

Tidy Towns Competition 2012

Adjudication Report

Centre: **Portarlinton** Ref: **312**
County: **Laois** Mark: **244**
Category: **E** Date(s): **20/06/2012**

	Maximum Mark	Mark Awarded 2011	Mark Awarded 2012
Overall Development Approach	50	32	33
The Built Environment	50	30	33
Landscaping	50	36	37
Wildlife and Natural Amenities	50	20	24
Litter Control	50	25	25
Tidiness	30	10	12
Waste Minimisation	20	11	13
Residential Areas	40	29	30
Roads, Streets and Back Areas	50	30	30
General Impression	10	7	7
TOTAL MARK	400	230	244

Overall Development Approach:

Welcome Portarlinton to the 2012 TidyTowns competition. There appears to be a reasonably good level of participation with 13 members on your committee. However, we are mindful that Portarlinton is a large town and a larger committee would allow you to tackle a greater number of projects. With this in mind, why not go on a recruitment drive? Your entry form refers to the help that you receive from many voluntary sources such as community organisations, but none are specified. Have you approached the sports clubs in the town such as the GAA, soccer or rugby clubs? Sports clubs are traditionally a source of good support in the TidyTowns competition. Don't forget that angling, rowing, canoe or swimming clubs may also be interested in getting involved in projects involving the river. Social groups such as the active retirement association and the local historical society (if there is one), while interest groups like residents associations normally have a natural interest in the environment and may also be interested in getting involved. The committee should consider 'co-opting' any of these groups or clubs that express an interest in supporting you by encouraging them to undertake TidyTowns projects by themselves (with perhaps some supervision). For example, why not encourage the GAA to provide or maintain some landscaping beds at their grounds? We would also recommend that local residents are invited to get involved on a project by project basis as many may be unable to give up time on a regular basis. Your participation in the RTE programme 'dirty old towns' is also noted and it is interesting to hear that a separate committee was set up to deal with this. Would any of the members of this committee be interested in joining the TidyTowns committee as you both have similar aims and objectives – which is improving Portarlinton. Well done on your establishment with links with local business, Fas, the Scouts, community organisations and local councillors as these links are important in getting projects completed. Your communication strategy is very comprehensive and we applaud your use of social media in order to encourage younger people in Portarlinton to get involved in the TidyTowns competition. It is great to see that the committee have a close involvement with the schools in the town and that various joint projects have been undertaken in litter control (Spring cleanup) and wildlife. We were delighted to read that there is a junior TidyTowns committee in Portarlinton from the Presentation Primary

School and we would encourage you to try to keep this initiative going and perhaps set up committees from other schools? Congratulations also on your achievement in winning the Endeavour award for Laois in the 2011 TidyTowns competition and this is a lovely acknowledgement of the excellent work that you have undertaken to date. With the number of projects that have been completed and are ongoing in your town, it is clear why Portarlinton was awarded the Endeavour Award in 2011. Thank you for all of your documentation which included your strategic plan and the extensive appendices. It was most helpful during adjudication and it clearly demonstrates the commitment and determination of the TidyTowns group. The Plan could be further improved by identifying short, medium and long term actions under each of the tidy towns categories as they appear in the entry form. We note your request in relation to the town boundaries that need to be considered. However, please be advised that adjudicators are instructed to consider all areas within the 50 kmph zones of all towns and villages and therefore, the committee is encouraged to concentrate their efforts on this area in future years.

The Built Environment:

