2021 @ 19:00 pm - 20:30 pm - Adult Workshop

Drop-In Event

As previously indicated, the Drop-In Event took place on the 17th of August 2021 between 12pm-5pm at a hub space on Market Square (Medals and Trophies 4 U). The event sought to provide an opportunity for members of the community to discuss the project, answer questions and provide feedback. During the event, an estimated 47 attendees over the 5 hour period were encouraged to discuss positives, negatives and opportunities regarding Roads & Paths, Buildings & Outdoor Spaces, Amenities & Attractions and any other possible topics in relation to Mountrath with the aid of a Rose, Bud, Thorn worksheet designed by Connect the Dots. For visual representation, three A3 aerial maps of Mountrath were used to stimulate attendees' thoughts and support conversation along with a virtual 3D map, all provided by urbanARQ Ltd. .

2. Methodological Approach



Youth & Adult Workshops

Both workshops were held separately in an outdoor space at the Amenity Park in Mountrath; the Youth Workshop took place between 5:30pm - 7pm while the Adult Workshop took place between 7pm-8:30pm. During the Youth Workshop the attendees were given the opportunity to point out areas of positives, negatives and opportunities of Mountrath using A3 aerial maps of the town and coloured stickers to mark specific locations. The event included an outdoor barbeque and a youth DJ organised by the MDA (Mountrath Development Association) which sought to create an engaging environment for the youth community which estimated a total of 30 attendees.

The Adult Workshop consisted of an overview by Connect the Dots of the responses and feedback from the previous two events including key repetitions and core issues brought forward throughout the day followed by an open discussion regarding possible next steps and realistic approaches for the town plan. The attendees (approximately 25) were given the opportunity to view the aerial maps with their edits from the previous events at the conclusion of the workshop as well as the opportunity to speak one-to-one with a member of the Connect the Dots team for any further questions or feedback.

3

Planning Context and Policy



3. Planning Context



3.1 Context

Mountrath is located c.14 kilometres south west of Portlaoise at the foot of the Slieve Bloom Mountains, on the old N7 Dublin-Limerick road (now the R445), approximately 14 kms and 8 kms from Junction 18 on the M7/M8 motorway network in County Laois. The 2016 Census recorded a population of 1,774 within the town, an increase of 7% on the 2011 Census (1,661).

Mountrath has a compact urban form, largely influenced by the Mountrath River (a Special Area of Conservation) flowing in a northwest to southeast trajectory, and the local road network. The layout of the town has changed little over time, retaining its original relationship with the river and features such as the Market Square. Typically, the town is urban in character with the majority of 2 and 3 storey buildings fronting directly onto the Main Street, one building deep. Mountrath's buildings are diverse in age, height, roof profiles and elevational treatments. This diversity is particularly notable within Market Square and diverging streets. Many of the buildings that line Main Street and Market Square are Protected Structures (41 in total). There is a high level of vacancy within the town centre particularly at first floor level. Residential areas have development along the approach roads into the town, most notably along the R430 (Abbeyleix Rd) where many higher density developments have taken place.

There are 3 schools in the town (two primary schools Scoil Bhríde and St Fintans, and a new secondary school), 3 creche and playschool services, 2 churches (St Peter's and St Fintans), a community centre on the Roscrea Road, a youth theatre and public library close to Market Square, library, post office, bank, credit union, fire station, GAA and soccer pitches and a Golf Club. Mountrath Amenity Park is located adjacent to the Mountrath River

Community Centre, library, post office, bank, credit union, fire station, Level 4 Retail Services

The Waste Water Treatment Plant has additional capacity for 2,168 PE.

3. Policy



3.2 Key Lessons Learnt

National Planning Framework 2040

The National Planning Framework (NPF) is a high-level strategy that will shape growth and development in Ireland out to the year 2040. The NPF draws upon lessons learned from the National Spatial Strategy 2002-2022 and provides a framework for the sustainable development of Ireland's existing settlements.

With regards the Eastern and Midland Region, the NPF states that the region's most significant place-making challenge will be to plan and deliver future development in a way that enhances and reinforces its urban and rural structure and moves more towards self-sustaining, rather than commuter driven activity.

The NPF includes specific targets related to securing compact and sustainable growth in Ireland's towns and cities, recognising that the physical format of urban development in Ireland is one of our greatest national development challenges.

Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy 2019-2031

County Laois is located in the Midland Region Strategy Planning Area of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly. Co Laois is part located within the Core region and the Gateway region. The Core region includes the peri-urban hinterlands in the commuter catchment around Dublin, whilst the gateway region acts as an inter regional gateway to the rest of the island.

Laois County Development Plan 2021 - 2027

The Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027 was adopted on 25th January 2022 and came into effect 8th March 2022.

Mountrath is identified as a Self-Sustaining Town - a town with high levels of population growth and a weak employment base which are reliant on other areas for employment

3. Policy



and/or services and which require targeted catch up' investment to become more self-sustaining.

The Plan seeks to grow the population of the town to 2,024 by 2027.

Objectives

The following Objectives are identified for Mountrath in the Plan.

MO 1 Create a new civic space within Market Square to facilitate everyday uses such as bus stop, waiting areas and special uses such as farmers market;

MO 2 Encourage redevelopment or restoration of derelict, vacant or underused buildings and improve public realm within the town centre as appropriate to support the town's vibrancy;

MO 3 Support the preparation and implementation of an Urban Regeneration Framework for Mountrath town centre over the plan period;

MO 4 Retain traditional painted timber shopfront and traditional advertisement styles and ensure any new shopfronts or advertisements must not detract or erode the special character of the town;

MO 5 Enhance the visual amenity of approach roads into Mountrath, protecting mature trees and enhancing by way of further greening and landscaping;

MO 6 Encourage and facilitate the re-use and regeneration of buildings in Market Square to a public/community/commercial/retail usage which will provide an opportunity to capitalise on its central location.

MO 7 Encourage the use of upper floors within the town centre for a diversity of living and working uses where such uses would contribute to the function and vibrancy of the town centre.

3. Policy



Economic and Community Development

MO 8 Encourage the further development of retail and commercial services in the town core - the redevelopment of existing unused or derelict structures for commercial or residential purposes will be particularly encouraged;

MO 9 Support developments that will establish Mountrath as a cycling and outdoor recreation hub for the Slieve Bloom Mountains;

MO 10 Support tourism-related uses, activities and amenities that will contribute to the Slieve Bloom Mountains tourism product;

MO11 Reinforce the centre of Mountrath as the priority location for new commercial and retail development, with emphasis on quality of design, positive contribution to the existing streetscape and protection of existing heritage assets;

MO12 Encourage small scale indigenous enterprise units at appropriately zoned lands;

MO 13 Support and facilitate the development of Bloom HQ as a community enterprise hub within the town;

MO14 Encourage the intensive use of existing community and sporting facilities and develop additional community facilities which are flexible and capable of being managed for a number of different uses, in particular youth-related facilities, community-based health facilities, extensions to schools and school facilities and an outdoor multi-use games area;

Infrastructure

MO 15 Provide and enhance strategic and recreational pedestrian and cycling linkages and associated street lighting and cycle parking at buildings in community use, especially schools.

3. Policy



M016 Investigate the feasibility, subject to the requirements of the Habitats Directive, of enhancing the existing road network as necessary and reserving land and pursuing funding for new orbital/relief routes;

M017 Actively manage short term parking in and around the Market Square;

M018 Enhance the amenity of Mountrath and provide appropriate lighting to linkages between the riverside walk and the Main Street;

4

Mountrath Study & Analysis



4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



4.1 Urban Design SWOT

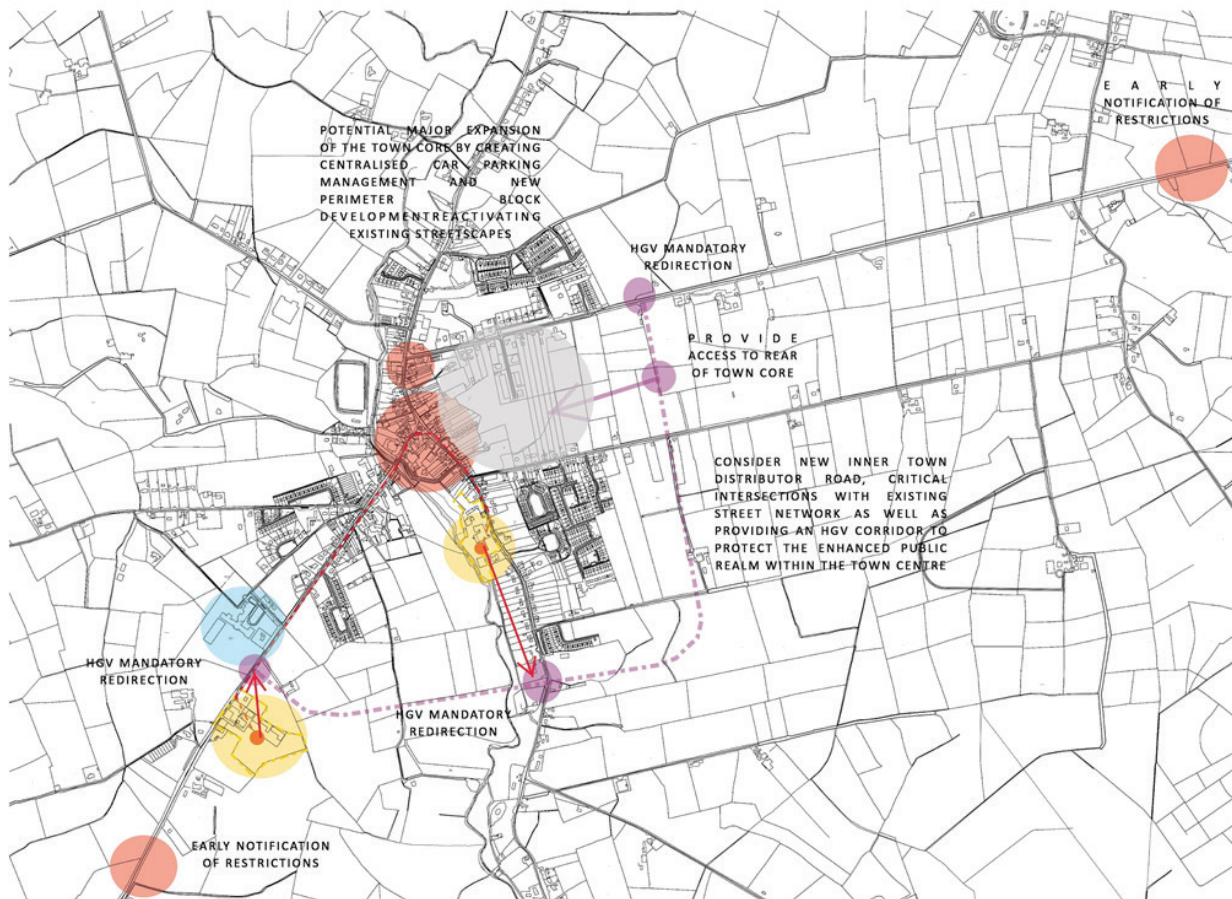


Figure 02 - SWOT Analysis

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



4.1 Urban Design SWOT

Strengths

Having walked the town and ascertained the viewed the community, the followings strengths of Mountrath were noted.

- Good permeability already exists, albeit these routes are not developed nor signalled adequately. There is a abundance of pre-existing connections throughout the town.
- There are active frontages on both sides of the main street. These includes a balanced mixed of uses, which include both existing and vacant commercial entities and residential properties.
- There are vehicular parking facilities located throughout the town.
- There is local employment throughout the town and forms part of an established location with a known positive reputation.
- There is an established community character as evident during the community engagement process. .
- Mountrath Town has a number of established and defined focal points and nodes which include but not limited to the 'Town Square', the Business and Community Activity Hub located at the former Bridgidine Convent - Bloom HQ and the Mountrath Amenity Park.
- There is an already existing infrastructural services network.
- The scale and layout of the existing built environment supports pedestrian exploration and discovery of the town.
- Good catchment areas adjacent to schools, employment and industry.

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



Figure 03 - Strengths

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



Weakness

- Reduced levels of footfall throughout the town due to the pedestrian intimidation by vehicular traffic.
- Roads throughout the town given priority over pedestrians, including vehicular conflicts and barriers. The result of which is traffic safety concerns.
- There is a lack of universal access throughout the town.
- There appears to be a lack of effective pedestrian signage to prioritise secondary areas.
- There are narrow and non-user friendly footpaths along the main arteries of the town. The existing restaurants and cafes do not have the potential to create outdoor dining areas/experiences.
- Poor active frontages to lane and passageway links.
- Business development curtailed by the physical impacts of a road dominant environment.
- The town appears to have a surface legibility confusion. In some cases, it is difficult to differentiate between footpath and road surfaces.
- A lack of coherent identity, compounded by uncoordinated street furniture, signage, lighting, security/safety fittings and information boards etc.
- Onstreet surface car parking is:
 1. Causing inconvenience to pedestrians,
 2. Restricting universal access mobility,
 3. Dominating the important first impression of the street
 4. Presents a randomness in terms of environmental management
 5. Unattractive and dominant when juxtaposed with the main nodal area
 6. Artificially constraining the potential for the area

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



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4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



their customers arrived by car and only 25% on foot. In fact only 32% arrived by car and 44% on foot. Bristol, UK, 2004 - survey by Sustrans found that a similar mis-perception existed.

A London study suggests that those who walk to stores spend more per week (£104) than those who drive (£73). Whilst also recording that pedestrians shopped more frequently.

Transport for London, 2004

Critical Mass, access, and connectivity..

- Shared surface design could greatly assist in forming an important gateway into the town and reinvigorating the existing permeability.
- One of the most pronounced urban barriers within the Town is the dominance of HGV's on the road network. The traffic management and flow rates have severed any chance of a human scale free flowing pedestrian integration. It is important to work with the relevant stakeholders, to establish a revised traffic management plan and possible revised road network in order to alleviate the pressures on the thoroughfare through the town. In doing so, this will invite more pedestrian footfall and generate more local business. This will also present an opportunity to take advantage of the existing town nodal point currently dominated by parking.

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



Figure 04 - Weakness

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



Threats

- Do nothing. The secondary area image reinforced and deterioration follows throughout.
- The vehicular/pedestrian conflict points could ultimately lead to serious consequences which could be detrimental to the community and town as a whole.
- The continued poor universal access will continue to have a negative impact on the town and will isolate members of the community.
- The parking as a continued justification for a road dominated environment will prevent development of the town and stifle any future redevelopment in the town and surroundings.
- The potential development of competing areas could overshadow and undermine the town further.
- Poor economic performances of the local businesses may make it difficult to secure funding for sustainable initiatives or attract new businesses to the town.
- Social and cultural barriers, such as resistance to change or lack of awareness about sustainable practices, may impede progress.

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



4.2 Community Survey Results

Adult & Youth Survey Results

The first step in the Mountrath community engagement process, which laid the foundation for future in-person engagement events, was an online survey for local adults and youth. The survey asked community members directly what they see as the features that make Mountrath unique, as well as what is missing and what they think has the potential to help the town grow and develop. The aim of the surveys was to improve our understanding of the perspective of Mountrath community members and identify the most pressing issues and opportunities to then build our engagement events around.

The more than 115 adult survey respondents identified with a wide range of organisations and businesses based in Mountrath, including (but not limited to):

Mountrath Development Association	Laois Handball	Mountrath Rambler Walking Group
Mountrath Tidy Towns	St Fintans GAA	Síol Foundation
Mountrath Youth Theatre	Mountrath Scout Group	Mountrath Community Forum
Mountrath Youth Creative Space	St Aengus FC	Kilnlane Residents Association
Bloom HQ	Arthritis Ireland Laois	Ballyfin Parish
Local businesses (incl. Phelan's Catering, pubs, barber shop)	Mountrath Community Alert	St Fintans BNS

Youth respondents hailed from the Mountrath Community School, Castletown School, Paddock School, Scoil Bhride and youth groups such as the Mountrath Youth Theatre.

