



Abbeyleix Portfolio 2017

Entente Florale Europe

ABBEYLEIX

HERITAGE TOWN

BAILE OÍDHREACHTA
MHAINISTIR LAOISE

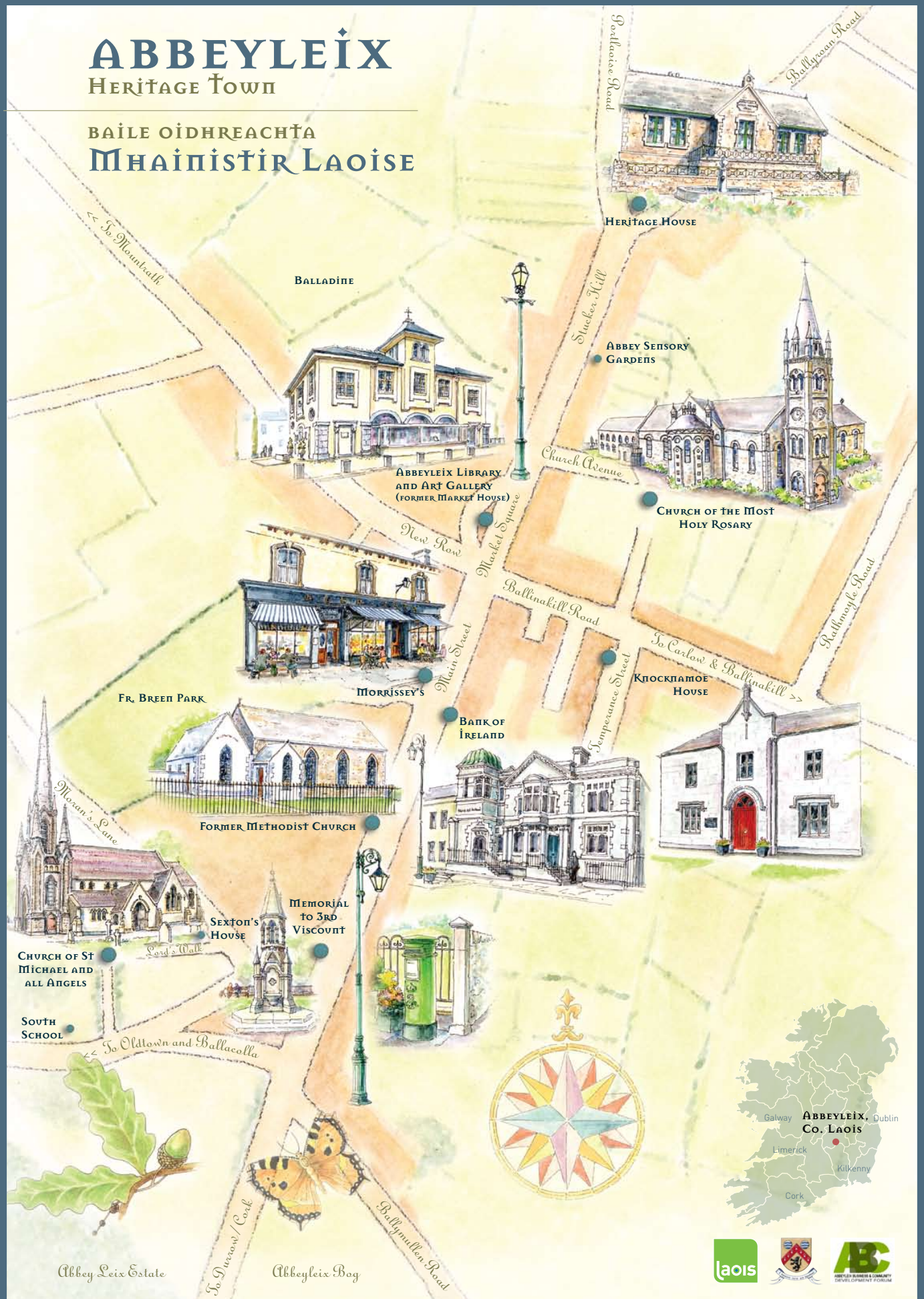





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Introduction

Cuireann Mainistir Laoise fáilte roimh Entente Florale na hEorpa 2017 *Abbeyleix welcomes Entente Florale Europe 2017*

Abbeyleix is a planned 18th century town located in south County Laois, in the heart of Ireland, within the River Nore plain. It has a relatively intact morphology comprising narrow plots and period buildings. The modern town of Abbeyleix dates to the late eighteenth century, when the then major landowners in the area, the de Vescis, decided to relocate the existing village away from the marshy river bank, and found a new town at its present location. The new town was formally planned in a cruciform shape, with an architecturally unified streetscape. A wide linear main street, with a central Market Square and planted lime trees, formed the spine of the new town.

Abbeyleix prospered in its new location and by 1837, had grown to 140 houses. Local farmers traded at the Market House and business premises lined its crescent. Over the next century the main industries included flour mills, a brewery, and a factory that made carpets used all over the world, including on the luxury liner, the Titanic.