Portarlinton is fortunate to have such a great range of buildings, open spaces and natural amenities such as the river and it is heartening to see that this variety of features of interest is acknowledged and that the TidyTowns group are working hard along with its development partners to maintain and improve them. In particular, your work in the area of the built environment is most impressive and in the view at the adjudicator, it is making a big difference. Many of the buildings in the town looked particularly well during adjudication. There are a number of key elements of the buildings in Portarlinton that are of significant interest such as their impressive architecture and their originality. Some excellent terraces of buildings were spotted on the main street and French Church Street. Stand alone buildings of traditional architecture that caught the attention of the adjudicator included the French Church, Riverview House, St Michaels Church, the Library and Courthouse. The HSE building directly opposite the entrance to Station Road is a lovely building and the adjudicator commends everyone involved with this project as it has achieved the reuse of an important historical building as well its sensitive refurbishment and extension. Another strength of Portarlinton is the many intact terraces of traditional buildings, such as the one on Main Street, as these terraces provide distinctive character and identity to the town. The adjudicator was delighted to discover that Portarlinton is not just about traditional architecture as there are some lovely examples of modern architecture to be found in the town centre. The pragmatic approach of concentrating contemporary designs on the inner ring road is complimented and it is considered that the modern architecture which could be seen in the pharmacy building and also in the leisure centre building provided a lovely contrast with the more traditional architecture found on the main street and elsewhere. Shop and business owners have also made a significant contribution to the main streets of the town centre with many commercial premises achieving a high standard of presentation on adjudication day. While it seems a little unfair to select some examples as the overall standard was generally high, a number of premises stood out and they included; the Garda station, the Post Office, AIB, the Anvil Inn, Whelan's central store and John Fletcher. The campus garage is located in a very interesting building, but the presence of numerous parked cars detracts from its appearance somewhat. The Weighbridge also looked very well. It was clear to the adjudicator that Portarlinton faces a number of challenges with respected to vacant and derelict buildings and you are commended on your determined approach to resolving this issue. Be sure to involve Laois (and Offaly) County Councils in your efforts as they have various powers at the disposal in the Derelict Sites Act to deal with these matters. You should also note that the Council provides conservation grants for refurbishment works (normally for protected structures) and the owners of the protected structures should be made aware of this. Perhaps an information evening could be arranged with the Councils and the Chamber of Commerce and other business owners to discuss the advice and funding that is available? It is also strongly recommended that the group try and agree with the Council which derelict or vacant buildings should be prioritised for action as some are in more prominent positions than others. Be warned that this can be a long process but many towns have dealt with this problem by concerted action and a partnership approach with their Local Authority. It is noted that improvement works were carried out at a number of protected structures in the past year which includes the Catholic Club on Main Street, St Michaels Church, St Michaels AC and Arlington House. We note that you refer to civic amenities as infrastructure and it is observed that a number of infrastructure improvements have taken place including new signs (on main thoroughfares), new footpaths (Station Road) and drainage upgrades. The list of projects that you have included under this category is most impressive and some of the ideas are most interesting such as the MUGA (multiple games area) in St Josephs Terrace. You are also commended on forming a rota of members to check online planning applications and to make submissions if you feel it is necessary. Finally, the idea for a heritage trail is an excellent one and it is long overdue as your town has many sites and buildings of interest that could be featured on it.

Landscaping:

The extensive list of native Irish species that have been planted on the river walk is very impressive. The Derryounce redevelopment project, which is to provide improved access between Portarlinton and the bog lands, is an excellent project and well done on providing features to enhance the walk. However, as bogs are sensitive habitats, it is important to be careful and only provide planting that is suitable for a bog area. Your

hard landscaping projects were also observed and it is noted that a piece of art in the shape of an eye was provided at the entrance to the walkway. Your work on the Park was admired with its excellent mature and established planting around the car park and pleasant seating areas. The park is an excellent amenity for the town and its riverside location, high quality playground and diverse and attractive landscaping all add to its appeal. The projects at Blackhall Bridge amenity area (including its treeplanting), the new green at Arlington house, the welcome wall (and its green area planted with native flowers), Corrig Wood and the planting of numerous containers and over 90 hanging baskets throughout the town were all noted and admired. It is noted that the 2011 adjudicator drew attention to the number of hanging baskets provided (over 90) and we concur that the number should be controlled as hanging baskets require a great deal of water and excessive numbers can give rise to visual clutter. Other landscaping projects that were observed included the raised timber planters outside the library, which were attractive and brought nice colour to this part of the Main Street.

Wildlife and Natural Amenities:

The adjudicator was delighted to read about your initiatives that are ongoing in the area of wildlife and natural amenity and it is heartening to see that the Committee is taking full advantage of the wonderful natural amenities that can be found both inside and outside your town. The adjudicator enjoyed a very pleasant stroll down the Derry ounce walk and it is lovely to see that there is such a variety on offer with a boardwalk, a woodland walk and a lake walk that are all accessible from the new pathway which will effectively links the town centre with the surrounding countryside. There is little doubt also that each of these three walks are diverse and abundant habitats were relatively distinct plant and animal species. Have you considered preparing a wildlife survey and management plan? A survey is strongly recommended as it would provide you with the information for interpretive signage and also enable you to monitor what happens to these habitats over time. Portarlinton is also very fortunate to have a special area of conservation (S a C) designated area for the river. This designation demonstrates that the river habitat has more than local importance but that it is also of significance at the county and regional level. Once again, has a wildlife management plan been completed for this? Remember that a lot of information would need to have been collected to enable the river to be included as a special area of conservation so it is possible that the survey has already been completed. Perhaps the group could obtain a copy of this information and use it for interpretative signage? The group are also encouraged to involve the schools in your wildlife plans and projects as it can be a very effective way of fostering an ownership of these environmental amenities among young people at a local level. This can help to lead to an appreciation of the importance improve the chances of conservation in the longer term. The 2011 adjudicators report identifies the river, the walks and the Park as excellent areas for wildlife. It is also suggested that wildlife sanctuaries are identified. Could this perhaps be part of the wildlife study?