{quick summary overview i.e. survey results show us that despite a m}

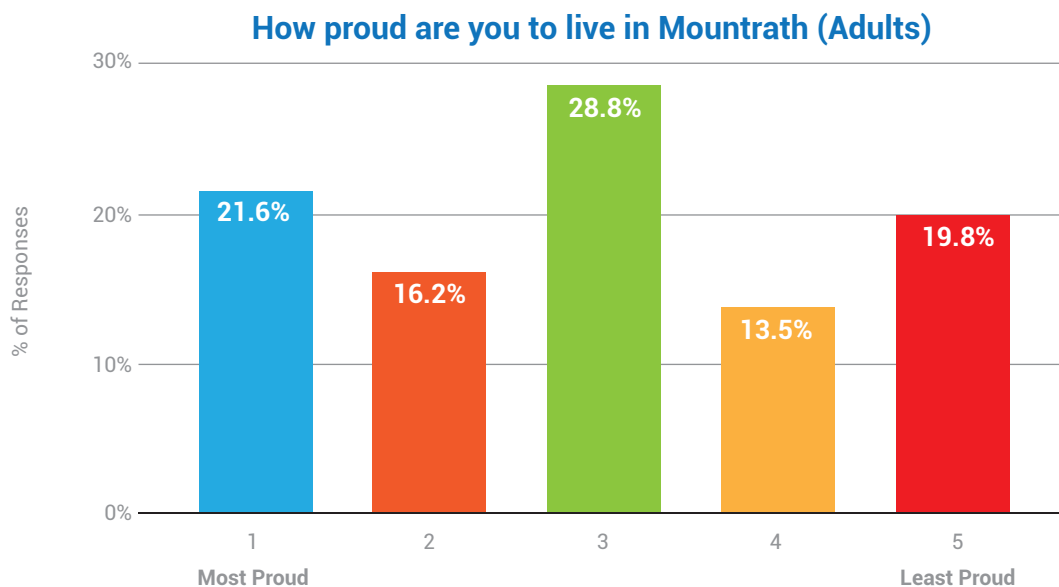
4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



Pride, Fame & Stories

To better understand the range of community attitudes toward and perspectives on Mountrath's history and unique features, adult and youth survey respondents were asked to rank their level of pride in living in Mountrath, as well as what they see as famous and hidden about the town. Additionally, respondents were asked for any stories about the town or its community that they would like to share.

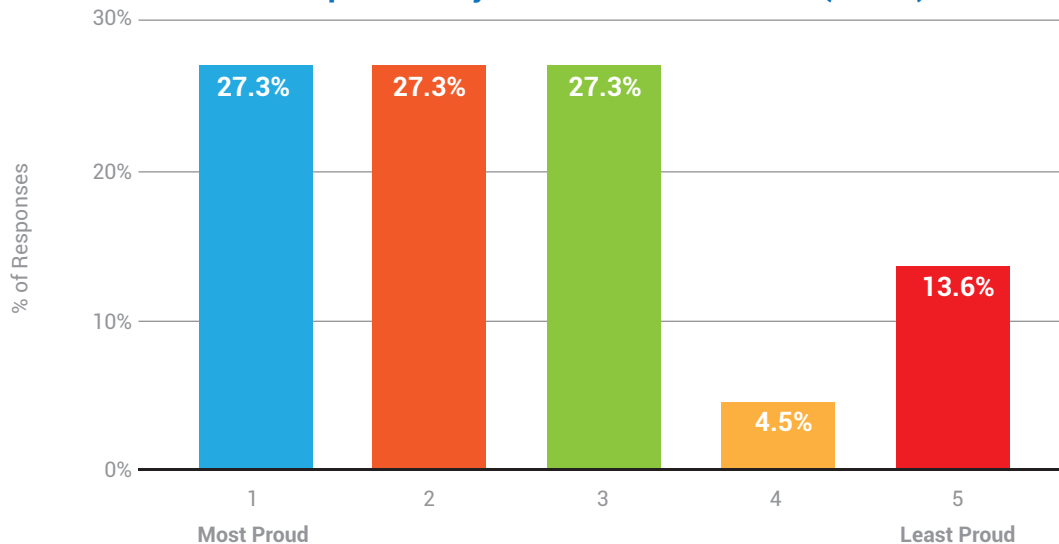
Respondent pride about living in Mountrath varied significantly among respondents, with a higher percentage of youth than adults expressing high levels of pride, and about 30% of both youth and adults responding with a 3 out of 5, demonstrating no strong feelings either way.



4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



How proud are you to live in Mountrath (Youth)



When asked what makes Mountrath famous, the nearly 100 adult and 30 youth responses highlighted a variety of themes across nature, local economy, sport and history, which are categorised by the most frequently referenced topics in the tables below.

What makes Mountrath famous? (Adults)	
Category	Common Topics
Nature	Gateway to Slieve Bloom Mountains; Whitehorse River; Amenity Park and River Walk
Sport	Handball (Phil Casey); Pride in Sport; Sport Facilities (St Fintan's GAA Grounds)
Economy	History of brewing & distilling (Whitehorse Whiskey); Sawmills; History as a market town; Modern economy/shops --> Bloom HQ, Sawmill; Eddie Phelan's, Bennett's Bar, others
Education & Religion	History of education - Bishop Delaney & the Brigidine Convent; Long history of border students
Quality of People	Friendliness; Pride of place; Community spirit
Location	Halfway point between Dublin & Limerick; Motorway toll bypass route
Famous People	News Anchor Claire Byrne; Handball World Champion Philip Casey
Modern Challenges	Lorries & Toll Bypassing; Dereliction

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



What makes Mountrath famous? (Youth)
Eddie Phelans
Amenity Park
Negative (nothing, boring)
Slieve Bloom Mountains
Location: Proximity to Portlaoise, Dublin-Limerick
Community Spirit, Friendliness - Tidy Towns
Education/Schools

Apart from what is more widely known about Mountrath, a question on the adult and youth surveys asked respondents to share what things in Mountrath are hidden that people may not know about. Responses again were wide ranging, with walks, nature features, historic buildings, and amenities not along the main street among the most frequently raised.

What hidden things are there in Mountrath that people don't know about? (Adult)	
Category	Referenced Topics
Walks	River Walk (some would like it extended to an old 'island walk'); Sli na Slainte walking track; Slieve Bloom Mountains (for hiking, cycling, nature walks); old overgrown roads (example: Clonin to Redcastle)
Old Convent	Sports facilities; Community centre; Christmas market
Historic Buildings	White Horse Distillery; RIC Barracks; Jacobean Chimney; Old Fever Hospital; Old Foundry Building
Gardens/Nature	Outdoor community garden and polytunnel; community orchard; wildlife area
Other	The Stepping Stones; Quaker Graveyard; St Fintan's Well; the Waterfall; the Kiln Lane Grotto; the Phil Casey Plaque; the old IRA Tunnels

Hidden places in Mountrath described among youth survey respondents include the River Walk; a variety of facilities, clubs, and spaces at Bloom HQ; the abandoned cinema; the forest/nature area behind the park; and an area in the new park behind a section of broken wall.

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



Adults and youth were also asked for their stories about Mountrath. A handful of youth respondents shared stories. Quotes from a selection of these are in the table below:

Do you have any stories you'd like to share about Mountrath, the community that lives there or its history? (Youth)

I don't really have stories. I have lots of friends in Mountrath. I love going to the tennis and basketball courts in Bloom HQ. I do karate and exercise classes sometimes.

Everyone knows each other. It's a lovely place but there are not a lot of things to do for the youth community. The most popular place to loiter is the Park and the only thing they do is sit on the swings, so it would be nice to have more places to be.

Being a part of Mountrath Youth Theatre is fun.

The adult survey responses included many stories of the rich history of Mountrath and its people -- a selection of which can be read in the table below.

Do you have any stories you'd like to share about Mountrath, the community that lives there or its history? (Adult)

I moved to Mountrath 12 years ago as a Dubliner and we raised a family here. I have to say that it is the most open and welcoming area having lived in other counties in Ireland before. The people are very friendly and proud. It is such a beautiful area for a newcomer with close access to rivers, mountains and nature.

I lately was informed that Pat Farrell of Patrick Street used to keep a horse in his yard and hay on the loft and every morning at 2am he would take the horse and cart to Kilbricken Railway Station to meet the mail train he had to put Nets out along the line as the train didn't stop instead it threw the mail off the side of the moving train. Thanks to Pat the town got its post up to Mountrath each day for delivery. To think what's now Mary McGraths beautiful home stored animals, reared a family and kept the community going.

The stories of my childhood and that formed the person I have become are all about Mountrath and the Slieve Blooms. I was lucky enough to be born into a family with a deep seated love and history for the area. We are losing the amazing history, crafts, skills and stories of this beautiful place.

I moved to Laois 29 years ago, I have found the community spirit amazing. The dedication of a few individuals (like Eddie Phelan, Sinead Cooper and James Kelly) is the making of the place. I mentioned some of the stories to Today FM and we won the Sound Town. I feel there is a big heart and a lot of compassion here. Well done to all.

The beat on the street was a brilliant day for the town and the white horse festival. We had great times in the town.

First world Handball Champion Phil Casey came from Mountrath.

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



It's a very old town (mid-17th century) and is actually very nicely laid out. There's a story of a former resident named Micheal Keogh, who apparently served on both sides of WW1, knew Roger Casement personally in New York, fought on the Texan frontier, and worked on the construction of the Panama Canal. Pretty impressive if it's all true.

...The BloomHQ Social Enterprise project has made a huge impact in the social development of the community of Mountrath, by providing hot desking, meeting room facilities, and community engagement programmes, we have filled a void that was missing in the town. But we have more to do, and we can only do that with the supports of other local community members and business owners ...

Memories of playing soccer in the Chapel yard between two walls. Hunting for apples in several orchards around the town. Going for illicit pints in John Duffy's pub. Dancing at a disco in St Fintan's Hall. Playing tennis in all whites at the Tennis Club. Playing Junior B hurling for Mountrath...and the list goes on.

I was born & reared 3 miles from Mountrath in the 40's. The town had a cinema, a dance hall, 2 hotels, 5 Draper shops, 2 banks, a fair day every month and loads of shops, shoes, bicycle shops. The foundry was in the town and there was huge availability of buses.

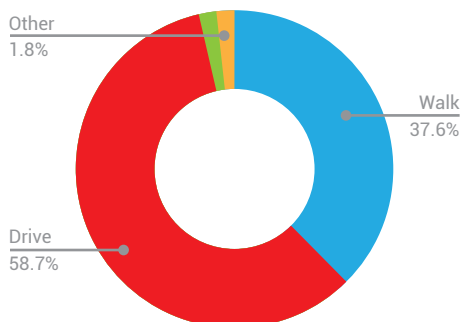
Mountrath was a striving town in its time with a lot of pubs but only a handful now. Mountrath has a mix of different communities in our town.

There are tunnels under the town which the IRA used during the war for independence. Mrs Tobin was carrying two two pales of milk and the black and tan shot them and spilt the milk on the road.

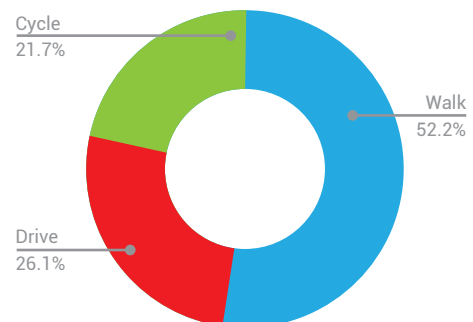
Mobility, Active Transport & Traffic

When asked how respondents move around Mountrath, a majority 58.7% of adults selected that they drive, with a significant 37.6% of adult respondents typically walking around the town. The majority of youth respondents, at 52.2%, walk around town, with about 21.7% cycling as their main mode of transport.

How do you move around Mountrath (Adults)



How do you move around Mountrath (Youth)



4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



When asked “what might help you walk or cycle more in your area”, answers ranged in focus from infrastructure like walkways and footpaths, to reductions in vehicle traffic, to improvements to the town centre that would make it a destination and pleasant place in which to walk.

Given the prominence of the issue of large numbers of lorries and cars driving through Mountrath to avoid the motorway toll, a question on the adult survey specifically asked community members for their views on the issue. Although the vast majority recognised the through traffic as a difficult challenge for the town, there is far from unanimity among the roughly 100 respondents.

Just over half of open-ended responses referred to the issue in strong terms as a fundamental problem that needs to be stopped through interventions like a ban on non-delivering lorries or a ring road around the town. Among the reasons raised was the detrimental impact on the safety of children, the quality of the roads, the levels of noise pollution and the ability to walk and cycle on the roads.

However, a significant minority of respondents saw the level of through traffic as either as necessary evil or even a benefit for the town’s economy, with a view that local businesses rely on the visitors. Other respondents took the view that if the problem is unlikely to change, supporting infrastructure should at least be put in place to allow the town to benefit from it (i.e. an improved parking regime).

Amenities & Ideas for Growth

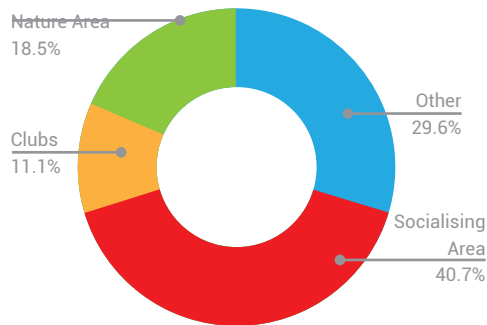
Finally, adults and youth were asked a series of questions in the survey to understand what types of amenities or facilities they feel are missing in Mountrath, and what they see are crucial to the town and town centre growing and developing.

When given a multiple choice question asking what amenity/facility type they like that they don’t find in Mountrath, the plurality of both youth (45.5%) and adults (40.7%) chose *Socialising Area* above *Nature Area*, *Clubs* or *Other*.

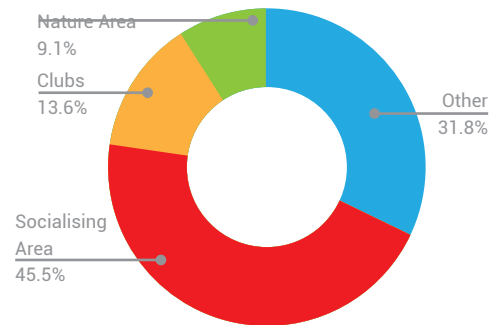
4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



What amenities/facilities do you like to use that are not in Mountrath (Adults)



What amenities/facilities do you like to use that are not in Mountrath (Youth)



An open ended question then allowed participants to specify what they see as missing for the community in Mountrath. Adult responses ranged in content from specific shop and service types, to activities for youth and elderly, to economic industry, transportation infrastructure and the less physical, such as community cohesiveness and unity of direction. The table below summarises the most frequently referenced topics.

What is missing for the community in Mountrath? (Adults)	
Category	Topic
Services or Amenities	Childcare (creche & after school); health/fitness provision; proper community centre; swimming pool; increased Garda presence; improved parking provision
Shop Type	Clothes store; bank; small hotel; tourist office; grocery (lidl/aldi); museum; cafe/restaurant options
Youth Activities	Local clubs/sport (beyond GAA); skate park; cinema; music lessons; graffiti wall
Elderly Services/Activities	Health services and social activities, like a 'silver surfer cafe' and dance hall
Events	Festival; art exhibitions
Economy	Industry; employment opportunities; housing retrofit/improvements
Transport	Direct bus to dublin/cork/portlaoise; cycleways (in town/to Slieve Bloom Mts/to Portlaoise)
Attitude	Pride of place; community cohesiveness; spirit; get over 'bypassed-mentality'; shared identity; united approach
Redevelopment	Coordination/one voice/unity; anti-dereliction; a proper town redevelopment plan; high street upgrades; more active Council intervention in town centre; painting of buildings; positive brand to build town identity around; tourism plan
Built/Natural Environment	Community gardens; public space improvements; public realm; cycleways (as above)

The responses from youth tended to focus on specific types of amenities, with reference to amenities like arcades, cinemas, skateparks, and a leisure centre/pool. Road resurfacing and rain coverage were also highlighted.