Today, Abbeyleix is a bustling hive of activity as it is home to 1,700 people – consisting of locals and ‘new locals’ that have relocated here. One thing that makes our town so special is the careful way our historical features are presented which allows all visitors to glimpse into our past.

Abbeyleix performs an important retail, residential, service and amenity functions, especially for its local hinterlands. The market place was established immediately to the north of the principal crossroads which today still acts as the pivotal centre of the town. The main commercial area is centred on Main Street and Market Square with residential areas concentrated on the southern portion of Main Street, Stucker Hill to the north, New Row/Balladine Row to the west and Ballinakill Road to the east.

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



Planned / Development Approach

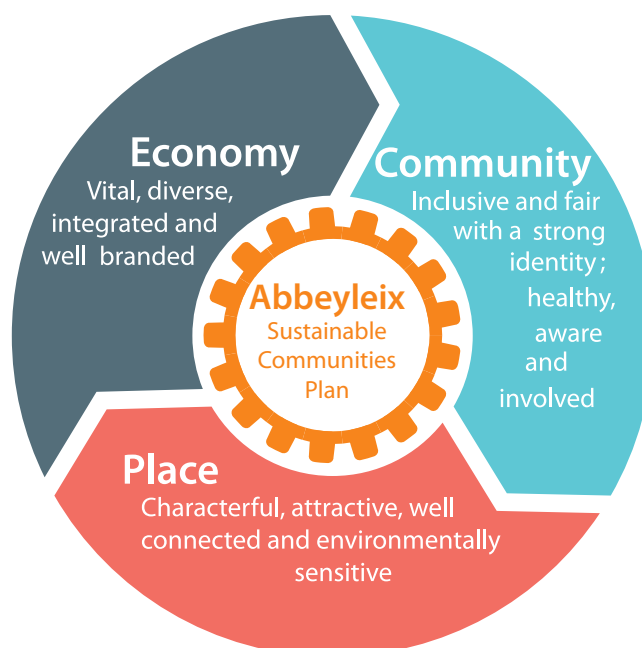
Abbeyleix as we now see it was founded and developed on the following principles:

- Wide legible planned street layout
- Strong architectural style
- Well defined centre Market Square
- Connecting vistas to countryside
- Imposing civic buildings
- Transport linkages – Bianconi Coach House
- Transport linkages – railway
- Employment – Worsted Mills, Agriculture
- Education – “the town of the schools” once hosting 7 schools
- Water supply and sanitation

Now, planning decisions rest with our local Planning Authority, Laois County Council, under the framework of the Laois County Development Plan. The Plan guides the future growth and development of Laois, taking European Directives, National legislation as well as Regional Planning Guidelines as well as National Spatial Strategies into consideration. It sets out a strategic framework for the proper planning and sustainable development of the administrative area of Laois, over a six year period. Amongst many other elements, it protects and enhances the amenities of the area, including the establishment of a policy framework within which more detailed plans (such as local area plans or plans for architectural conservation areas) can be drawn up for specific parts of the planning authority’s area. Currently, Laois County Council is in the process of completing the County Development Plan 2017-2023.

Abbeyleix adopted a ‘Sustainable Communities Plan’ which was developed in public consultation with the local population. It has provided us with a framework to ensure that all development and projects undertaken are positively contributing towards ensuring the long term future of our town for both current and future generations.

The guiding principles of this Plan are as follows:



Environment

Natural Environment

The status of Abbeyleix's natural environment illustrates how highly valued it is – something which has been recognised by many supporters and admirers including President Michael D Higgins, President of Ireland, on his recent trip (May, 2017) to Abbeyleix Bog during National Biodiversity Week to launch the National Wetlands Strategic Plan 2017-2020.

Abbeyleix Bog is a significant and large wildlife refuge, encompassing an area of nearly 500 acres (202 hectares) and contains several semi-natural and modified habitats including degraded (but recovering) raised bog, lagg, cutaway, wet carr woodland and meadows. A unique and varied flora and fauna population can be found here, as they prefer wet, acidic and nutrient poor conditions. Inhabitants include up to 12 varieties of Sphagnum Moss, the main bog builder, insectivorous plants including butterwort and sundew, as well as a wide variety of birds (including nesting long ear owls, cuckoos and woodcocks), amphibians (including fox, hare, common frog and lizard) and many varieties of invertebrates (including Snails, Spiders, Moths and butterflies, Dragonflies, Damselflies and beetles). Deer and pheasant are also present.



The majority of the raised bog has been classified as 'Degraded raised bog' (Ecologic 2009), with significant features of particular ecological interest including a small area of 'active raised bog'. (Both habitats are listed on Annex I of the EU Habitats Directive and active raised bog is a priority habitat). The presence of an intact lagg along the eastern side of the bog (outside the Ecological Network) is a very significant feature of this site, as these transitional zones around raised bogs have generally been destroyed by peat-cutting and habitat loss.



President Higgins acknowledged “the fruits of the tremendous community initiative undertaken over the past number of years to restore and reanimate Abbeyleix Bog and its wetland habitat”. It further provides an excellent example of how community activists, local authorities, state agencies and educational institutions can work together to protect, restore and conserve our natural amenities which provide so many important ecological services.