Litter Control:

We were delighted to read that you won the towns category of the Laois Intercommunity Litter Challenge 2011 – this is an excellent yardstick of how much your town is improving. It is noted that your litter control strategy comprises actions by the Council's and by volunteers. Well done on your phased approach to litter and tidiness as this can be the most effective way of improving a town the size of Portarlinton. Your regular litter patrols and your work on both cleaning up dumping blackspots and helping to prevent further dumping by installing CCTV signs is also to be commended. We were generally impressed with the standard of litter control that was observed on adjudication day with many areas in the town appearing litter free. However, isolated incidences of litter was observed in a number of areas such; on the verges of the approach road to Portlaoise, at the Bring Bank in the Supervalu car park, on Crow Street, on some parts of Main Street, in the car park of the Aldi Supermarket, along canal walk and at Kilmalogue Park. However, it must be emphasised that these incidences of litter were quite isolated and it was clear to the adjudicator that regular litter patrols are taking place. On a positive note (and noting the experience of the adjudicator in 2011), no litter was spotted in or near the Park.

Tidiness:

The standard of tidiness observed was generally good and it was evident on adjudication day that a lot of work was undertaken on weed control and verge and footpath maintenance. The town centre was particularly impressive with virtually no weeds spotted and footpaths and road verges neatly swept. It is noted that your projects for 2012 included upgrading the welcome to Portarlinton entrance plaques, cleaning the stone benches in the square, painting public bins within the town, upgrading parking meters and working with the council to improve derelict estates. All of these actions are commended. It is further noted that the 2011 adjudicators report refers to problems with weeds at the base of walls and this was not the experience of the adjudicator in 2012. Despite this positive performance, improvements are possible. The landscaped planters outside the library building are a little untidy looking and will need painting in time for 2013 while the flagpole will also require paint.

The treatment of the verges of the link road was mixed with the verges on one side (the Supervalu side) in good condition and appearing well maintained while those on the opposite side were rather long and untidy

looking. The residential area directly across from the car park of the People's Park was in quite poor condition with overgrown and weedy verges observed. The railings at a pedestrian crossing close to the entrance of the Park will also need painting for 2013 and the site beside Whelehans was in poor condition. Are there any plans for this? On the Offaly side of the town, the appearance of St Michaels National School was let down somewhat by weed growth at the base of the walls in the car park and railings at the front that are in need of paint. The planters at the junction of the Tullamore Road and industrial estate road (Botley Lane?) are a little weedy and untidy looking. This road is also not great as it has quite untidy verges as well as weeds evident in the kerbs. The appearance of the Retail Park could be improved as untidy and overgrown verges and a weedy central landscaping bed was observed. A number of parts of canal walk were also very untidy looking due to overgrown verges, vacant sites and litter. The railway station car park was also in need of attention and maintenance.

Waste Minimisation:

Your performance under this category is quite impressive and the actions that you have undertaken demonstrate that the focus of your committee is on waste minimisation as well as recycling. It is noted that there are two bring banks in Portarlinton at Supervalu and Kilmalogue cross. It is further noted that you have listed the recycling centres and the charity shops in Portarlinton. The range of facilities provided is also very impressive with numerous recycling facilities available and within easy access of most residents. It is also great to see that there is a bring bank located on each side of the river. Your inclusion in www.greenhome.ie is observed while you are commended on the range of actions that you've engaged in order to minimise waste generation in Portarlinton – such as the new section on waste minimisation on your web site. Please also tell about your own waste reduction activities in your TidyTowns projects. Do you make your own compost or grow your own plants? Do you avoid chemical pesticides and fertilisers? We are also interested to hear about where you source the water to maintain the planters and flower baskets – is this harvested rain water or does it come directly from the river?

Residential Areas:

The number of estates in Portarlinton is extensive with a total of 40 and it is great to see that there is a Portarlinton combined residents Association. It is noted that 75% of the estates participate in the PCRA and we have little doubt that the remaining estates will come on board once they see the positive difference that it makes. Congratulations also to Ballymorris Manor Residents Association on winning the special award in the best estate competition in 2011 and the adjudicator was quite impressed with this estate with its attractive name stones and landscaped green. Other impressive estates include Rose Court, Botley Court, Pine Villa, Station Grove and Clonmalure – all of which achieved a good standard of presentation. St Michaels Park, Kilmalogue Park, Castle Gate, Avondale and Corrig Glen were also quite nice while a number of estates such as the Birches, the Sycamores, Bothar Coaran, Station Mews and Riverside were reasonable but would benefit from more regular maintenance and attention.

Roads, Streets and Back Areas:

The approaches to Portarlinton were mixed with some approach roads achieving a higher standard than others. The Tullamore Road was generally good as it provided an attractive and well maintained entrance to the town. The Edenderry approach road was less impressive as the overgrown verges gave it an untidy appearance. The Ballymorris approach road was reasonable but the verges at the 50 kmph signs were overgrown. The approach from Killenard could also be improved by trimming the verges – especially in the vicinity of the name stone. Well done also on your projects for 2012, which included the provision of a new footpath and cycle lane at Station Road and washing town and village nameplates and maintaining walls, fences and hedges.

General Impression:

Portarlinton is a fascinating town that greatly impressed the adjudicator. The quality and originality of the buildings and the natural amenities are particular highlights and the TidyTowns group is to be commended for making the most of these features of the town. While challenges remain, we have no doubt that you will continue to improve in the future. Best of luck for 2013!