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



4.3 Engagement Events Results

Three community engagement events were held in Mountrath on August 17th, with opportunities for community members to share their thoughts on the status and direction of Mountrath town and its development through the formats of afternoon 'drop-in' hours, an early evening Youth Workshop or an Adult Workshop in the later evening hours.

Each engagement event utilised large maps and a 'rose, bud and thorn' discussion exercise aimed at unpacking the positive, negative and promising features in Mountrath in category areas such as:

- Roads and Paths
- Buildings and Outdoor Spaces
- Amenities and Attractions
- Other topics



4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



Strengths

Participants across the events highlighted natural assets and green spaces, community institutions and aspects of the local economic development as strengths of Mountrath.

- The **Slieve Bloom Mountains and River Mountrath** were highlighted as assets to the town that provide attractive views, recreational opportunities, and local identity. Walking paths and cycling were discussed as strengths of both places with the opportunity to expand.
- The **Mountrath Amenity Park**, its foliage and playground was also seen as a strength of the area, although challenges with anti-social behaviour and vandalism in the park were highlighted by some participants.
- **Community institutions**, such as the St Fintan's GAA and St Aengus FC, as well as the youth theatre group were also highlighted by participants as strengths of the area, contributing to activities for youth and maintaining local community spirit.
- The **former Brigidine convent** and its emerging business and community spaces, which are home to youth activities, Bloom HQ co-working spaces, and regular public markets, were raised by several participants as examples of positive developments in the town. Other economic development strengths, such as the Metac training facility and Coolrain Sawmills were raised.
- The general **friendly and communal nature of people** in the area was discussed by multiple attendees, who highlighted the many residents committed to local voluntary work and the prevalence of interest in and ideas for improving the town among community members.

Similar in view to the local adults, attendees of the youth workshop highlighted the Amenity Park, local drama group, a street art painting and certain shops, like Aidan Byrne's, as positive features of the town.

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



Weaknesses

The weaknesses facing Mountrath identified by attendees stretch across categories such as traffic and transportation challenges, dereliction and lacking facilities and activities for teenagers, as well as for the elderly and visitors to Mountrath.

- As referenced in the survey results above, **heavy traffic** of HGVs and other vehicles through the town are raised as a core challenge to the town. Dangerous speeds and pollution of these vehicles is seen by many as making walking and cycling less safe, especially given the **lack of cycle lanes and limited or non-existent pedestrian paths**, which is especially prevalent, for example, on the Castletown Road and to access the soccer club. Certain points in the town centre road are seen as particularly dangerous for the speeds at which vehicles blindly travel around them.
- Related to traffic is the difficulty of **limited parking provision**, which is cited by many as a problem both in the market square and at the schools for pick up and drop off times. A problem of individuals leaving their cars all day was raised by some as limiting the convenience of finding parking to visit shops. Electric vehicle charging points are also non-existent in the town.
- **Public transport is described as infrequent**, especially on the weekends, with local destinations such as the Slieve Bloom mountains completely inaccessible without a lift. The town has no bus shelters, making infrequent timetables a more difficult issue in bad weather.
- **Dereliction in the town centre** and its impact on the overall sense of life and colour were raised by many attendees. One particular site in the heart of the Market Square that has been vacant for decades draws the ire of many participants. Youth participants seemed particularly perceptive of a feeling of dullness that results from closed businesses and derelict sites in town. The need for a 'lick of paint' was a repeated refrain among attendees.
- **A shortage of activities for local youth and teenagers** was raised repeatedly. For those uninterested in sport, hang out venues safely accessible by foot and bicycle appear limited, with no local cinema or skate park, for example. Some adults feared that a lack of activity had led some teenagers toward vandalism and anti-social behaviour, in the Amenity Park, for example.

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



- **Deficient facilities and activities for the local elderly** was also highlighted, with Mountrath lacking a local day centre, nursing home, primary care centre and a decline in activities catering to older people (such as Bingo clubs).
- Although the River Mountrath is broadly seen as a strength of the town, the **overgrowth along the river, need for dredging and risk of flooding** were negative features that were discussed by attendees.
- **A relatively high number of Mountrath residents living in poverty or with a disability**, as well as the lack of disadvantaged families involved in community organisations and activities was seen as a challenge for the town. As is the inability or lack of confidence to advocate and voice opinions among community members without literacy skills.
- **Lacking tourism infrastructure**, such as a small scale hotel/accommodation and information point, is also seen as a limitation on the ability of tourism to grow in Mountrath.
- Certain shop types, such as **affordable supermarkets, clothing stores and (in the near future) a bank are missing from Mountrath**, but considered important amenities.

Opportunities

Attendees at the drop-in, youth and adult workshops identified a variety of opportunities for Mountrath's future, ranging across topics like mobility and recreation improvements, strategic sites for development, areas for public realm improvements, and specific activities and amenities for local youth and elderly residents.

- The need and opportunity for **mobility and recreation improvements** was highlighted by attendees across the events. Suggestions included establishing walking trails along older country roads, cycle lanes and paths connecting amenities within the town and between the town and nearby attractions. Improving links to the Slieve Bloom Mountains and cleaning up and extending the walking area by the river were also seen as significant opportunities.

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



- Several **specific derelict & strategic sites** were identified as major locations for potential use and transformation. Most notably the Market Square Site was raised as a potential for a public plaza or parking area, while the Bank of Ireland building was identified for its potential for accommodation. Another site in disuse which attendees expressed desires to renew was the large plot previously known as the Cattle Mart.
- Developing a **brand identity to represent Mountrath and its vision** was discussed, with the potential to provide a catalyst and platform for improving internal and external communications. On a similar topic, local communication channels such as a 'What's on in Mountrath' social media page was also raised as an opportunity with potential.
- **Public realm improvements** for public social spaces were favourable opportunities for community members. Improvements including street furniture for outdoor socialising, rain coverings and shelters to eliminate weather restrictions, landscaping and general visual enhancements of shop fronts with paint & colour.
- Attendees felt there was potential for **improved social and care infrastructure for specific segments of the community** including young families, young people and elderly members; suggestions including a creche, more after school activities and elderly day centres.
- As stated above, there were many **opportunities and ideas suggested for students and youths in the town**, especially activity based. Youth Activities and facilities including a possible youth cafe, a handball court (in relation to the history of Phil Casey), a public square hang out space, and a hang out space made from a semi-derelict site. Other opportunities arising from nearby towns included an arcade, a cinema and pool amenities.
- **Better utilising and telling of the story of Mountrath's rich history** was also noted by several attendees, with the potential for commemorations, history walks & history museums.

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



4.4 Separate Submissions

The engagement team also received a handful of separate submissions of input from community members and others who were unable to attend the in-person engagement events.

These submissions included input from a Laois County Council officer, the Office of Senator Pippa Hackett (Minister of State for Land Use and Biodiversity) and participants of Mountrath Amalgamated CEP CLG.

Suggestions from these submissions include:

- Pursue a Town Centre First planning approach;
- Promote active travel improvements (to lower car dependency, reduce GHG emissions, improve air quality and quality of life);
- Incorporate biodiversity conservation in planning;
- Encourage derelict building owners to paint and repair (etc) their buildings;
- Pursue sweeping and litter picking outside of premises by business owners;
- Clean up Darcy's Lane (remove caravan, cut huge, remove wood, etc.);
- Address dog fouling;
- Move seating area across from Girls National School to the bottom of Tom's Lane (to reduce antisocial behaviour in view of school children and GAA);
- Turn the flowerbed at the roundabout into a paved seating area;
- Plant Cherry blossom trees along streets;
- Place a Christmas tree outside of Purcells;
- Develop the cycle path along the riverbank -- utilise 3 unutilised bridges;
- Clean and dredge the river;
- Update and open public toilets;
- Paint houses of OAPs with help of CE participants (if paint is supplied);
- Reduce any fees and expand access to youth amenities and clubs;

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



- Retain dedicated youth space, perhaps develop the old cinema;
- Celebrate creative opportunities for youth in addition to athletics;
- Increase overall colour in the town (i.e. Dingle and Kinsale);
- Improve river bridge to allow views down to the river;
- Increase outdoor gathering space in town;
- Create a designated youth service in the town, especially catering to the disadvantaged;
- Improve relations and communication between the County Council and community groups around topics of community development;
- Establish a dedicated building that older people feel comfortable in;
- Create a women's shed or hen house;
- Encourage a collaborative and not divisive ethos to local community development.

4. Mountrath Study & Analysis



4.5 Key Issues Identified

Connect the Dots, urbanARQ Ltd. and RealSim designed the Re-Imagine Mountrath public consultation process for Mountrath Town Strategy Group with the goal of delivering an engaging and inclusive process that would produce a shared vision for the future development of Mountrath Town that is grounded in the interests and expertise of the local community, to be utilised by local residents, community groups, businesses, and policy makers.

In spite of the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, the consultation process engaged with hundreds of Mountrath residents through a programme of surveys and events for local adults and youth.

The surveys collected local stories and perspectives on what makes the town unique; measured local activity and opinion relating to transportation challenges; and gathered local ideas for improvements and directions for future growth of the Town. The in-person events provided an opportunity to build on the survey findings by meeting face to face (at social distance) to discuss local strengths, weaknesses and opportunities with the help of visual aids, such as physical and digital maps

Across formats, Mountrath's strengths in nature, history, sport, and an active and committed community were raised (among others), as detailed above. Challenges that were frequently referenced include areas of dereliction, lacking social facilities for youth and elderly, as well as limited transportation infrastructure and the pervasive impact of HGV traffic through the town. Opportunities were identified, in developing the use of natural assets, active transport and recreation infrastructure, public realm improvements, key regeneration sites, and creating a local brand identity to represent the town's vision.

5

Response



5. Response



5.1 Overview

It is widely recognised that a road-dominated town layout can negatively impact the liveability, sustainability, and safety of a place. It can discourage walking and cycling, increase pollution and contribute to undermining social interaction and community cohesion.

Effective urban design can have numerous benefits, including improving the quality of life for the community, enhancing public health and promoting environmental sustainability. A well-designed town/city can also attract tourists, businesses, and investment, leading to economic growth and job creation.

To achieve these goals, the surveys and community engagement undertaken can inform the local climate, topography and culture, as well as the needs and preferences of local community and relevant stakeholders. In extracting and relating to the surveys undertaken, in short, priority will be given to the needs of pedestrians, cyclists, and the general public.

Overall, the outcome of the research is complex and challenging, but it is essential for creating a thriving and sustainable Mountrath Town.

In extracting and relating to the surveys undertaken, in short, priority will be given to the needs of pedestrians, cyclists, and the general public.

5. Lot 1 Urban Design



5.2 Lot 1

The community engagement surveys was a rather critical element and served a driver to the this Mountrath Sustainable Community Plan. The result of which is a few important adjustments and amendments as highlighted below:

Mobility and Recreation improvements

In trying to pedestrianise the town, compensatory walking rails, cycle lanes and paths connecting amenities should be introduced. Once pedestrianisation is encouraged, it will transform the town to make it more warm and inviting. The increase in footfall will have a direct impact on the local businesses positively.

Transformation and Improvement

Mountrath Town is littered with historic buildings throughout. Sadly, upon conducting our research, there are a number of buildings that have fallen into disrepair for various reasons. One of which is the old Cattle Mart which ceased operations within the last number of years. The transformation of these existing disused building has the potential to add value to the town and bring life back into these once thriving institutions. Additionally, the public realm improvements, which might include the addition of street furniture and renovated shop fronts, will have a positive impact on the street scape and creating a more welcoming environment.

Care Infrastructure

The primary data suggests that the town is lacking in care facilities for parents of babies and youth as well as care facilities for the elderly. These services are vital when trying to change the landscape and attract the right people to the town. As will be demonstrated in Lot 2, the proposed Youth Centre for the town will go, in some way, to upgrading the limited facilities within the town.

Amenity Space

The recreation of the Town Square will seek to create a draw to the town as it was previously with the Mart. This could potentially be a space for the youth to convene and hang out. Additionally, the 'Philip Casey Handball Alley' is proposed as part of the youth amenities for the town.



The centre piece of the redevelopment revolves around the proposed new town square. The public consultation response directly informed the need for a focal point and town square that could potentially have a positive impact over the medium to long term.

At present, the location chosen is dominated by a sea of parking with a token focal point town square post located on a central island. In trying to respond to the regeneration, a number of design iterations were undertaken in order to prepare a concept master plan.

Vehicular In trying to pedestrianise the town, compensatory walking rails, cycle lanes and paths connecting amenities should be introduced. Once pedestrianisation is encouraged, it will transform the town to make it more warm and inviting. The increase in footfall will have a direct impact on the local businesses positively.

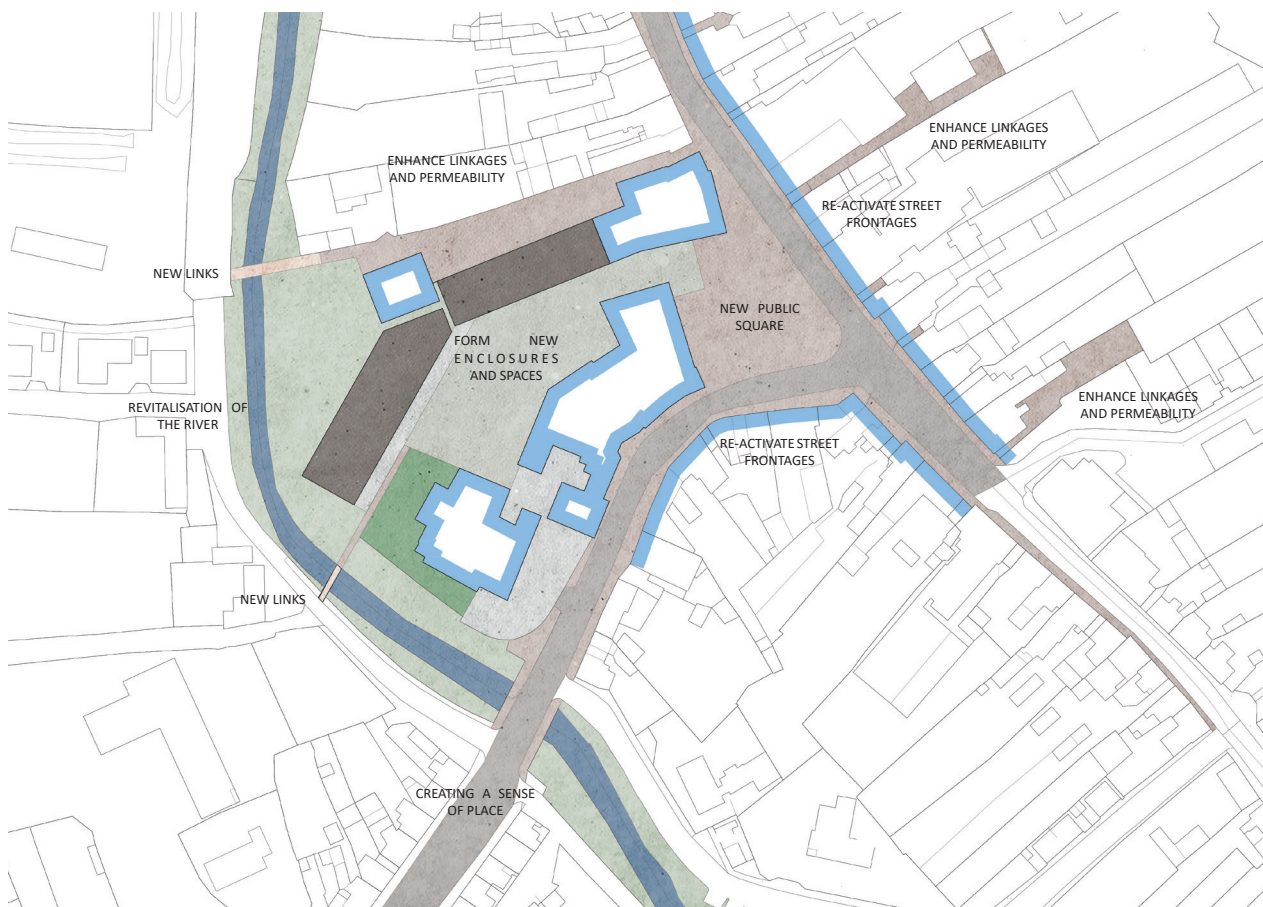


Figure 05 - Urban Design Proposal



Infrastructure Response

The design proposed in relation to the town square addresses a number of concerns raised by the community. Two critical items that appeared to be constant was the poor vehicular road network conditions and the lack of pedestrian infrastructure. The urban fabric interventions contribute to town square proposal positively. The addressing the road element, it give rise to addressing the pedestrian flow automatically.