During recent surveys for our Biodiversity Action Plan, we discovered our local environment includes hedgerows, scrubland, tree lines, amenity grasslands, mixed broadleaf and coniferous woodlands, improved agricultural grassland as well as our bogs. There are also excellent examples of species rich limestone walls at numerous locations around Abbeyleix.



Water Quality

Irish Water, the national utility company, is responsible for providing water and wastewater services throughout Ireland. Local water and sewerage systems were updated in 2014 to cater for our population. With a service level agreement in place, Laois County Council is required to monitor the quality of drinking water for all water supplies under its responsibility in accordance with the European Union (Drinking Water) Regulations 2014 (S.I. 122 of 2014).

In the 2016 National Tidy Towns competition, we received the ‘Value Water’ Award for the Midlands and East Region. This award, sponsored by Irish Water, aims to encourage communities to raise awareness around water conservation and water protection which in turn highlights where water comes from and where wastewater goes to. Our success in this was due to our active engagement in promoting the Green Schools water programme with local schools. Water displacement devices were installed in Scoil Mhuire which contributed to water saving of 133,956 litres in the school year.

We work closely with the recently established ‘Local Authority Waters and Communities Office’ focusing on the natural waters of County Laois. The local officer, Basil Mannion, presented at three separate locations an updated draft of the River Basin Management Plan for Ireland 2018 – 2021 along with details on how communities can input into the final plan. This information has been widely promoted on our social media channels.

Water Conservation

In keeping with our green credentials, Abbeyleix Tidy Towns also delivered an innovative Water Harvesting Project which is using hydraulic RAM technology. This unique project is providing a free and sustainable source of water (using no outside source of power other than the kinetic energy of flowing water) to the allotment garden on the grounds of St Michael's and All Angels at the southern end of Abbeyleix. The RAM pumps water up to two header tanks (IBCs) which are located at the back of the allotments. There is an outflow pipe to return unused water back to the stream once the tanks are full. The project has attracted a lot of attention and training has been provided to the Portlaoise Men's Shed as well as engaging with other National Tidy Towns committees considering this technology.

Promoting the use of Greener Gardening Guides

Working with the Regional Waste Management Office and the EPA, Laois County Council provided us, as part of their ongoing support to the Laois Federation of Tidy Towns, with 'Greener Gardening' and 'Greener Cleaning' guides. Each publication focuses on the importance of prevention activities to become more sustainable in our activities. For example the 'Greener Gardening' guide focuses on ways to get rid of pests, slugs and weeds using natural methods as well as outlining the benefits of composting and how to use natural fertilisers.

Rain Water Collection / Water Efficiency

Local schools, community gardens and allotments as well as numerous households actively promote the use of water collection systems. Our newly installed flowering containers located around the town are also fitted with reservoirs – Abbeyleix was chosen to pilot this innovative management system to ensure maximum water conservation is optimised. Water displacement devices installed in Scoil Mhuire contributes to water saving of 133,956 litres in the school year.



Waste Management

Laois is one of 11 County / City Councils that form the Eastern and Midlands Waste Region and implement the targets set in the Eastern Midlands Regional Waste Management Plan (WMP) 2015-2021. This statutory plan is the framework for the prevention and management of wastes in a safe and sustainable manner and follows EU policy for waste management with the main focus being on waste prevention, preparing for reuse, reusing, recycling, energy recovery and disposal.

Abbeyleix Tidy Towns recognise the generation and management of waste is an everyday challenge which the people, businesses, industry and institutions of the Eastern-Midlands Region must recognise and address. Effective management systems are needed to ensure that we continue to live in healthy communities and protection is afforded to our environment. In the region we have a collective responsibility to improve our behaviours in response to this ongoing problem. This is necessary if we are to rethink the waste challenge and ignite the opportunities which waste as a resource offers.

Working with various Laois County Council staff, we engage with our local community on waste prevention and resource management programmes. We also piloted a National Household Waste Battery Recycling programme, in association with WEEE Ireland, a compliance scheme organising the environmental management of Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) and waste batteries. WEEE Ireland was so impressed with our efforts and recycling statistics (over 0.5 tonnes were collected over a 3 week period) they decided to roll it out nationally, partnering with other local Tidy Towns networks and County Councils to ensure a high level of engagement and participation rate.



Most recently, the Council also upgraded our bring site for glass and aluminium cans. The new banks have a capacity of 2.5 cubic meters meaning as we recycle these items, we further reduce our carbon foot print as the banks have a longer period between servicing. During 2016 we recycled 30 tonnes of glass and nearly 2 tonnes of aluminium cans.

Composting and green waste recovery

We hosted workshops and talks with the local Grow It Yourself group on this topic and have communal composting areas in both the GIY Community garden and the community allotments. Many private houses have availed of composting bins, which our local Council sold at a heavily subsidised cost.

Abbeyleix Golf Club conducts mowing regimes which ensure their grounds are not only well maintained but has the minimum impact on the environment. Knocknamoe Park, along with approach roads, had their mowing regimes reduced to allow for the establishment of biodiversity zones. A mulcher is used when cutting the large green area in Fr Breen Park.

