

Tidy Towns Competition 2013

Adjudication Report

Centre: **Portlaoise** Ref: **313**
County: **Laois** Mark: **292**
Category: **G** Date(s): **15/06/2013**

	Maximum Mark	Mark Awarded 2012	Mark Awarded 2013
Overall Development Approach	50	46	46
The Built Environment	50	43	43
Landscaping	50	43	44
Wildlife and Natural Amenities	50	25	25
Litter Control	50	30	31
Sustainable Waste And Resource Management	20	12	12
Tidiness	30	17	17
Residential Areas	40	31	32
Roads, Streets and Back Areas	50	34	34
General Impression	10	8	8
TOTAL MARK	400	289	292

Overall Development Approach:

Thank you for the comprehensively completed application form plus the supplementary material such as maps of the town and additional indexed supporting documentation in folder form. It has been some time since this adjudicator took time out to traverse Portlaoise as up to now one tends to bypass the town on when travelling the M7. It was nice to revisit a place and have time to both do the work as an adjudicator and then take time out in one of the Towns oldest establishments for some sustenance. The changes that have occurred in the town, particularly in the outskirts, have been quite staggering since my last visit. The amount of mixed development that has occurred has been major and one hopes that town can sustain it as like everywhere else Portlaoise has suffered because of the economic situation and a number of what seemed established businesses have been closed down. Overall it was a pleasant experience, if at times a tiring one, to adjudicate Portlaoise and observe that the positive improvements far outweigh the negative aspects. The town has suffered some adverse publicity due to its litter problem in the past and while the litter situation has not been fully addressed there have been improvements in that category. Portlaoise is a town with a rich historical built environment that has tried to retain its main features while also embracing modern change and one can only laud that effort.

Last year's report alluded to the level of support from statutory bodies like Laois County Council and the Laois Partnership and while it is good to see this it's only what one would expect given that Portlaoise is the main county town. The support of other town associations and especially the wider community is paying dividends as a good image of the town was presented on adjudication day.

Well done to all who made the compilation and presentation of this entry possible and it is good to note that the town is being positive into the future. One will come back to partake in one of the evening Historical Tours of the Town about to commence in July.

The Built Environment:

The main change that this adjudicator has seen since last visit to Portlaoise is something that applies to a number of centrally located towns the volume of traffic that goes through its core area. Despite the advent of the M7 and the myriad of bypass options the volume of traffic a lot of it heavy that went through on adjudication day was quite staggering. The number buildings in a bad state of repair is still probably high but not exceptional for a town of its size, but a few of these seem to be listed buildings and are of architectural significance. Good to note that some of the historical buildings such as the Stonehouse and Fort of Maryborough now form part of the Heritage Trail as indicate by the very becoming and informative blue plaques. Portlaoise has like it sister county

town has a strong link with the Quaker tradition and this can be seen in parts of the town with reference to a number of prominent Quaker people. The Court House with its impressive frontage is in magnificent structural condition and a fitting iconic building in the part of the town that it's situated. In present society one has to embrace and praise contemporary architecture as well and there are many fine examples to be seen in Portlaoise. The buildings that house multiples such as Tesco, Aldi, and Lidl are of contemporary design and now form part of the fabric of most big towns in the country. The following buildings appealed to the adjudicator for a number of reasons but they may not be other people's choices so no offence intended. Chocolate Brown Coffee Shop at bottom of Main Street for its relevant colour scheme, Martleys Shop Front on Borris Street but just remove the fridge from outside, United Nations Veterans and FAS building near Fitzmaurice Place, Ryans Bar for simplicity but effective front design and one would have to mention Boyles Bookmakers beside it painted in the county colours, Ramsbottoms a surname with long association with Laois deserve mention as well. There are some derelict premises that stand out notably a few older houses in Bridge Street, there isn't very much a committee can do except to engage with the owners as best they can to see if any measures can be taken to improve at least the outside frontage. In times of financial constraints this may be beyond owners so one has to be patient and while I am on the subject it is sad to see the Old Bank Building only recently a Bridgestone rated restaurant up for sale and in a shoddy state. Another hoary chestnut is the proliferation of plastic and inappropriate signage that one encounters in towns and villages. The main churches, including the very impressive RC Church, schools and other public building such as Council Offices and Fire station in the town and on the outskirts were in a good state of presentation. The use of Irish in town is increasing and the Committee should keep encouraging people both business and private property owners to use the language to good effect where possible and it is good to note that you are to embark on a bilingual programme in the future. The footpaths were in good condition this makes walking easier as well as giving a street a uniformed look. One request could the very impressive heritage notice board at County Hall be replicated in the centre of town. Overall a very good standard with a great number of impressive private residences to be viewed in the immediate outskirts.