The design proposal for the new square not only created a centrally located town amenity space, but also an area that members of the community can congregate and meet as a social hub. The new urban grain aims to provide a more safe environment by creating a higher footfall on the street and the local businesses.

Insofar as the roads, there were a number of avenues for which we used to tackle the issues raised. The roads widths were made narrower to accommodate for a more pedestrian friendly environment. Secondary traffic calming measures include the introduction of two way yielding and a change in the road profile to promote slower speeds.

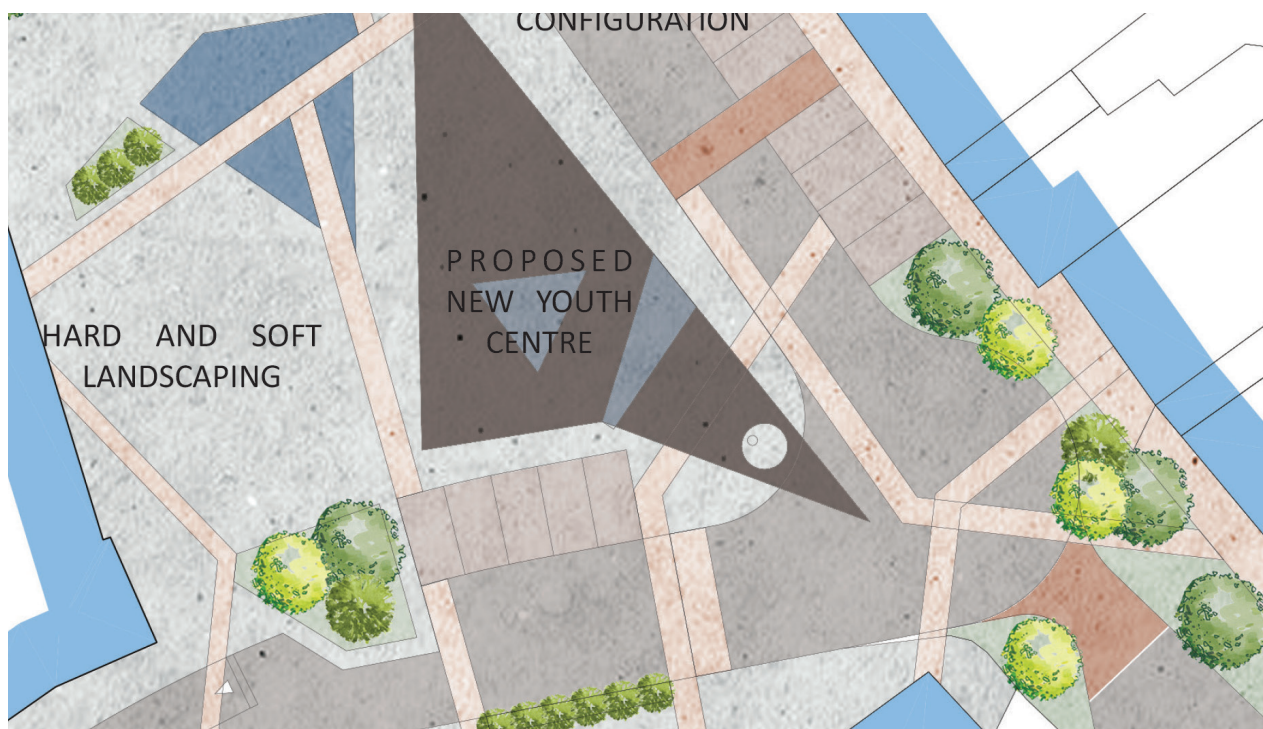


Figure 06 - Hierarchy of shared surfaces.



Urban Fabric and Town Square Regeneration

- Creation of new linkages to nodal points.
- Reactivate street frontages to encourage pedestrian footfall. .
- Realisation of a new Public square for the community at large.
- Formation of new public enclosures.
- Enhance existing permeable links and the creation of new.
- Traffic calming measure to encourage pedestrian movement and limit vehicular thoroughfare.
- Creation of a public square – potential to include the Youth Centre.
- Design of hard and soft landscaping to encourage footfall to the benefit of the community and surrounding businesses.
- Use of shared surfaces to reduce intimidation and soften the context.





5. Lot 2 Youth Centre



5.3 Lot 2



Figure 07 - Hierarchy of shared surfaces.

The location proposed has come about after a series of walk-abouts through the town, feedback from the community, youth surveys and assessments undertaken by ourselves.

The proposed Youth Centre is located within an area that is easily accessible from anywhere in the town. The location of the center adds to the community and creates a space for the youth of Mountrath to congregate. The design also creates further linkages over the river to the GAA club,

5. SWOT Analysis - Youth Centre



5.4 Youth Centre SWOT

Strengths

Having walked the town and ascertained the viewed the community, the followings strengths of Mountrath were noted.

- Good permeability already exists with the town, albeit these routes are not fully developed nor signalled adequately.
- The creation of a focal point in close proximity to the town.
- Linkage between the town square, the River Mountrath and GAA Club.
- Centrally located and represents a good catchment area..
- There is an established community character as evident during the community engagement process. .
- Scale and layout of built environment supports pedestrian exploration and discovery.



Weakness

- Reduced levels of foot fall due to access and vehicular intimidation. Creation of a focal point in close proximity to the town.
- Vehicular conflicts and barriers and Traffic safety concerns
- Landownership
- Absence of a nodal point or magnet.
- A lack of coherent identity, compounded by uncoordinated street furniture, signage, lighting, security/safety fittings and information boards etc.
- Poor strength of main areas creating a secondary perception.



Opportunities

- Reinvigoration of the town by attracting the community as a whole.
- Create positive interaction and involvement by the youth.
- The introduction of shared surface treatments would allow for time managed pedestrian priority. This coupled with improved way-finding information and the development of the youth centre could have a positive impact on footfall into the secondary areas.
- Create a safe and welcoming environment where the youth of the town can congregate, socialise and interact with one and other.



Threats

- Youth continue to have no space that they can call their own to socialise and interact.
- Social and economic deterioration continues.
- Vehicular/pedestrian conflict points could ultimately lead to serious consequences.
- Development of competing neighbouring areas
- Parking and heavy vehicular traffic as a continued justification for a roads dominant environment will drive out any youth involvement in the town.

6

Appendix



6. Appendix - RealSim



Geographical Context

Town Evolution and Historical Context

Mapping Mountrath

New Town Information Website

Asset Mapping

Town Centre Health Check

The 3D 'Digital Twin' Town Model

Incorporating Community Feedback and Architectural Team Vision into the Town Model

APPENDIX I

Geographical Context

The county of Laois is often described as the only county in Ireland which doesn't touch a county which touches the sea. If this was a measure of centrality, it could be described as Ireland's most inland county.

Mountrath is relatively central within this most inland of counties and is in fact equidistant to the main cities of Dublin and Limerick, (96.5km each way). It could therefore be claimed that Mountrath is one of the most central towns in Ireland.

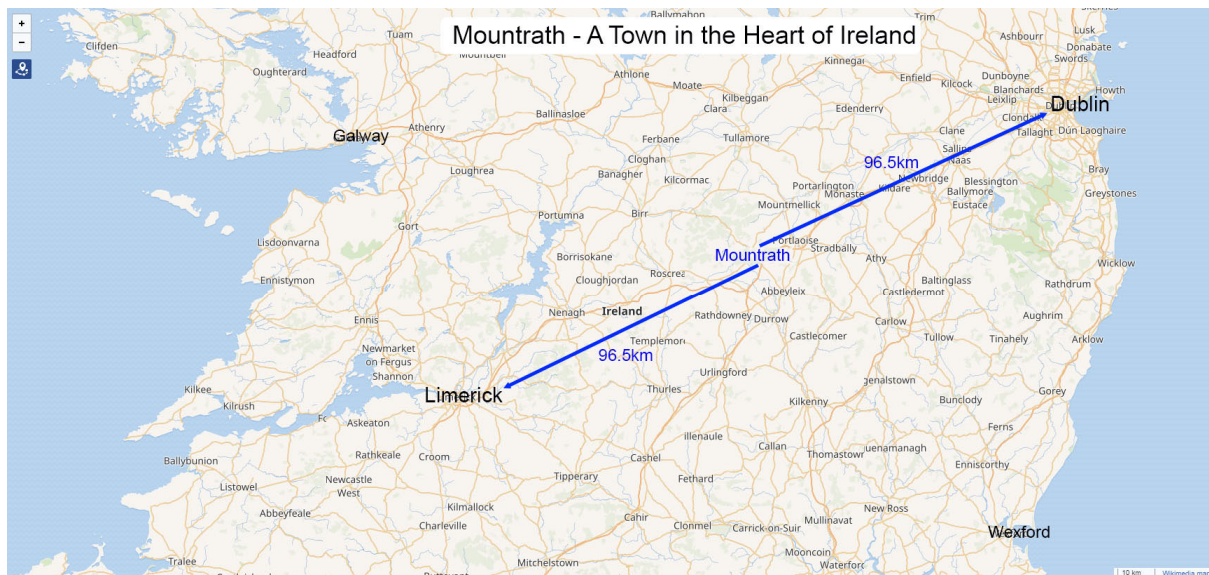


Figure 1: Mountrath's central location as a half way point between Dublin and Limerick.

Town Evolution and Historical Context

The Irish name for Mountrath, Moin Ratha, meaning the Rath in the bog gives an indication to the areas long standing habitation. With reference to the satellite image in Figure 2, the town is surrounded by pockets of brown bogland. It is this bogland containing rich iron pans, combined with the extensive woodland that existed in the 16th and 17th centuries, that the Cootes established a vibrant iron ore smelting industry, establishing Mountrath as an industrial hub from the 16th to 19th century. The Iron Mill at Dysartbeagh is marked on one of the earliest known maps of Mountrath, a 17th century parish map (Figure 3). The historical maps in this report are borrowed from Arnold Horners excellent collection of historical maps in his book, "Mapping Laois, from the 16th to the 21st century.

In his 1837 Topographical Dictionary of Ireland entry for Mountrath, Samuel Lewis states that;

"an extensive factory for spinning and weaving cotton is carried on by Mr. Greenham, who employs 150 persons in the spinning mills, and about 500 in weaving calicoes at their own houses; the average quantity manufactured is from 200 to 250 pieces weekly. Stuff-weaving is also carried on extensively; there is a large brewery and malting establishment, and an extensive oil mill; and the inhabitants carry on a very extensive country trade."

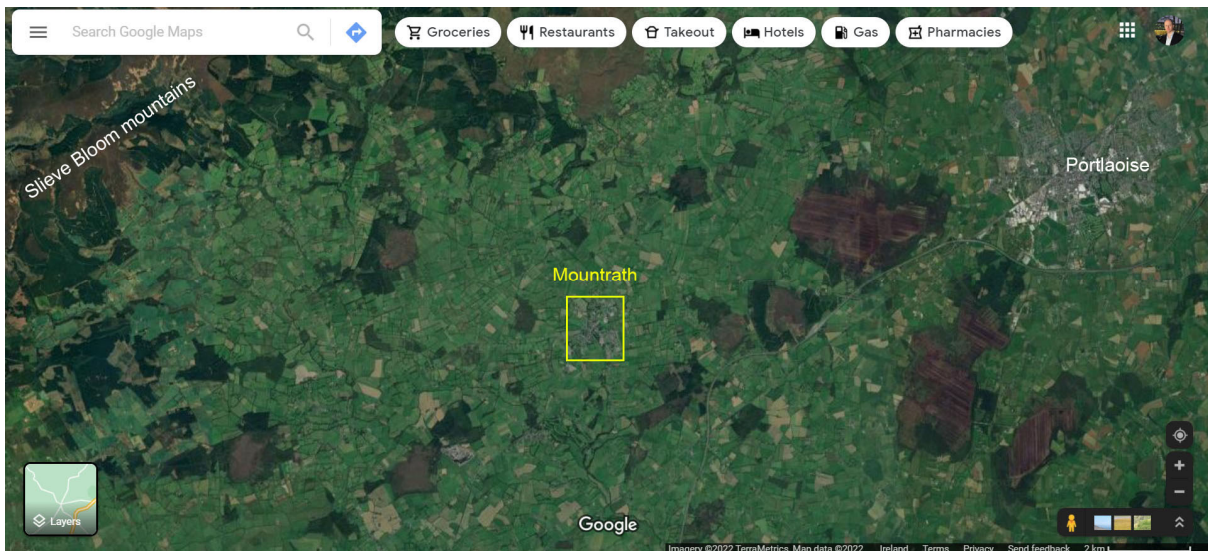


Figure 2: Google Maps satellite image showing the present day bogs that surround the town.

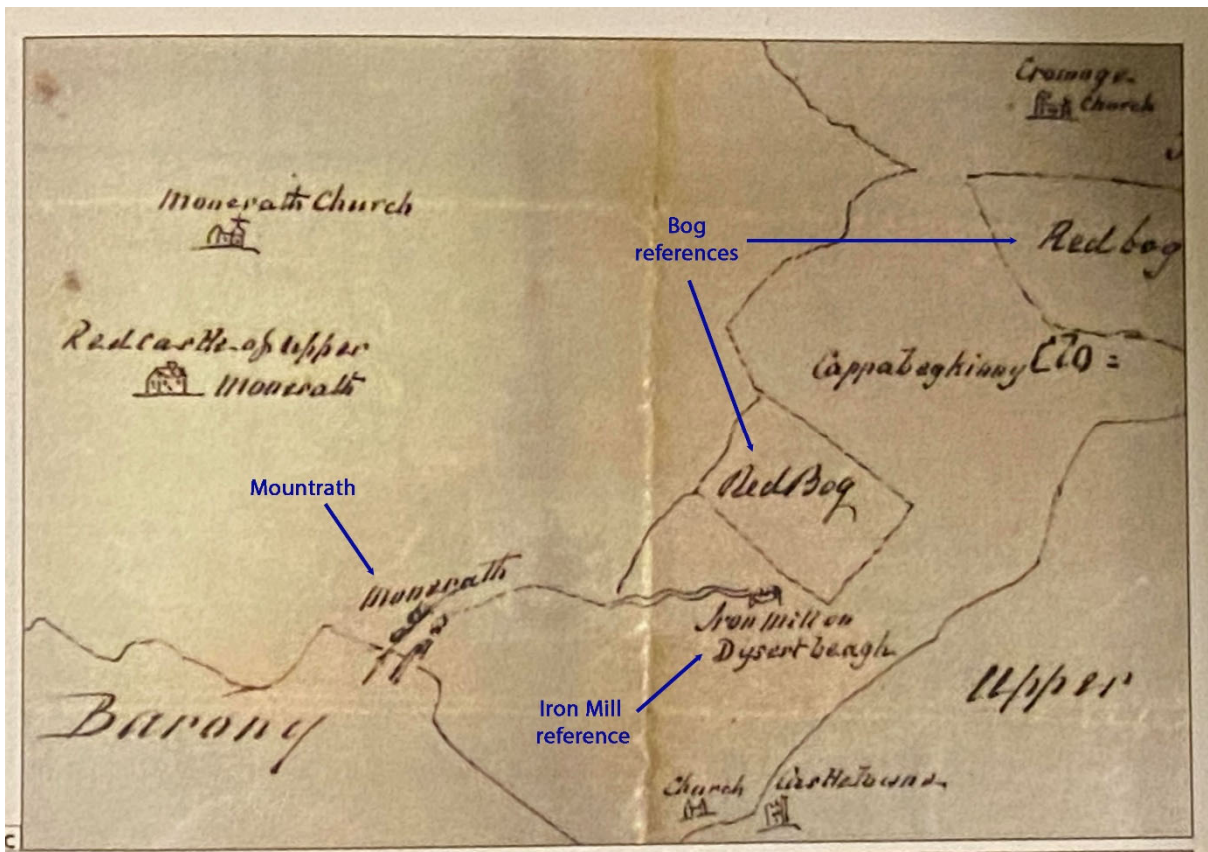


Figure 3: A 17th century parish map, originally stored in the Quit Rent Office and now in the National Archives of Ireland. The Iron Mill at Dysertbeagh and the location of nearby bogs are clearly indicated. The bridge at Mountrath over the Whitehorse river is also clearly marked.