Pollution Reduction and Air Quality

Air quality in Ireland is generally of a high standard across the country and is amongst the best in Europe; however, levels of some pollutants remain of concern, with those produced by traffic approaching limit values in urban centres. Here in Abbeyleix, as most of the heavy traffic has been diverted from our town centre, it has provided us with an excellent opportunity to promote walking and cycling routes in and around Abbeyleix.

The key development in this area is the completion of high quality cycle corridor (2 x 8.5 Km lanes) between Durrow and Abbeyleix. This safe cycle corridor is encouraging a significant number of cyclists back onto the road and is also tying in with the High Nelly bicycle clubs which have established in both Abbeyleix and Durrow.

Although much of the cycle traffic is for recreational purposes rather than for direct replacement of car journeys, it is certainly a move in the right direction. We are also a hub for National Bike week's local events, hosted by Laois County Council's Sports Office and Laois Sports Partnership. We also have public transport links for both local and urban destinations and we encourage car pooling to Tidy Towns training events and other similar activities.

We helped to initiate a feasibility study for the Abbeyleix to Kilkenny Leisure Trail (by Mary Tubridy and Associates) which examined the feasibility of developing the old railway line between Abbeyleix and Kilkenny as a walking/cycle route. Abbeyleix also features in the annual Laois Walks Festival, run by Laois Partnership. With over 25 walks throughout the county, there is something for every age and ability.

The Council is also very supportive of and committed to reducing their own carbon footprint and the Council is headquarters to the Midlands Energy Agency (MEA), which was established to assist four Midland local authorities (Laois, Offaly, Westmeath and Longford) to manage and reduce their energy consumption in accordance with national targets. Their goal is to empower each Midlands local authority to achieve 33% saving in energy use by 2020 (target set for public sector by National Climate Change Strategy 2007-2012). The aim of the MEA is to embed energy management into every section of the Midlands local authorities and to achieve ongoing and sustained reductions in the amount of energy used to deliver local authority services. We also hosted public events for schools with Gavin Harte of Education for Sustainable Development. These events explored 'what is a watt?' and illustrated human pedal power (children had to cycle a bicycle to power a light bulb). A climate change talk was also held in the local library for the wider community.



Policies and actions taken for sustainable energy

Domestic solid fuel use is a source of air pollution in Ireland and particularly impacts air quality in areas where the sale of bituminous coal is permitted. As a result, air pollution from the burning of solid fuel can be of a greater concern in smaller towns in Ireland. In order to illustrate the how we can unite as a community to deal with this and other climate change related challenges, Abbeyleix participated in a 'Community Power Down Tool Kit' – a training project for leadership, livelihoods and local resilience that enabled us to make an informed response. The course built capacity for active citizenship at local level and an awareness of our responsibilities as global citizens. Following on from this course, we also undertook an energy audit (based on the ESB Halo Scheme) in one of our estates Ashbrook of 20 units. The suggested work plan for each house highlighted potential for annual energy savings of up to €607 as well as CO₂ savings of 2,694kgs per annum.

We are committed to buying and producing locally where possible and this is one of our central themes. There is a weekly farmers market in Market square which sells locally produced breads, eggs, confectionaries, organic pork products and vegetables. In addition we hold a number of artisan markets in conjunction with our annual festivals and other events e.g. Applefest, Christmas Market etc.

We have embraced the Grow It Yourself (GIY) movement, which was established in Ireland but now is a global community of people that grow their own food. Those involved in the GIY movement recognise the fact that growing locally not only reduces our reliance on imports, transport costs and subsequent CO₂ emissions but also helps to develop healthier lifestyles and in turn benefits local biodiversity. The local GIY group of 200 members has developed two public gardening spaces – allotments at the southern end of town and the community garden in the town centre.

We applied for and received funding to invest in energy efficient LED Christmas lighting (overall spend €12,000). We are proud to say all our Christmas lights are LED, which use 1 watt each compared to 60 watt bulbs on the older light sets. This has provided significant energy savings our bills as well as a reduction in the associated running costs. The public lighting scheme on our Main Street, as well as all current and future replacement programmes are all LED. This has resulted in a 50% saving on the previous running costs as well as the associated carbon reduction.

One community crèche, which is accredited by the Environment Protection Agency (EPA) endorsed 'Eco Cert' scheme, is working to an energy improvement plan which includes installation of heating controls; dual flush toilets, low energy lighting etc.

The woodchip based heating system in the library has efficiency benefits over a conventional oil based system while 16 street level uplighters located around the library are LED.

We continue make strides in this area and our future plans will have a focus on the following areas:

- We intend to make Abbeyleix more bicycle friendly and to augment the level of bike stands already in the town (already located in Market Square).
- We are actively looking at extending the South Laois Cycle Route to take in our town.

