

OFFALY LOT DONE ON PUBLIC REALM PLAN!

Offaly County Council's Public Realm Plan to revitalise the historic Offaly town of Birr was recognised by Chambers Ireland with the 2017 Excellence in Local Government Award in the 'Enhancing the Urban Environment' category.

Offaly's historic town of Birr boasts a rich collection of fine buildings including elegant Georgian town houses and the Pugin-designed Civic Offices. It is overlooked by the inhabited Castle with its exquisite gardens and the world famous telescope.

Emmet Square is one of the finest squares in Ireland and was laid out in formal style during the Georgian period. Birr is also a busy commercial centre and car traffic and parking had started to dominate the previously attractive town core.

Birr Town Council and Offaly County Council commissioned a Public Realm Plan for this historic town for the purpose of improving the attractiveness and functionality of the town.

The plan also aimed to deepen Birr's role as a centre for tourism, retail and commerce in the south of the county, as well as an excellent place in which to live.

The percentage of pedestrian traffic in the town has increased by 25% over the past five years. Recorded visitors to Birr Castle also increased from 41,000 in 2012 to 121,000 in 2017, of which 30% were foreign tourists.

According to Frank Heslin, Offaly County Council's Deputy Chief Executive, a key contributor to the success of the scheme was the initial framing of an overarching shared vision for the town based on detailed analysis and extensive consultation.

"Another factor was the incremental approach taken, primarily because of financial constraints. This proved to be a positive because the phased approach allowed sufficient time to build credibility with the community and for the community to adapt to proposed changes in a measured way," he told 'Council Review'

DESIGN AND MANAGEMENT

Following considerable analysis and consultation, an international team of urban design consultants – The Paul Hogarth Company – completed this plan in 2009.



The 2017 ELGA award in the 'Enhancing the Urban Environment' category was presented to Offaly County Council for the Public Realm Plan for Birr.

Pictured (l-r): Aidan O' Reilly, Dept of Housing, Planning and Local Government; John Mitchell, District Engineer, Birr Municipal District; John Clendennan, Vice-Cathaoirleach, Offaly County Council; John Clancy, Head of Public Sector Sales, Vodafone Ireland (award sponsor); John Carroll, Vice-Cathaoirleach, Birr Municipal District; Frank Heslin, Deputy Chief Executive, Offaly County Council, and Ian Talbot, Chief Executive of Chambers Ireland.



A pedestrian bridge over the Camcor River facilitates shortcuts and safe routes for pedestrians and cyclists through the leafy park.

MARKED IMPROVEMENT IN TIDY TOWNS' COMPETITION

Birr has greatly improved on its performance in the National Tidy Towns' competition over the last ten years; it scored 228 points in 2008 compared to its 303 points total in 2017.

The National Tidy Towns' adjudicators made a number of positive comments on this historic town as follows:

"The civil space at Emmet Square is superb" (2016)

"The statue with telescope, (at the Northern gateway) reinforces the town's identity" (2016)

"The connectivity between the town centre core and the town surroundings make access to the Main Street from parking lots and access to the Castle very convenient. That access is often through narrow lanes" (2015)



Emmet Square has been reconfigured and enhanced to provide greater priority for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport.



Tullamore Road Gateway after the development plan hit the road.

Birr Town Development's charges of €750,000 (35%) leveraged a further €1.5 million in grant assistance from sponsors including the Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport, Offaly Local Development Company and The Heritage Council.

Over a seven-year period Emmet Square, in addition to four access routes to the town and two car parks, were reconfigured and enhanced to provide greater priority for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport.

A boardwalk along and a pedestrian bridge over the Camcor River facilitated shortcuts and safe routes for pedestrians and cyclists through the leafy park. A cycling network comprising 1.7 km of raised cycle ways, 4 km of segregated cycle ways and 3.4 km of shared cycle ways was also provided.

Kenny Lyons Architects, Jason Redmond Consulting Engineers and MJ Turley Quantity Surveyors undertook the design and contract management of Emmet Square and the town's two car parks.



Cornmarket car park is situated to the rear of Birr Castle.