In the beginning of the 17th century, the lands around Mountrath became the property of Charles Coote. And he is attributed to laying the foundations of the present day town. In 1628 Coote obtained for the inhabitants a grant of two weekly markets and two fairs, and established a very extensive linen and fustian industry.

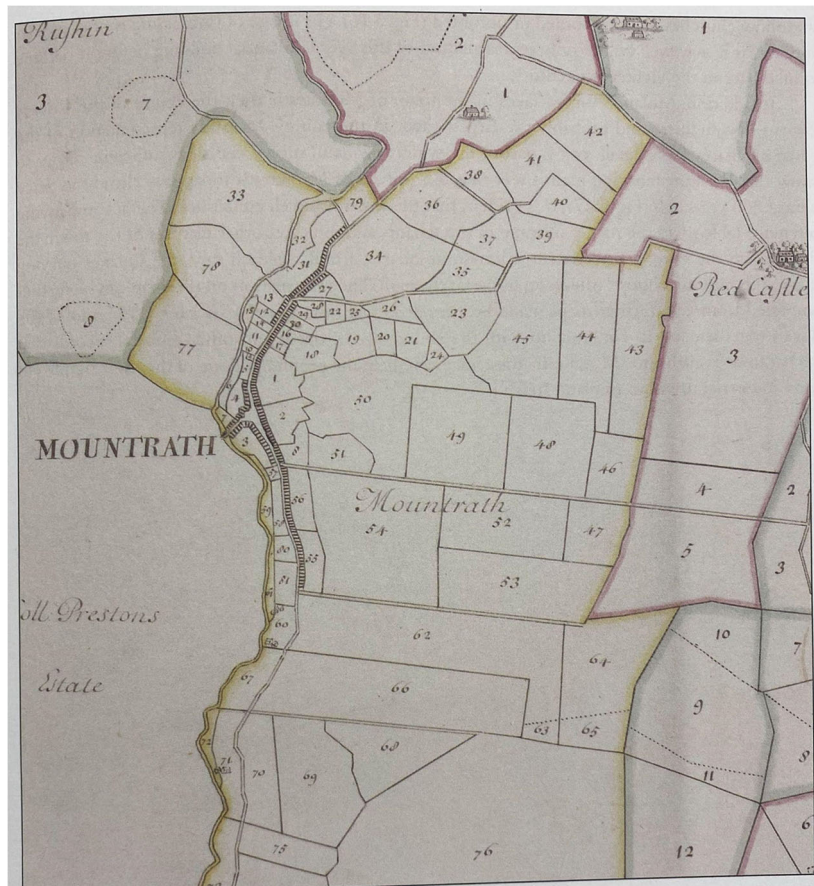


Figure 4: The first indication of the town square appears in Thomas Molands 1730 map.

The first indication of the town square appears in Thomas Molands 1730 map, the same year that Francis Bindon designed the Market House. The first Map the Market House appears in is the 1815 Thomas Logan & Son map of the town (Figure 5).

By the mid 19th century, the main streets of the town have been well established (see Valuation Office Map Figure 6).



Figure 7: Market Square house as captured in a 1912 photo of the town square.

Mapping Mountrath

Before any proposals can be made as to potential interventions and regeneration initiatives to help revive the town, we must first carry out a detailed mapping exercise to understand the town's current buildings, functions, and general activity.

To aid this exercise we employed the latest advances in 2D and 3D digital mapping integrated with available database information on buildings activity, and augmented with street level mapping and verification.

Although Mountrath is not (yet) a member of the Heritage Councils Collaborative Town Centre Health Check programme (CCTCHC), we endeavored to follow their asset mapping methodology. This allowed us to make informative comparisons between Mountrath and other towns which have had similar asset mapping exercises carried out. More information on the CCTCHC programme can be found on their website, <https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/projects/town-centre-health-check-programme>.

New Town Information Website

<http://mountrath.realsim.ie/>



Figure 8: The home page to the new town information website which contains links to the Open StreetMap asset mapping page (Figure 9) and the 3d Town model (Figure 13).

Asset Mapping

For this exercise we acquired the latest Geodirectory information from Laois County Council (Q1 2021 at the time of this exercise). Geodirectory combines information from An Post and Ordnance Survey Ireland on building activity. The map with overlaid geodirectory data is available on the following weblink and through the Street Map tab on the web link above;

<http://mountrath.realsim.ie/Map>

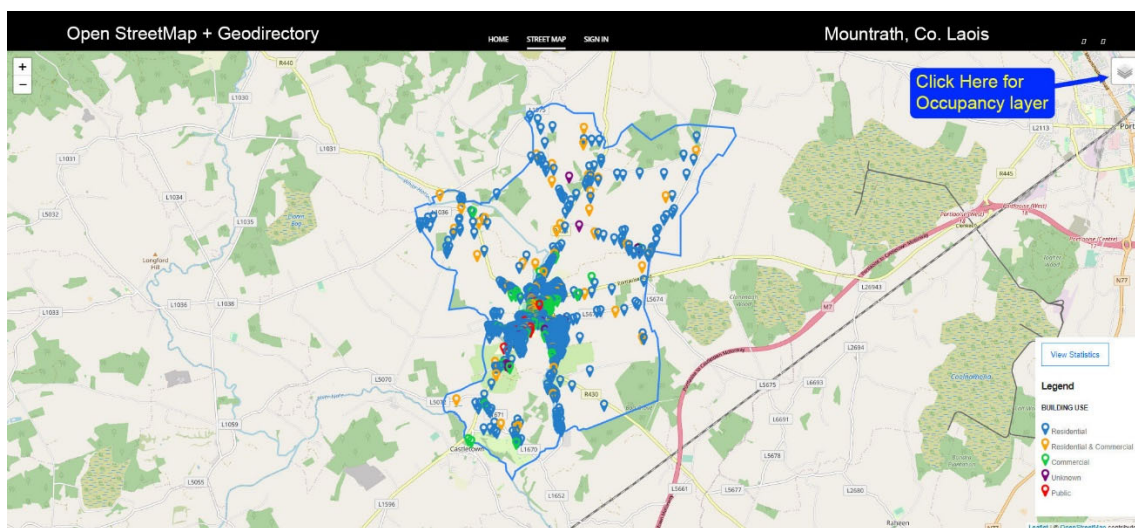


Figure 9: 2021 Geodirectory data overlaid on top of Open StreetMap.

The latest population census for Mountrath (2016) shows there were 1772 people living in the town. The 2022 figures for the town have not yet been released but with an average 8% population increase across the country, we can now assume that this figure is close to 2000 people.

MOUNTRATH BUILDING USAGE STATISTICS	
Total Buildings	1142
Commercial Buildings	61
Residential Buildings	971
Unknown Usage Buildings	13
Commercial & Residential Buildings	86
Vacant Buildings	73
Residential Occupied/Commercial Vacant Buildings	6
Residential Vacant/Commercial Occupied Buildings	0

Table 1: Statistical breakdown of building use for all 11

Table 1 shows the total number of buildings within the town of Mountrath as indicated by the blue boundary polygon in Figure 9. As a percentage of the overall town buildings, the vacancy rate of 6% is quite low but as we will see, these buildings are largely concentrated in the centre of the town which indicates a poor level of commercial and residential activity associated with the town centre (Figure 10).

Town Centre Health Check

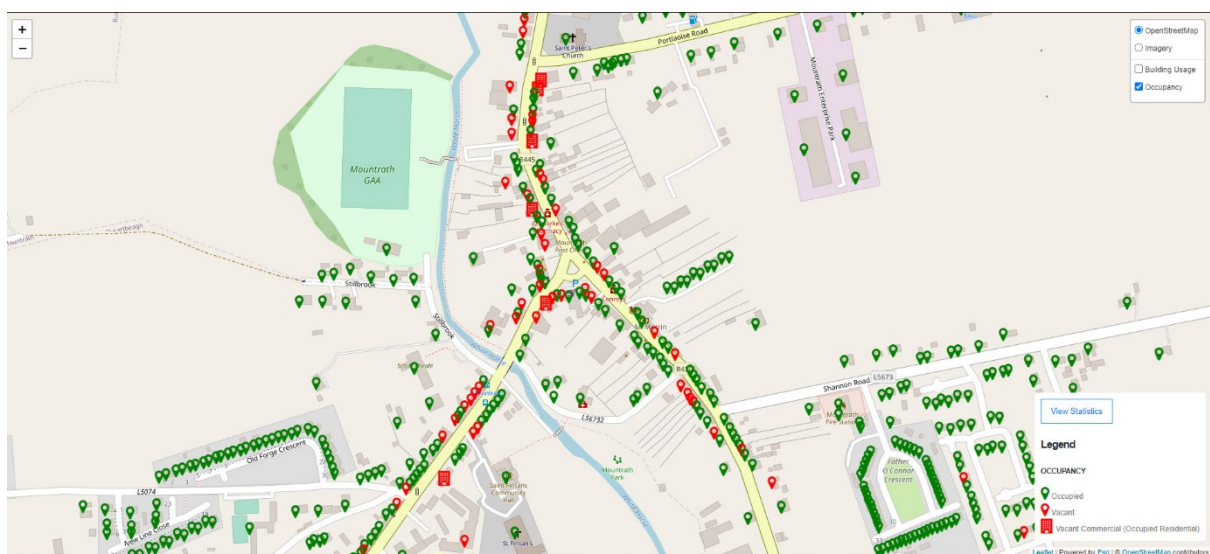


Figure 10: A view of building occupancy rates in the centre of the town

For the purpose of this study, the town centre includes the Main Street from the Portlaoise Road, Bridge Street as far as the River and down Shannon Street as far as the town library, (Figure 11). The map view in Figure 10 encompasses this area. It displays icons for every building in green (occupied) and red (vacant). A simple visual glance of this map shows there are a large number of red icons indicating a high vacancy rate for buildings.

Figure 11 shows the area subjected to our town centre health check analysis and breaks it down into buildings (blue) and land associated with those buildings (yellow). As will be discussed later, the yellow ‘backlands’ extent of the town centre is very large in proportion to the buildings extent. This is both a challenge and an opportunity for the town.

This area can be broken down into the following numbers;

Total Area	9.22 Hectares
% Building Footprint	18%
Backlands Area	7.5 Hectares
Backlands accessible through Main St property only	91%

Table 2: Town Centre Buildings and ‘Backlands’ analysis.

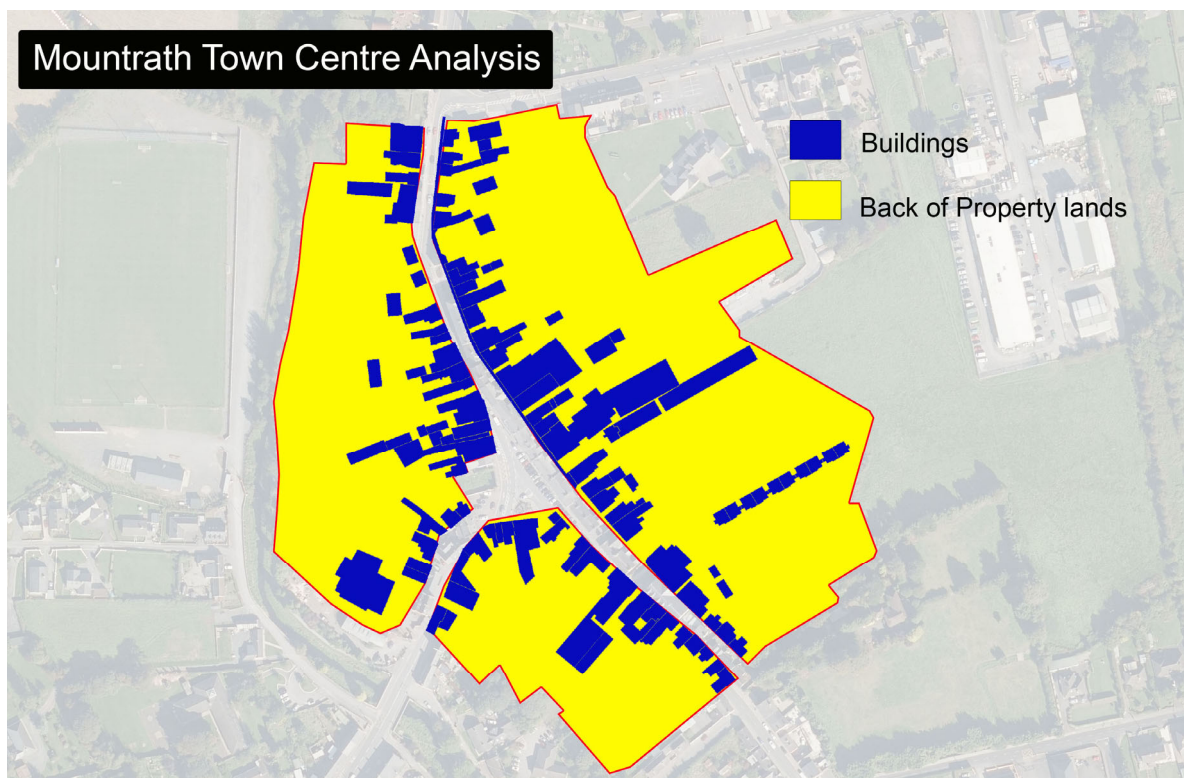


Figure 11: The area chosen for the town centre health check analysis comparing the relative proportion of buildings to associated land (the backlands).