The Abbeyleix Business and Community (ABC) Group is very supportive of our ongoing activities. They provide volunteers, supports and sponsorship throughout the year. An example of 4 local businesses green credentials are provided below:

- The Abbeyleix Manor Hotel has been involved with DaysE (Donate As You Save Energy) initiative. This is a social enterprise model facilitating collaboration between community and business partners on efficient energy use. They also separate their waste into food waste, recyclable and landfill waste. All glass bottles used in the bar are also recycled.
- First Ireland Spirits has implemented its Origin Green charter. The Origin Green programme is the only sustainability programme in the world that operates on a national scale, uniting government, the private sector and food producers through Bord Bia, the Irish Food Board.
- Gs Gourmet Jams is also an Origin Green member, use traditional methods, with locally sourced natural ingredients. As they are involved in this initiative, it means Gs Gourmet Jams have clear objectives across three key areas: Raw Material Sourcing, Manufacturing Processes and Social Sustainability.
- Super Valu is part of the Musgrave Group, Ireland's largest grocery and food distributor. They are the main National Tidy Towns sponsor and know firsthand the community spirit needed and make local areas a better place to live. We have received ongoing support and encouragement from our local store on such activities as clean ups, providing a local collection point for batteries as well as providing sponsorship for events. Clelands, our other supermarket, also supports our initiatives.



Built Environment:

Abbeyleix has an impressive collection of imposing and breathtaking structures. The town's streetscape has remained relatively unchanged to this day. There are many built structures worthy of special note including:

- Heritage House
- Dove House Sensory Gardens
- Abbeyleix Market House (now library and art gallery)
- Temperance Street and Knocknamoe Park
- Bank of Ireland (purpose built in 1907)
- The Lord's Walk and Sexton's House
- Pembroke Terrace located in the town centre was built as a dowry by the Earl of Pembroke for his daughter, Emma, who married the third Viscount De Vesci.
- Abbey Leix Estate, which opens twice yearly for charity events.
- The town of the Fountains
- The Church of the Most Holy Rosary,
- St Michael's and All Angels Church



There are many restaurants, coffee shops and pubs in the town where good fare is offered at reasonable prices. One of the first houses to trade in Abbeyleix was Morrisseys, which opened as a general store in 1775. It still is operating today as a public house and recently won 'All Ireland Pub of the year' earlier this year. More contemporary buildings include Scoil Mhuire National School, which has been recently extended and landscaped with a sensory garden for pupils to enjoy. A dedicated autistic unit opened recently in the school which caters for pupils from the surrounding areas. Abbeyleix South National School, which moved from its 1843 building to its current state of the art site in 2012. Traditional shop fronts also contribute to the heritage town aesthetic.



Street Enhancement Programme

Using our Sustainable Communities Plan as a work programme, we recently implemented upgrades to the Northern Bookend (2016) and Southern Gateway (2015) entrances to our town. These have gone a long way to providing a fitting entrance to our heritage town. The Northern Bookend also hosts a 1916 commemoration, an important acknowledgement to those who have gone before us. Following on from an accessibility audit which was conducted in the town, footpaths were upgraded with a €30,000 project budget in 2017. We continually work with Laois County Council on projects which enhance our town.



Streetscape and Street Furnishings

The streetscapes remained unchanged since Abbeyleix was originally established and are testament to the vision of the deVescis. The new town adopting a cruciform shape, with an architecturally unified streetscape, boasts a wide linear main street, with a central Market Square and planted lime trees. Street furniture, which has been updated using 100% recycled plastic, many beautiful lime trees, complementary planting as well as traffic management measures all make up our unique street scape.

Cleanliness and tidiness

We have a very active Tidy Towns committee, community and supportive Council which unite on a continuous basis to keep our town looking so attractive. We feel it is very important to continue to work on keeping a strong emphasis on keeping our town litter free. Our activities complement the targets set in Laois County Council's Litter Management Plan (2015-2017) as well as the Waste Management Acts 1996-2001 and the Litter Pollution Act, as amended. Because of our united approach we have achieved both local and national recognition in Tidy Towns competitions, coming first locally and only 3 points away from being crowned Ireland's Tidiest Town in 2016. We have a great working relationship with our resident associations and they receive financial support for improvement works from Laois County Council via its 'community grant'. Works which these groups undertake include litter picks, ongoing maintenance of shared planted areas as well as the establishment of biodiversity zones. We gratefully acknowledge their ongoing support.

Landscape

In June 2017, we are hosting this year's National Landscape Forum, in association with the Heritage Council of Ireland. The forum aims to find effective ways of converting the aspirations of our national and international strategies and conventions into action where it matters: in the local living place and space where natural processes and human activities interact to shape our shared landscape and planet. We were chosen due to our 'dynamic and progressive civic community' and Abbeyleix and its landscape circle provides a tangible living stage-set for the exercise. We believe this forum will illustrate how we, along with other communities, can achieve more as we work together to meet the challenges of managing our landscape responsibly, creatively and sustainably to deliver a high quality of life for present and future generations. This is the first time the National Landscape Forum has been held outside of Dublin.