A street level ground survey discovered that there is no road or vehicular access to a massive 91% of the backlands. These areas are accessible only through the Main Street property itself. This hampers any future town centre development. Suggested solutions to this are discussed further in this report

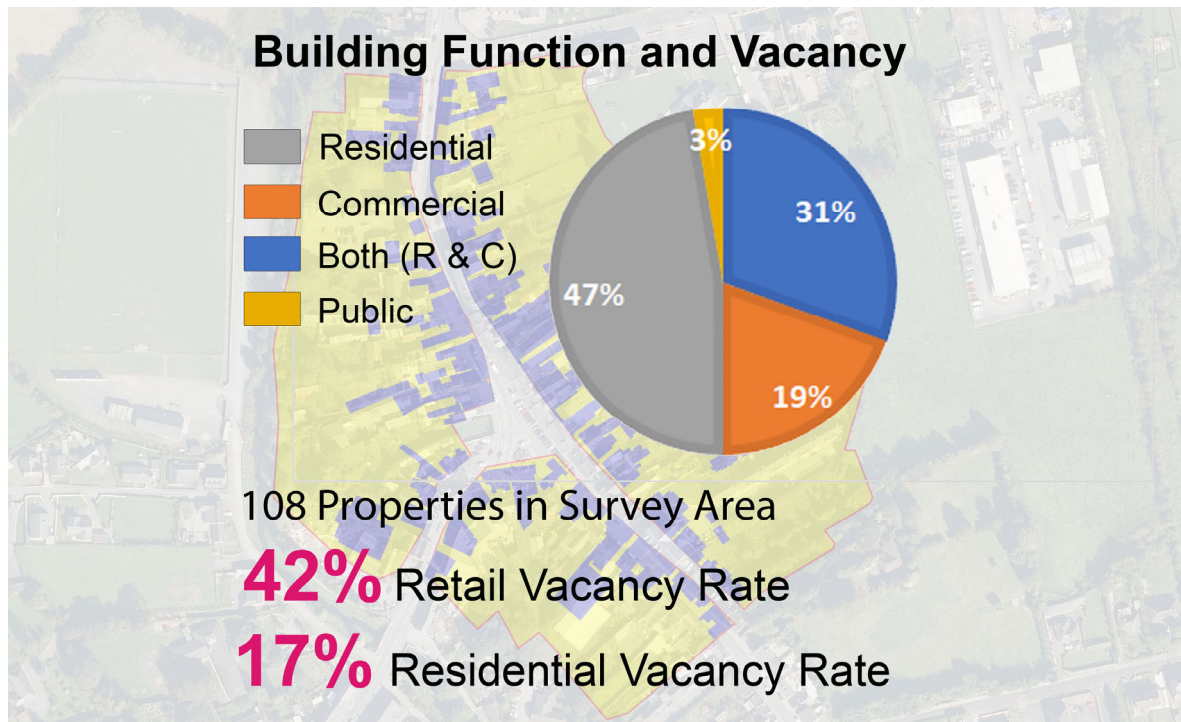


Figure 12: Statistical breakdown of building use and vacancy rate for the town centre

So how does this compare with other towns in Ireland? We can compare the retail vacancy against other towns who have taken part in the Heritage Councils Town Centre Health Check programme;

<https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/projects/town-centre-health-check-programme>

Town Centre	Retail Vacancy Rate	
Tipperary Town	28%	from Heritage Council CTCHC programme
Letterkenny	27%	from Queens University Belfast CTCHC study
Carrick-on-Shannon	31%	from Queens University Belfast CTCHC study
Mountrath	42%	RealSim mapping analysis

Table 3: A comparison of retail vacancy rates between Mountrath and other towns in Ireland as of August 2022.

The other towns listed in Table 3 are larger than Mountrath and would be deemed to be significant county towns. One would expect more commercial activity in these towns however notwithstanding the size difference, a retail vacancy rate of 42% for the town centre of Mountrath is significant.

The 3D 'Digital Twin' Town Model

A Future Visioning Platform

Town Planning is a 3-dimensional challenge which is more often than not performed on 2-dimensional maps. This study embarked on the creation of a 'Digital Twin for the town to visualize the town as it is today and how it could look in the future.

It is not the first town in Ireland to have 3d model made of it, but it is the very first to have such a model made available to the public as an online viewer;

<https://online3d.realsim.ie/webgl/Mountrath/>

This model is designed for desktop and laptop only and may not run on all mobile devices.



Figure 13: Screenshot from online 3d town viewer with town development layers tab displayed.

This model is spatially accurate and is built upon the following aerial mapping datasets;

- A 2m LiDAR Digital Terrain Model from the OSi accurate to +/- 10cm
- A 25cm photogrammetry based Digital Surface Model (Figure 14) accurate to +/- 40cm
- A 25cm ortho photo from Bluesky flown in 2018

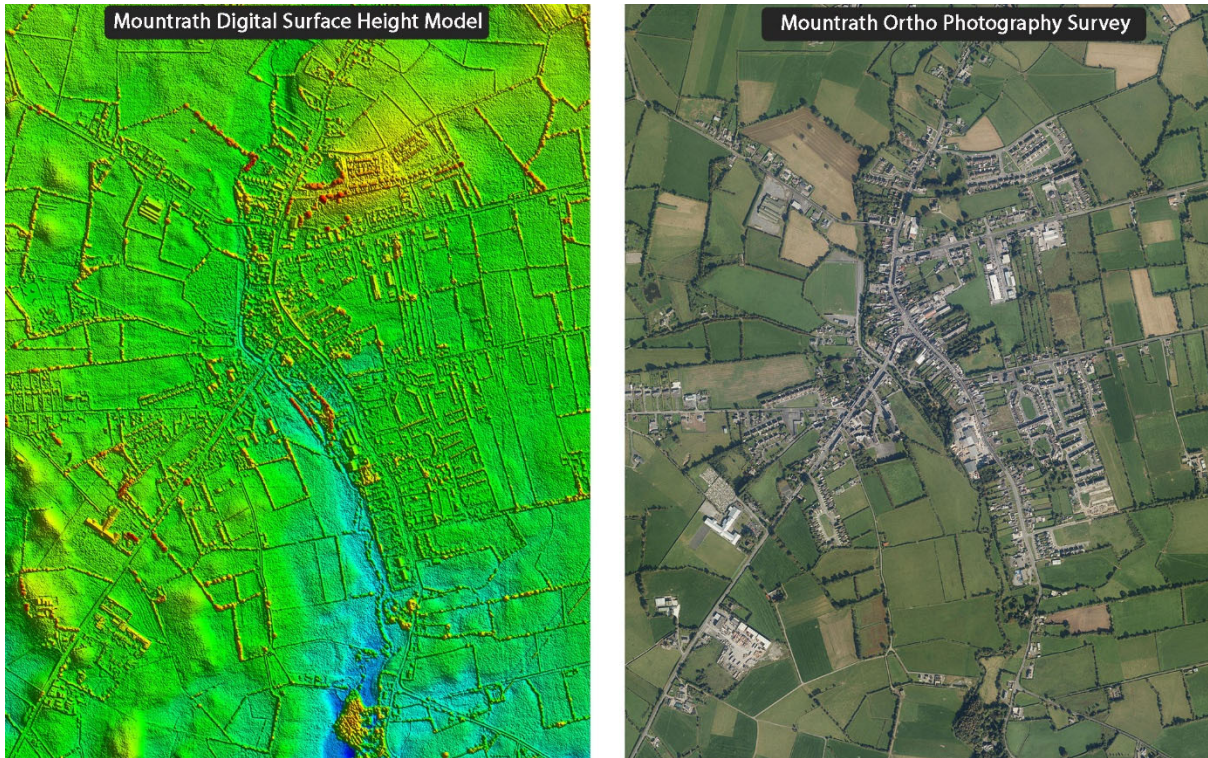


Figure 14: The Digital Surface Model (left image) and the ortho photo (right image) for the model extent around Mountrath.

3D CAD models of buildings were modelled using the Digital Surface Model as height and geometry reference. These were further refined with reference to an extensive street level photography survey. This survey was used to confirm or otherwise the voracity of the Geodirectory data. Some buildings came into use which had been listed as vacant during the course of the study, like the establishment of a new pharmacy, Audrey's, in the Square (Figure 15).



Figure 15: A previously vacant building was brought back into use as a new pharmacy in 2022.



Figure 16: A view from the 3D town model of what Mountrath Market Square could have looked like today if the Market House still existed.



Maighean Rátha (Mountrath)

A busy little town where parking is wherever you happen to find a bit of space. None of these vehicles around the central area are moving.

Photo and comments by Chris Horn (copyright) in 2009 as presented on;
<https://www.geograph.ie/photo/1254127>

Figure 17: A photograph taken on the town square as it looks today. Note the comments above from the photographer on the haphazard abandonment of vehicles.

The town model shows one historical building which sadly no longer exists, the previously mentioned Market Square House (Figure 16). This building fell into disrepair and was no longer in use by the mid 20th century. In 1964 a decision was made to knock down the building and replace it with a roundabout. As a result, the town centre lost part of it's identity as a Market town. A photo taken by Chris Horn in 2009 captures very well the vehicle dominated town square and the random parking it facilitates (Figure 17).

Incorporating Community Feedback and Architectural Team Vision into the Town Model

Currently there are 8 model layers in the town model. Some of these occupy the same physical space so toggle against each other as scenario options. Three of the models, the Youth Centre, Hotel and Handball Alley, were suggested by members of the public during the public consultation. This is not an exhaustive list of the proposed suggestions but simply ones the team felt could have a significant positive contribution to the town. The inclusion of a reconstruction of the Old Market House is simply a playful 'what-if' scenario to see what the town could have looked like if it was still in existence but also reminds people of the origins of the town square.

Regeneration Areas	
Proposed Market Square	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Old Market Square House	<input type="checkbox"/>
Square to River Greenway	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Youth Centre	<input type="checkbox"/>
Town Centre Expansion	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hotel	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tennis Court Restoration	<input type="checkbox"/>
Handball Alley	<input type="checkbox"/>

Figure 18: The Layers tab in the online 3d town model. Buildings highlighted in blue were suggested by members of the public during the public consultation phase. The Old Market House reconstruction was added as a playful 'what-if' the building still existed scenario. All others are architect proposals.

UrbanArq have come up with a radical vision for the town centre. RealSim transformed their 2D plans into a 3D model that can be more accessible to the public. The model also includes a proposed new greenway connecting the square to the river, a Youth Centre, a possible solution to opening up the extensive backlands in the town centre, and a restoration to the tennis courts which formed Lot 2 as part of the study. Various images from the model are shown in Appendix I.

APPENDIX I

-

Views from 3D Digital Twin Town Model

<https://online3d.realsim.ie/webgl/Mountrath/>



Proposed re-imagining of town square as viewed from Main Street



Proposed greenway connecting re-imagined town square with river



An elevated view of the Youth Centre as viewed from the Square to River Greenway



An elevated view of the proposed Youth Centre from the GAA pitch side of the river



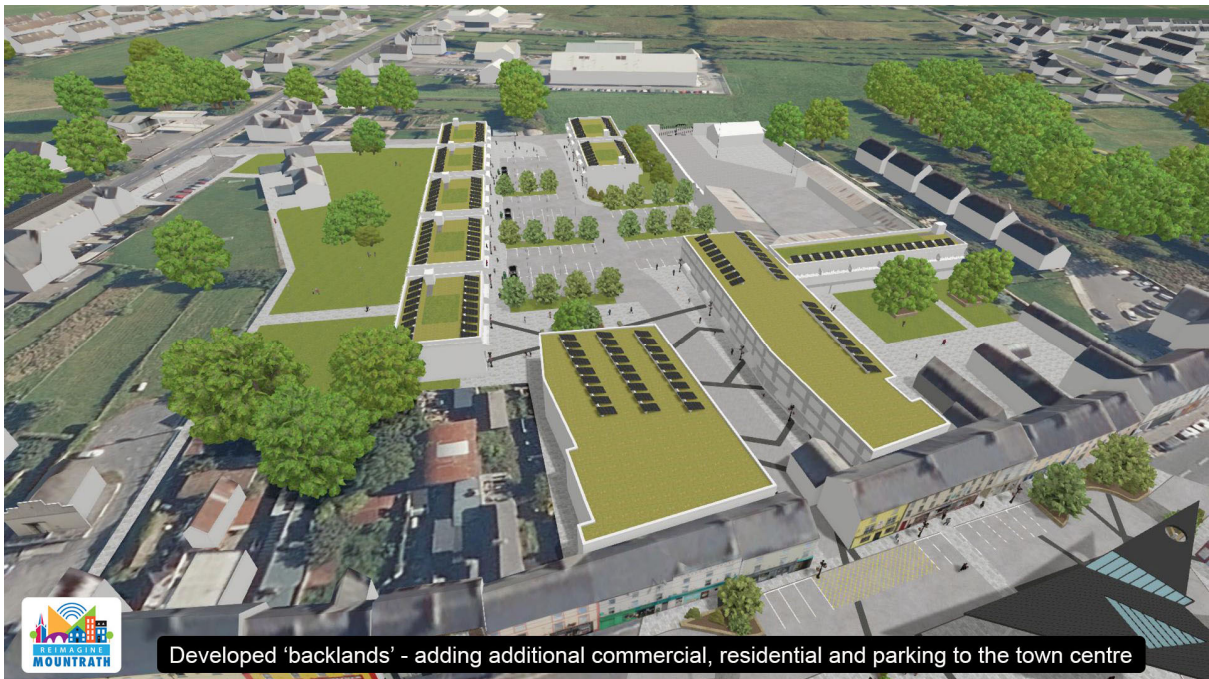
Proposed Hotel on the site of the old foundry off Bridge St.



New Town Square connecting to new street opening up 'backlands'



New Street opening up commercial and residential potential of 'backlands'



Developed 'backlands' - adding additional commercial, residential and parking to the town centre



Re-Imagined Mountrath - A Sustainable town for a Prosperous and Healthy Future



Evening sunset over the re-imagined town square as viewed from Shannon Street

6. Appendix - David Mulcahy



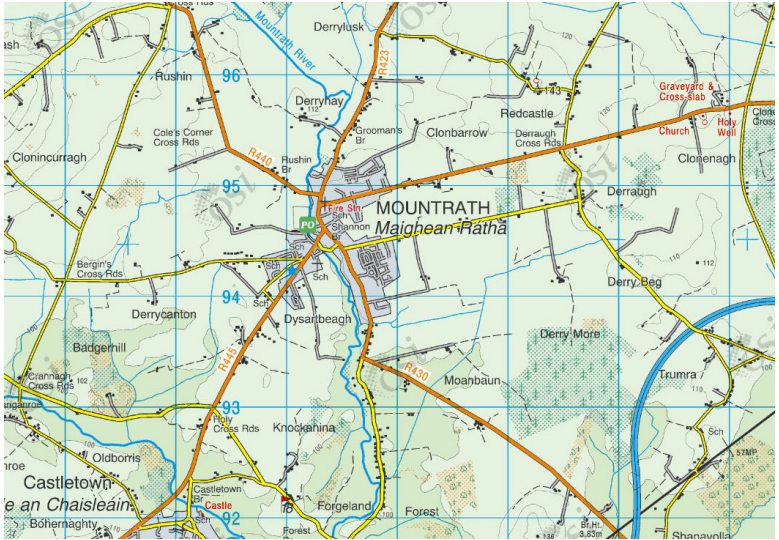
DM	DAVID MULCAHY PLANNING CONSULTANTS LTD
	67 The Old Mill Race, Athgarvan, Co. Kildare
	PH: 045 405030/086 350 44 71
	E-mail: david@planningconsultant.ie
	www.planningconsultant.ie
Company No: 493 133 Directors: D. Mulcahy & M. Mulcahy	

17th April 2023

MOUNTRATH PLANNING CONTEXT

Mountrath is located c.14 kilometres south west of Portlaoise at the foot of the Slieve Bloom Mountains, on the old N7 Dublin-Limerick road (now the R445), approximately 14 kms and 8 kms from Junction 18 on the M7/M8 motorway network in County Laois. The 2016 Census recorded a population of 1,774 within the town, an increase of 7% on the 2011 Census (1,661).

Mountrath has a compact urban form, largely influenced by the Mountrath River (a Special Area of Conservation) flowing in a northwest to southeast trajectory, and the local road network. The layout of the town has changed little over time, retaining its original relationship with the river and features such as the Market Square. Typically, the town is urban in character with the majority of 2 and 3 storey buildings fronting directly onto the Main Street, one building deep. Mountrath's buildings are diverse in age, height, roof profiles and elevational treatments. This diversity is particularly notable within Market Square and diverging streets. Many of the building that line Main Street and Market Square are Protected Structures (41 in total). There is a high level of vacancy within the town centre particularly at first floor level. Residential areas have development along the approach roads into the town, most notably along the R430 (Abbeyleix Rd) where many higher density developments have taken place.



Site context map, Source: MyPlan.ie



Satellite image of Mountrath, source Google Earth Pro, September 2020



OS Map of the town (I can't get this at large enough size off MyPlan.ie).

National Planning Framework 2040

The National Planning Framework (NPF) is a high-level strategy that will shape growth and development in Ireland out to the year 2040. The NPF draws upon lessons learned from the National Spatial Strategy 2002-2022 and provides a framework for the sustainable development of Ireland's existing settlements.

With regards the Eastern and Midland Region, the NPF states that the region's most significant place-making challenge will be to plan and deliver future development in a way that enhances and reinforces its urban and rural structure and moves more towards self-sustaining, rather than commuter driven activity.

The NPF includes specific targets related to securing compact and sustainable growth in Ireland's towns and cities, recognising that the physical format of urban development in Ireland is one of our greatest national development challenges.

Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy 2019-2031

County Laois is located in the Midland Region Strategy Planning Area of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly. Co Laois is part located within the Core region and the Gateway region. The Core region includes the peri-urban hinterlands in the commuter catchment around Dublin, whilst the gateway region acts as an inter regional gateway to the rest of the island.

Laois County Development Plan 2021 - 2027

The Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027 was adopted on 25th January 2022 and came into effect 8th March 2022.

Mountrath is identified as a **Self-Sustaining Town** - *a town with high levels of population growth and a weak employment base which are reliant on other areas for employment and/or services and which require targeted catch up' investment to become more self-sustaining.*

The Plan seeks to grow the population of the town to 2,024 by 2027.

The following Objectives are identified for Mountrath in the Plan.

- MO 1 Create a new civic space within Market Square to facilitate everyday uses such as bus stop, waiting areas and special uses such as farmers market;

- MO 2 Encourage redevelopment or restoration of derelict, vacant or underused buildings and improve public realm within the town centre as appropriate to support the town's vibrancy;

- MO 3 Support the preparation and implementation of an Urban Regeneration Framework for Mountrath town centre over the plan period;

- MO 4 Retain traditional painted timber shopfront and traditional advertisement styles and ensure any new shopfronts or

advertisements must not detract or erode the special character of the town;

- MO 5 Enhance the visual amenity of approach roads into Mountrath, protecting mature trees and enhancing by way of further greening and landscaping;
- MO 6 Encourage and facilitate the re-use and regeneration of buildings in Market Square to a public/community/commercial/retail usage which will provide an opportunity to capitalise on its central location.
- MO 7 Encourage the use of upper floors within the town centre for a diversity of living and working uses where such uses would contribute to the function and vibrancy of the town centre.

Economic and Community Development

- MO 8 Encourage the further development of retail and commercial services in the town core - the redevelopment of existing unused or derelict structures for commercial or residential purposes will be particularly encouraged;
- MO 9 Support developments that will establish Mountrath as a cycling and outdoor recreation hub for the Slieve Bloom Mountains;
- MO 10 Support tourism-related uses, activities and amenities that will contribute to the Slieve Bloom Mountains tourism product;
- MO11 Reinforce the centre of Mountrath as the priority location for new commercial and retail development, with emphasis on quality of design, positive contribution to the existing streetscape and protection of existing heritage assets;
- MO12 Encourage small scale indigenous enterprise units at appropriately zoned lands;
- MO 13 Support and facilitate the development of Bloom HQ as a community enterprise hub within the town;

MO14 Encourage the intensive use of existing community and sporting facilities and develop additional community facilities which are flexible and capable of being managed for a number of different uses, in particular youth-related facilities, community-based health facilities, extensions to schools and school facilities and an outdoor multi-use games area;

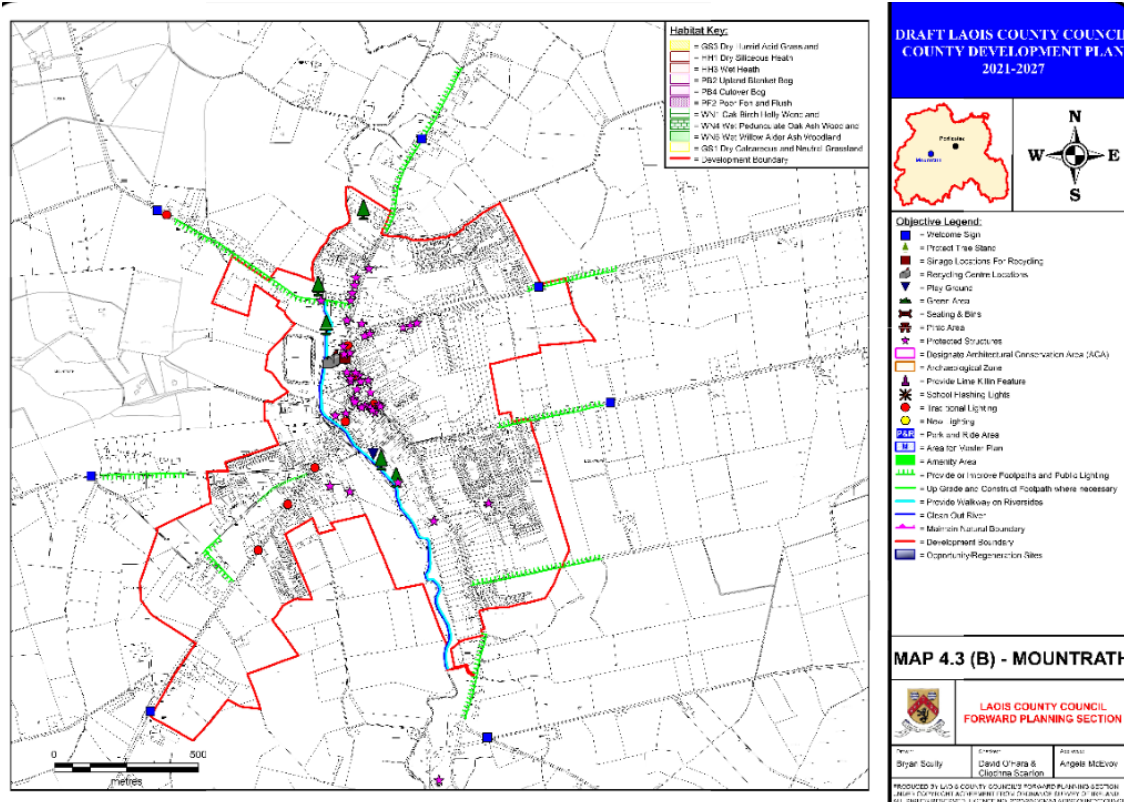
Infrastructure

MO 15 Provide and enhance strategic and recreational pedestrian and cycling linkages and associated street lighting and cycle parking at buildings in community use, especially schools;

MO16 Investigate the feasibility, subject to the requirements of the Habitats Directive, of enhancing the existing road network as necessary and reserving land and pursuing funding for new orbital/relief routes;

MO17 Actively manage short term parking in and around the Market Square;

MO 18 Enhance the amenity of Mountrath and provide appropriate lighting to linkages between the riverside walk and the Main Street;



Objectives map

Signed:

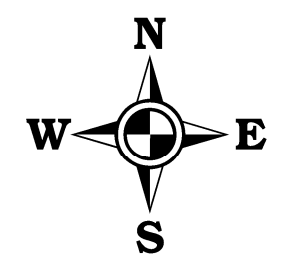
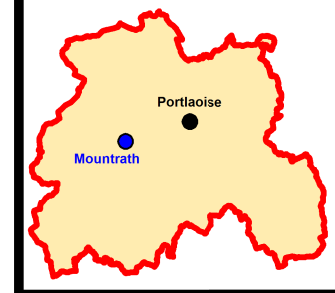
David Mulcahy

BA (Mod. Natural Sciences), MRUP, MSc. Urban Design, MIPI, MRTPI

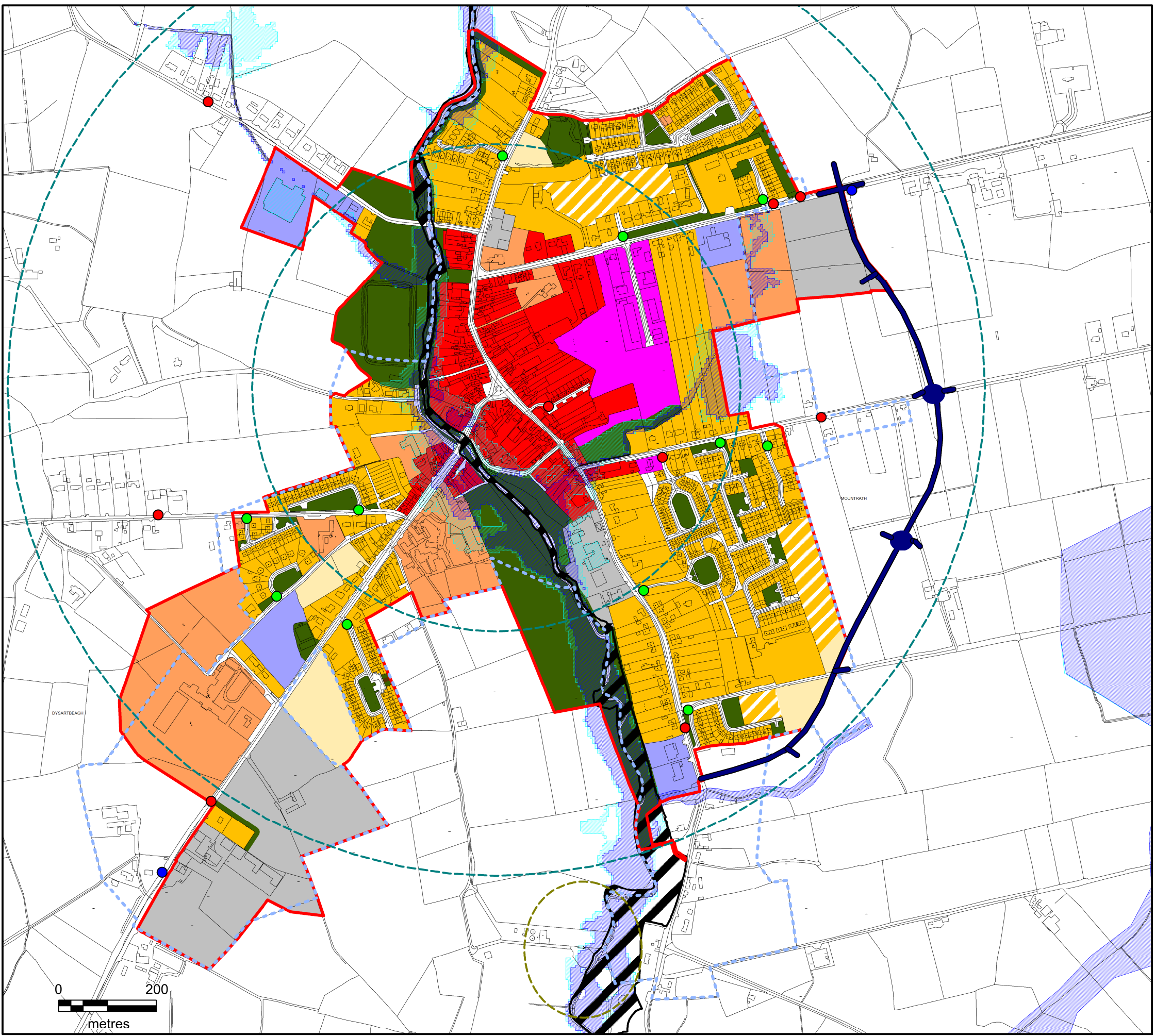
David Mulcahy Planning Consultants Ltd

CHARTERED PLANNING CONSULTANTS

ADOPTED 25/01/2022
LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL
COUNTY DEVELOPMENT PLAN
2021-2027



- Legend:**
- = Town Centre
 - = Open space/ Amenity
 - = Residential 1. Established
 - = Residential 2 - New Proposed Residential
 - = Strategic Reserve 2027-2031
 - = General Business
 - = Community-Educational-Institutional
 - = Industrial
 - = Enterprise and Employment
 - = Utilities
 - = Tourism
 - = Horticulture
 - = Mixed Use
 - = Natura 2000 site - Constrained Land Use Zoning Objective
 - = Zone A - Risk of Flooding Once Every 100 years
1 per cent (1 in 100) or greater chance of flooding each year
 - = Zone B - Risk of Flooding Once Every 1000 years
up to a 0.1 per cent (1 in 1000) chance of flooding each year
 - = Roads Approved
 - = Roads Objectives
 - = Indicative Roads Objectives
 - = Buffer zone For Sewage Treatment Plant
 - = Monuments Buffer Zone
 - = Extent of Development Boundary
 - = CSO Settlement Boundary
 - = 80km/h speed limit
 - = 60km/h speed limit
 - = 50km/h speed limit
 - = 30km/h speed limit
 - = 500m/1km Radius



MAP 4.3 (A) - MOUNTRATH

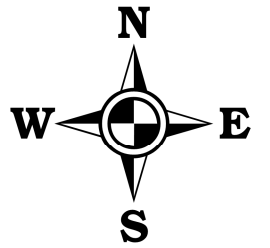
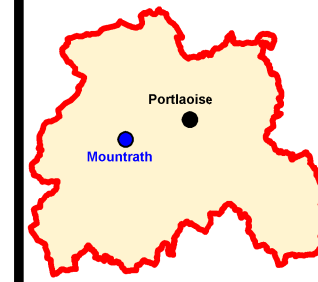


LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL
FORWARD PLANNING SECTION

Drawn: Bryan Scully	Checked: David O'Hara & Nathan Smith	Approved: Angela McEvoy
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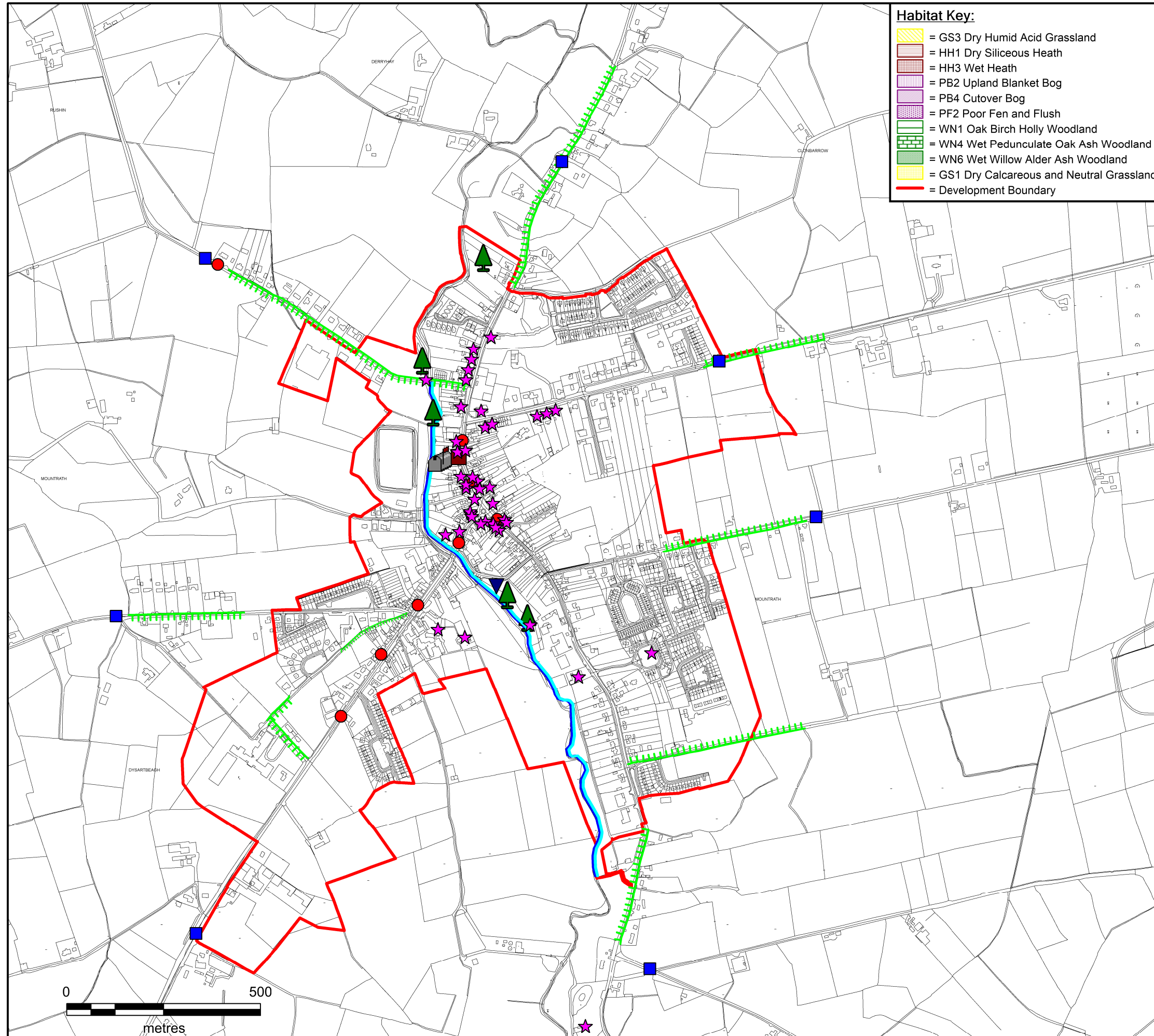
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ADOPTED 25/01/2022
LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL
COUNTY DEVELOPMENT PLAN
2021-2027