Wildlife habitats and biodiversity of flora and fauna

The jewel in our crown, and one which we are so proud of, is Abbeyleix Bog – an area covering nearly 500 acres (202 hectares). However, we are continually exploring and learning about our local wildlife habitats and have arranged environmental education talks and workshops to numerous groups including:

- Abbeyleix Tidy Towns (local meetings and at Laois Federation of Tidy Towns meetings)
- Abbeyleix Community (held in our frequently visited public library)
- Abbeyleix Active Retirement Group
- Jelly Tots Creche (planting workshops using upcycled and recycled containers)
- Scoil Mhuire National School (school based workshops)
- South National School (school based workshops)
- Training for Community Employment, Laois County Council and Transport Infrastructure Ireland staff on eliminating indiscriminate use of chemical sprays and advice on invasive species management.
- Numerous Volunteers and Educators from 3rd level Colleges including Trinity College provide valuable assistance on field work activities (logging data on species recorded) as well as hosting numerous Rhodendrum bashing parties as part of the invasive species management programme.



Abbeyleix has adopted a Biodiversity Action Plan, originally funded by Laois Partnership, with subsequent projects funded by Laois County Council under their Tidy Towns and Special Projects grant schemes. Consultant Ecologist, Dr Fiona MacGowan, has undertaken numerous surveys in our town. Based on her findings, 18 actions were recommended, from erecting bat boxes to establishing bug hotels, as well as promoting pollinator friendly planting schemes - all of which boost biodiversity zones in Abbeyleix. We have married this work with the targets set in the All Ireland Pollinator Plan 2015-2020. Such pollinator friendly planting projects are located at the Northern Bookend and Southern Gateway entrances to the town, at South National School and Scoil Mhuire as well as numerous housing estates throughout Abbeyleix where edible hedging is now the norm.



Open Green Spaces

Sports and Playgrounds

A unique feature of Abbeyleix is that the sports clubs share a common facility - Father Breen Park. The park incorporates a full size GAA pitch, soccer pitch, hockey, all weather pitch, all-weather tennis courts and indoors sports halls. The park also incorporates a crèche and crèche play area. The character of the park is functional and there is little evidence of a design informed approach. Visit at any time of year and you will find many groups training as well as dedicated GAA games and FAI Ireland sports camps during Easter and Summer months specifically for children aged 6 and up.



Abbeyleix Golf Club was founded in 1895 and moved to its present site in Rathmoyle in 1927. It is a course laid out on rolling landscape with plenty of mature trees and water features. Originally a nine hole course, it is now an eighteen hole golf course with an area of over 3 acres (1.2 hectares) designated as an area of conservation which allows for natural succession. This is now an area rich in natural flora and fauna and teeming with many kinds of wild life, including water hen and ducks which are seen on an ongoing basis. The beautiful delicate yellow flow of the water lily has added to the colour of the area. They are anchored to the mud at the bottom of the slow flowing water course by a root system of rhizomes. They provide a spectacular contrast to the dark green of the reeds and rushes that populate the wetland. Wild bluebells, an indicator species of ancient woodlands, are multiplying and expanding year on year.

A fountain dedicated to the 3rd Viscount de Vesci sits within a very small railed green space at the southern end of Main Street. Knocknamoe sculpture park is located on the Ballinakill Road and features sculptures from famous Irish sculptor, Cliona Cussen.

The beautiful playground, Sult na Mara, located at Heritage House, offers a variety of play choices including 30 meter cable run, hammock swing, net climb, tunnel slide and extensive sand and water play area for younger children, basket swing, swings, roundabout and a picnic area. During National Heritage Week (August – an annual event) it also hosts Viking Celtic and Medieval shield making as well as the award winning Kids Shipwreck Dig workshop. Outside of these planned events, local school children are brought on weekly scheduled Physical Education trips. It is also a very popular location for people through the County to visit with their families.



Cemeteries

There are 4 cemeteries located in Abbeyleix namely

- Famine graveyard, called 'Gate way to Heaven', is located to the south of Abbeyleix District Hospital (formerly the Workhouse) is located on the Carlow Road. It is the former site of the 19th century Union Workhouse burial ground, but contains no visible markers or headstones. It can be viewed on the 1908 map.
- St Michael and All Angels Graveyard, located on the Ballacolla Road.
- Abbeyleix Graveyard (for Church of the Most Holy Rosary), located on the Ballyroan Road contains headstones dating from the 20th century onwards.
- Graveyard at the Church of the Most Holy Rosary.

All graveyards were surveyed in 2011 as part of Laois County Council's Heritage programme with support from the Heritage Council, a statutory body who acknowledge that community involvement is at the heart of the Council's vision for national heritage.

Streams, ponds, lakes and banks

The stream located on the Ballacolla Road has been utilised to conserve water which is used in St Michael and All Angels community allotments. It is considered to be of exceptional value as it ends up in the basin of the River Nore, in Abbey Leix estate. We have engaged with the Local Authority Water and Communities Office for guidance regarding maintenance regimes to ensure the protection of habitats. This information, combined with additional guidance from local ecologist Dr Mark McCorry, advised that all additional works be undertaken manually. This is something which we are happy to do, when conditions allow, as we understand the value of an aquatic habitat.