Habitat Key:

- = GS3 Dry Humid Acid Grassland
- = HH1 Dry Siliceous Heath
- = HH3 Wet Heath
- = PB2 Upland Blanket Bog
- = PB4 Cutover Bog
- = PF2 Poor Fen and Flush
- = WN1 Oak Birch Holly Woodland
- = WN4 Wet Pedunculate Oak Ash Woodland
- = WN6 Wet Willow Alder Ash Woodland
- = GS1 Dry Calcareous and Neutral Grassland
- = Development Boundary



Objective Legend:

- = Welcome Sign
- = Protect Tree Stand
- = Signage Locations For Recycling
- = Recycling Centre Locations
- = Play Ground
- = Green Area
- = Seating & Bins
- = Picnic Area
- = Protected Structures
- = Designate Architectural Conservation Area (ACA)
- = Archaeological Zone
- = Provide Lime Killin Feature
- = School Flashing Lights
- = Traditional Lighting
- = New Lighting
- = Park and Ride Area
- = Area for Master Plan
- = Amenity Area
- = Provide or Improve Footpaths and Public Lighting
- = Up Grade and Construct Footpath where necessary
- = Provide Walkway on Riversides
- = Clean Out River
- = Maintain Natural Boundary
- = Development Boundary
- = Opportunity/Regeneration Sites
- = Traffic Calming Measures
- = Improve Junction Layout
- = Provision of Planting
- = Demarcation of Parking Spaces
- = Upgrade Open Space
- = Provide or Improve Pedestrian Crossing
- = Re-surface Area Within
- = Signage for School/Community Centre
- = Maintain Sinage
- = Maintain Sinage To Old Graveyard
- = Maintain Sinage To For Emo Court
- = Set Down For Bus Area
- = New Dublin-Cork Bus Stop
- = Maintain Stone Wall

MAP 4.3 (B) - MOUNTRATH



LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL
FORWARD PLANNING SECTION

Drawn: Bryan Scully	Checked: David O'Hara & Nathan Smith	Approved: Angela McEvoy
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6. Appendix - urbanARQ





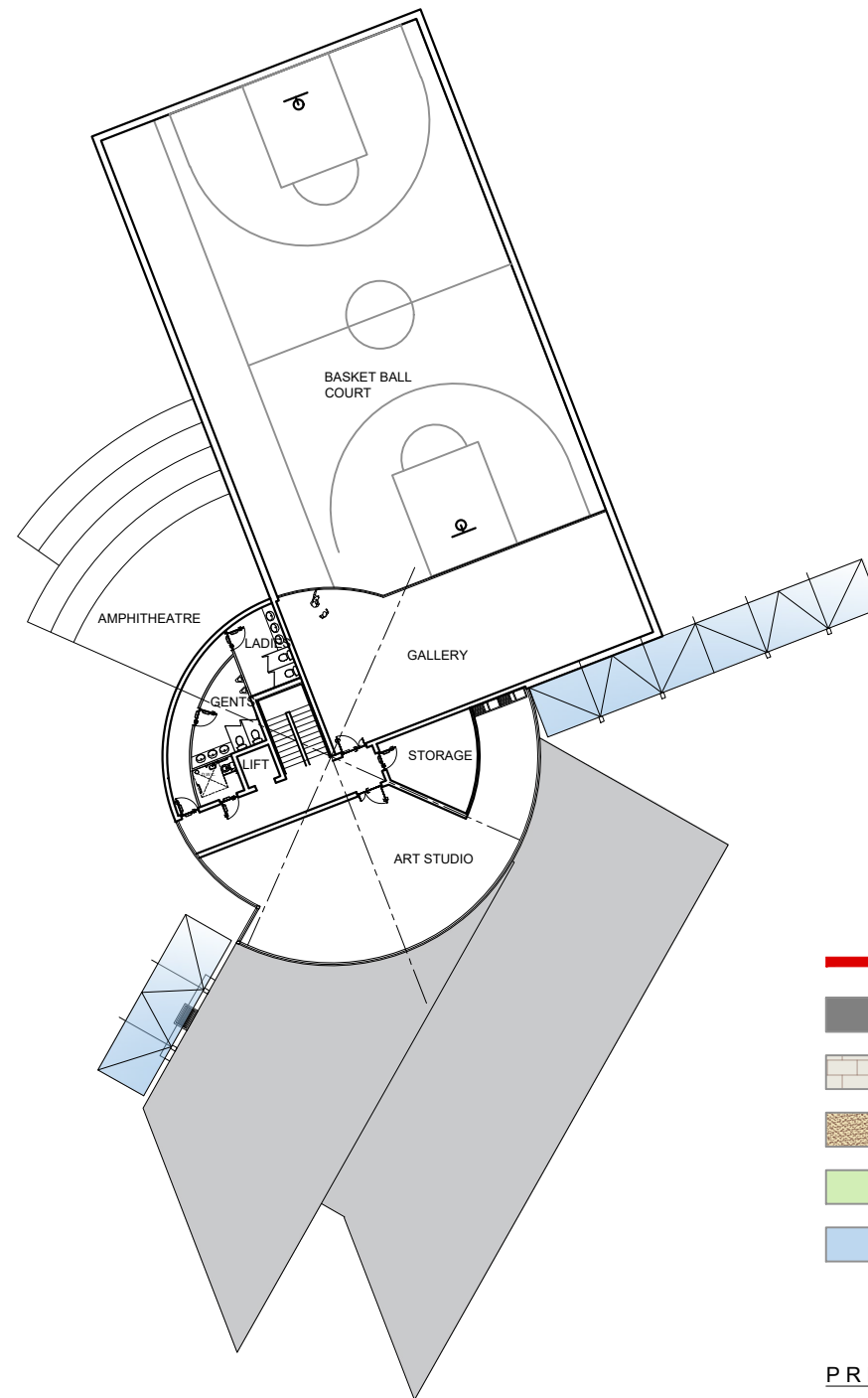
- SITE BOUNDARY
- EXISTING STRUCTURE
- PROPOSED PAVED AREA
- PROPOSED SOFT PLAY AREA
- GREEN OPEN SPACE
- RIVER MOUNTRATH

PRELIMINARY SITE STATISTIC

SITE AREA (WITHIN RED BOUNDARY):	3,338 m ²
PROPOSED GROUND FLOOR:	
- BASKET BALL COURT:	632 m ²
- OTHER INDOOR ACTIVITIES:	673 m ²
PROPOSED FIRST FLOOR:	
- SPECTATOR GALLERY:	132 m ²
- ART STUDIO+TOILETS:	231 m ²
TOTAL:	1,669 m ²
OPEN SPACE:	1,954 m ²
PLOT RATIO: 0.5	



PROPOSED GROUND FLOOR PLAN

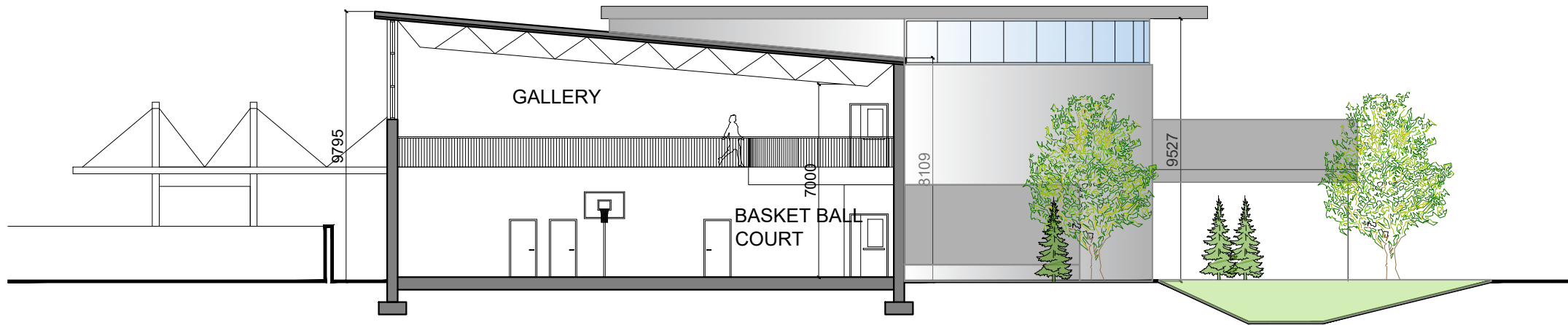


PROPOSED FIRST FLOOR PLAN

- █ SITE BOUNDARY
- EXISTING STRUCTURE
- PROPOSED PAVED AREA
- PROPOSED SOFT PLAY AREA
- GREEN OPEN SPACE
- RIVER MOUNTRATH

PRELIMINARY SITE STATISTIC

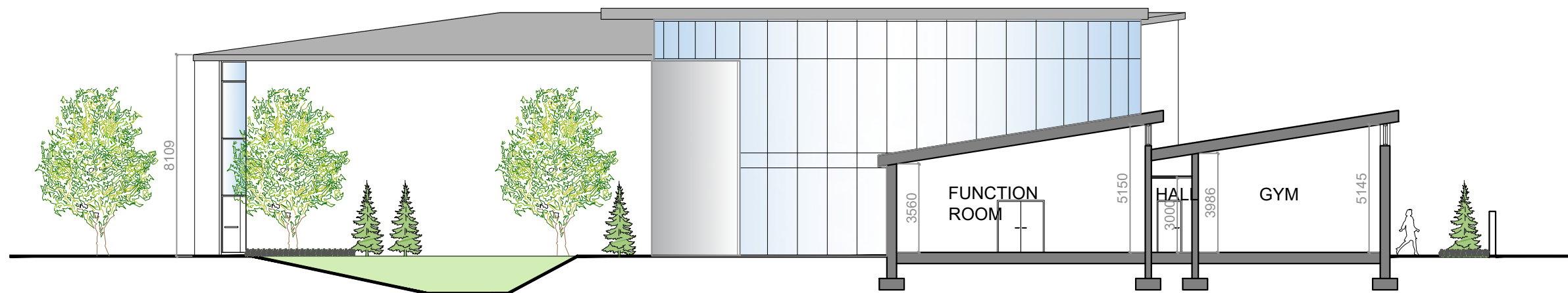
SITE AREA (WITHIN RED BOUNDARY):	3,338 m ²
PROPOSED GROUND FLOOR:	
- BASKET BALL COURT:	632 m ²
- OTHER INDOOR ACTIVITIES:	673 m ²
PROPOSED FIRST FLOOR:	
- SPECTATOR GALLERY:	132 m ²
- ART STUDIO+TOILETS:	231 m ²
TOTAL:	1,669 m ²
OPEN SPACE:	1,954 m ²
PLOT RATIO:	0.5



PROPOSED SECTION A-A

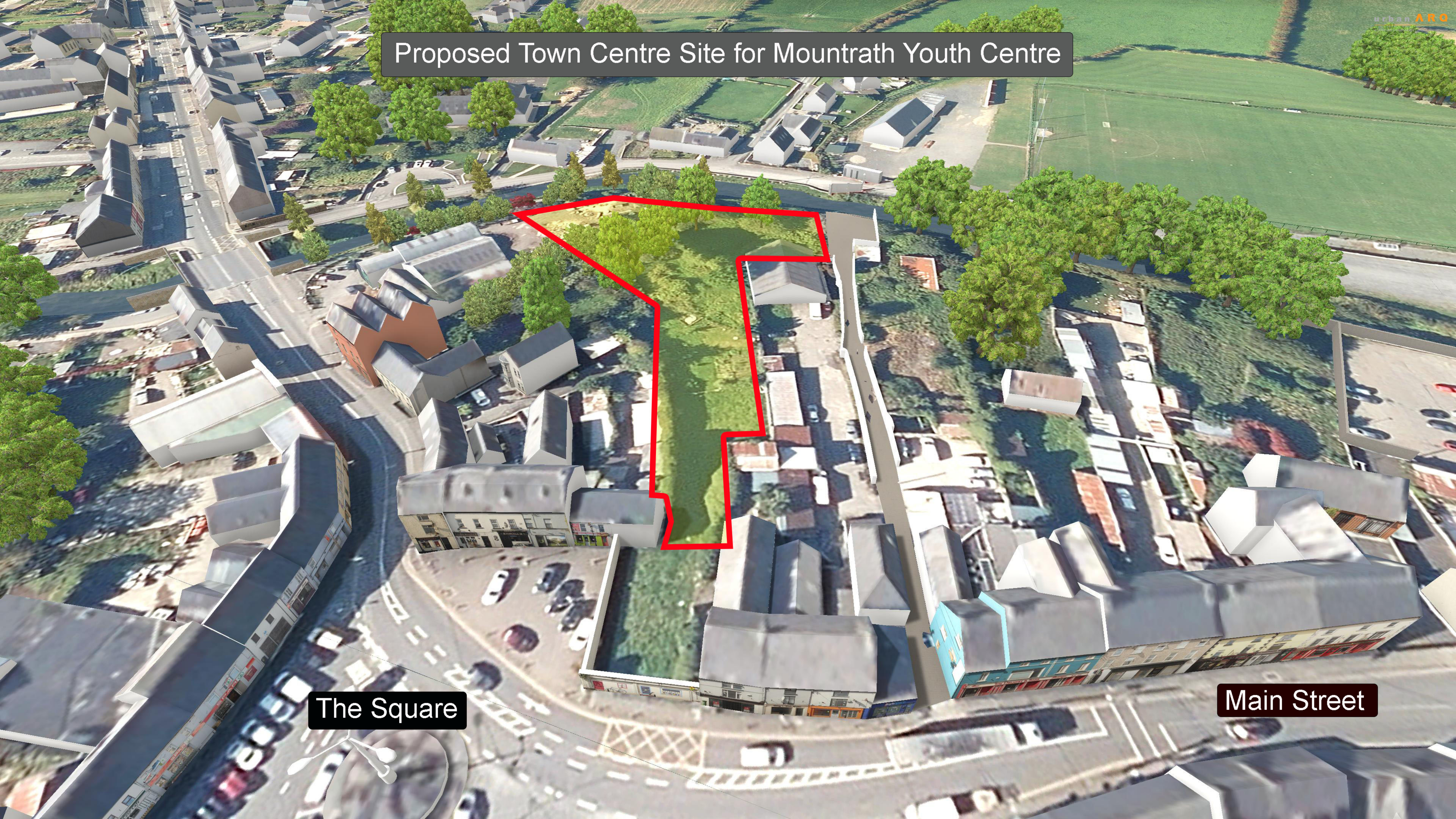


N
KEY PLAN



PROPOSED SECTION B-B

Proposed Town Centre Site for Mountrath Youth Centre



The Square

Main Street

Proposed Mountrath Youth Centre



Access from
Town Square

Existing
Laneway

Proposed Mountrath Youth Centre

Existing laneway
from Main St.

Mountrath Youth Centre

New footbridge over the river

As viewed from GAA ground entrance



Proposed Mountrath Youth Centre



Proposed Mountrath Youth Centre



Proposed Mountrath Youth Centre



Proposed Mountrath Youth Centre



Proposed Mountrath Youth Centre



Proposed Mountrath Youth Centre



Proposed new footbridge approach from Stillbrook