Permanent Planting

Abbeyleix is committed to focusing on long term sustainability of our planting schemes and continue to focus on pollinator friendly and planting schemes which yield long term gains for our native biodiversity. In 2017 alone, we planted:

- 165 native birch hedging in Fr Breen Park.
- 500 whitethorn on Portlaoise Road.
- 200 whitethorn as well additional soft landscaping at Scoil Mhuire NS.
- 50 edible hedging in Scoil Mhuire NS.
- 160 edible hedging and whitethorn hedging at Fairways.

We very much recognise the complementary activities that have taken place in the town due to the ongoing interest in our local environment including the establishment of 6 bug hotels – one each at Scoil Mhuire NS, Abbeyleix Bog, Fairways and 3 at South NS. With the support of our local bee keepers and their colleagues in Dunamais Bee Keepers, we also identified local habitats for solitary mining bees on the Green Road/ Ballyroan Road located at the First Ireland Spirits boundary hedging, the old railway track in Abbeyleix Bog as well as the land bank adjacent to Scoil Mhuire and Casserly's boundary wall cavity (on the Main Street).

We also encourage the planting of fruit trees where appropriate not only to boost local biodiversity and help pollinators, but also to contribute to the work of Seed Savers Ireland – an organisation that aims to conserve Ireland's very special and threatened plant genetic resources. Their work focuses on the preservation of heirloom and heritage food crop varieties that are suitable for Ireland's unique growing conditions.

Heritage variety trees have been sown in the following areas:

- Ashbrook Estate – 3 types of heritage variety trees
- Heritage House – 4 types of apple trees in conjunction with Applefest festival
- Old Bank Orchard – a small orchard was established in the rear garden of the old bank adjacent to our community garden to assist local growers with their ongoing 'Grow It Yourself' (GIY) programme.
- South National school planted apple trees as part of their ongoing Green Schools work.
- A "Junior" GIY section has also been established and both primary schools have growing plots in the community garden.
- The Jellytots community crèche also maintain a plot in the allotment garden
- Balladine Heights and Drive have undertaken tree planting programmes in their estates.



Seasonal Planting

It has always been the philosophy of Abbeyleix Tidy Town to concentrate on perennial planting, shrub and tree planting which offer year round cover and colour. In particular we have been reluctant to go down the route of spending scarce resources on showy but transient displays of annual flowers that rely on lots of water and fertilizer and leave little or no legacy. Often these have limited biodiversity value.

Over the past couple of years we have developed this idea further. In particular we have explored the idea of creating an Edible Landscape which will serve an aesthetic landscaping purpose while at the same time creating a healthy edible by-product. Underlying this is the promotion of the sustainability message of buy local - grow local - eat local.



Edible and Pollinator Friendly Window Boxes Project

As part of our ongoing Tidy Towns work, we piloted the 'Incredible Edible' window box project. This involved stocking our normal window boxes with perennial herbs including Parsley, Sage, Rosemary Thyme, Mint, Coriander, Borage (Incredible Edibles) and also Pollinator friendly plants for Bees & Butterflies Phlox, Nepeta, Penstemon, & Papaver. The project was a wonderful success and warm weather produced a bumper crop.

The public are encouraged to "snip away" at the produce which was also made available at the Applefest festival. Plants were passed on to our community gardens to out-winter.

We are pleased with the outcome of this project and noted that it attracted a very positive response from the general public and has been replicated by other Tidy Towns committees locally and nationally.



Environmental Education

The primary focus of Abbeyleix Tidy Towns is to instil a sense of civic pride and social conscious among the young people attending our local schools – we take our role as environmental educators and advocates seriously. Laois boasts 76 prestigious Green Flags schools, two of which are in Abbeyleix – South School NS and Scoil Mhuire NS having achieved their flags for Litter and Waste, Energy and Travel (currently working to achieve their Biodiversity Flag) while Scoil Mhuire has achieved their flags for Litter and Waste, Energy, 'Green Homes' and is currently working towards their Water Conservation flag.

The students attending the 2 Primary schools located in Abbeyleix play an integral role in the ongoing activities of Abbeyleix Tidy Towns. The committee believe strongly that their involvement is critical for the future of the town.

However, we reach beyond the formal teaching methods and structures - our community crèche, Jelly Tots, also participated in waste awareness sessions for preschool children (planting bulbs in old washing machine drums) to complement preschool educational curricula – Aistear and Siolta. They also undertake nature walks to local amenities to observe and learn about local flora and fauna and design complementary art projects (from reusable materials) when they return from their adventures.

Since our bog conservation project began, we host students from 3rd level colleges to conduct botanical surveys which in turn have allowed us to implement the most appropriate conservation techniques. Our engagement with local conservation groups and volunteers has allowed us to undertake the following work:

- Boardwalk installation by Mens Shed and Abbeyleix Bog Project volunteers
- IWT Badger Club events (for children)
- National Heritage Week Events
- Management of invasive species with National Volunteers Ireland
- Swift survey and installation of swift boxes in association with Laois Offaly branch of Bird Watch Ireland



Effort and Involvement

Our Tidy Towns committee consist of 10 members which are drawn from across the community. We work closely with all the relevant groups in town and have direct representation on the following committees: The Abbeyleix Business and Community (ABC) Group, Abbeyleix Heritage Company, Abbeyleix Bog Project, Abbeyleix Park Development and APEC (Community Employment Scheme). We regularly engage with our local Womens Development Group; Schools; Churches, Council, Department of Social Protection, ICA, Sporting groups and all community groups.

We recognise the importance of volunteers – even with this one powerful example: numerous volunteers hand built the boardwalk in the bog, the first phase took 20 volunteers 90 days to complete and they used 4.5 km of timber, 310m of recycled plastic stakes, 180m of storm water pipe, 130 nuts and bolts as well as 7,000 screws!

Together we have achieved so much but without the ongoing support of the community of Abbeyleix we wouldn't get as far.



Social events include Garden fete (500 people attending), hosted in the grounds of the rectory; senior citizen's party celebrating its 54th year – all these events are organised by volunteers. We also host Applefest, South NS and Scoil Mhuire family fun days, Christmas markets and walking festivals. Active Age activities are held which promote the benefit of an age active town and we also cater for our younger population with 'games on the green' in local housing estates as well as all ages using the free outdoor gym in Fr Breen park.



The Community Involvement and initiatives earned Abbeyleix 2nd place in the International Livecom Awards (Population less than 20,000 category) and the town also were prize-winners in the All Ireland Pride of Place Awards. In the National Tidy Towns Awards Abbeyleix won Gold Medals in 2016 (only 3 marks away from the National Winner) and 2015. In 2014 we achieved silver medal status and were highly commended.



Tourism and Leisure

Just eight miles south of the County town (Portlaoise), Abbeyleix is located on the N77 with excellent links to Dublin, Limerick and Cork just off the M7 / M8 Motorway. Its central convenient location makes it an ideal focal point to explore the midlands of Ireland. It is a town that has long been familiar to travellers commuting to or from the South and Southwest on the N8 Dublin to Cork road. While almost a half-way point between the two cities, it was for a time the first town stop on a trip from Dublin to the Munster capital. Bord Fáilte, Ireland's Tourism Board, believes that if you learn the stories of a place and you'll come to understand the soul of its people. From ancient high kings to modern day poets, saints and scholars to ramblers and fishermen, Ireland's Ancient East pulsates with legendary tales. Heritage House Museum, which is part of Ireland's Ancient East, will transport visitors back in time allowing them to journey with the pre-Christian warring tribes of Laois.



This picturesque town was described in 1826 by J. M. Brewer, the famous travel writer, as one of the most pleasing villages in Leinster with each cottage having a useful garden. Now a "Heritage Town of Ireland", Abbeyleix invites passers-by and visitors to linger, to explore its distinct heritage and to sample the attractions of its hinterland.



The town has a 44 bedroom hotel, the Abbeyleix Manor, which is equally busy with conferences and weddings. Its relaxed atmosphere, combined with impressive bedrooms, make it an ideal base to explore the midlands. A selection of neighbouring Bed and Breakfasts (B&Bs) are also available and the town boasts a fine range of restaurants and cafes.



The town is one of 27 designated Heritage towns in Ireland with its own unique character and special interest to visitors. Strolling through the town will reveal many of its hidden gems including the restored Heritage House originally an old National School on the northern end of town, and close by are the Sensory Gardens of Dove House. The town square is dominated by the magnificently restored Market House which is now a Public Library and Art Gallery. Abbeyleix is also known for its fountains all beautifully preserved and maintained each with their own story.



Golfers are catered for at the beautiful Abbeyleix Golf club an 18 hole course surrounded by a fine collection of mature trees. If fishing is your sport the River Nore and the nearby Grantstown Lake, and Masslough / Gills Pond, Ballinakill will provide plenty of course fishing opportunities.

Fr. Breen Park which is linked to the town centre offers an array of sporting facilities with its Soccer and Gaelic pitches, Tennis Court and outdoor gym equipment.

The beautiful playground, Sult na Mara, located at Heritage House, offers a variety of play choices including 30 meter cable run, hammock swing, net climb, tunnel slide and extensive sand and water play area for younger children, basket swing, swings, roundabout and a picnic area.

The town offers walkers beautiful open spaces. Collins Looped Walking Trail and the Killamuck Bog Loop are splendid walks that take in the beauty of Abbeyleix Bog. Situated on the southern periphery of the town it encompasses an area of almost 500 acres of diverse habitats including degraded raised bog, lagg, cutaway,

wet carr woodland and meadows. Signage for these walks, plus health and safety guidelines, are annually reviewed and approved by Sports Ireland National Way Markers Walking Trail programme.



*Buíochas
Thank you ...*

Abbeyleix Tidy Towns would like to sincerely thank the support of the National Tidy Towns Unit, Entente Florale Europe Mentors, the participants and supervisor of the Community Employment Projects, Laois County Council members, management and staff, Portlaoise Municipal District staff, local photographers and artists, all our supporters, local experts, families and friends.