Landscaping:

There were many examples of both practical and colourful planting arrangements to be viewed both in public places such as roundabouts, green areas and adjoining public buildings plus new planters filled with colourful annuals in the centre areas such as Main Street and on Market Square. The use of trees as an urban necessity for both practical and aesthetic reasons is very much evident in Portlaoise again in core areas and very much on the outskirts. It is noteworthy that in the main young trees, which incidentally are well staked throughout, were not subjected too much vandalism. The use of low tree stakes has helped in this respect. Fitzmaurice Place in this adjudicator's opinion was a little bare and could with a little upgrading in planting terms to enhance it better. Maybe the committee could consult with the County Horticulturist to see if some planting arrangements could be place in the Square, now I realise that this may not be an option because of possible interference with such items. Similarly the Remembrance Park for World War 1 and those who served with the United Nations dead might benefit from a little added enhancement by way of some additional mixed planters that would give near all year round colour. Many hanging baskets have been placed at intervals around the town and they are effective in blending in with what already is in place. One has to commend the owners of individual gardens that were observed by the adjudicator as they were top class. Also well done to the committee for purchasing a poly tunnel to produce its own nursery stock a very worthwhile cost effective idea. Overall much good work has been done in this category and merits an increase in an additional mark.

Wildlife and Natural Amenities:

Last year the adjudicator mentioned the Peoples Park as a haven for wildlife and this has been endorsed by this year's adjudicator.

The application mentions other areas where there are wildlife habitats that have been highlighted such as the very well appointed Glendowns Wildlife Park and Kilminchy Village Lake but there is no accompanying explanation or attachment that outlines what has been undertaken in these areas to promote the preservation and encouragement of wildlife species. One is left to figure out what has been planned so I would suggest that the committee get in touch with the local County Horticulturist to see if he or she can help devise a simple plan that can be worked on and might result in the production of a survey or series of information leaflets or notice boards. It is also important to involve children from the various schools to be part of any such work as it will encourage them to come up with ideas that can be implemented and that they can be associated with.

Litter Control:

Litter was evident on the day and probably too much in central locations such as Lyster's Lane and Main Street but allowances have to be made in that it was a weekend day and Portlaoise was very busy. The committee is doing Trojan work to raise awareness amongst all sectors of both the business community and the greater local population as can be seen by the photographic records in the supplementary information folder. Without having to labour the point one can only do ones best to make everybody aware that it is in their own interest to keep their town as litter free as possible because it's better for the environment and its better for the Town as a whole both in commercial and tourism terms. Well done to the Committee for involving all the schools in your various initiatives and I have no doubt that the children will benefit very much from being part of such a crucial element of social civics. One additional mark is warranted in this category.

Sustainable Waste And Resource Management:

This is a category that caused a lot of concern for many centres under the old heading of Waste Minimisation

and it is now being revamped under this new heading. The objective behind it is to encourage entrants to move beyond recycling and take steps to reduce the amount of waste being produced by the public in the first place. It will take time to get everyone to even embrace the concept not to mind putting into practice what is deemed best in environmental terms. You as a Committee have embraced what this category is all about and have been very proactive in taking steps to put in place relevant awareness campaigns such as locating a shop area in the central part of town to promote any events that you intended to run. Areas such as anti gum campaigns, dog fouling and composting of waste are all part of the above but there are added dimensions such as using waste material to manufacture items of use. For instance old pallets can be adapted to grow crops of strawberries or old timber to make grow boxes to set the basics such as seed potatoes, lettuce and cabbage etc. It's all part of a new approach to prevention of producing unnecessary waste. For more ideas see the following website addresses: www.localprevention.ie www.greenhome.ie www.stopfoodwaste.ie

Tidiness:

The standard in this category was quite good as Portlaoise is a larger town that this adjudicator realised; his feet have made him aware of that fact! and it has many different features that have to be managed properly from a tidiness perspective. Some of the problems relative to tidiness, messy back areas and side entrances, broken boundary walls and the state of unoccupied houses are often outside of the control of any committee. All one can do as a committee is to constantly encourage owners to keep properties, frontages and side areas in proper condition. Other issues such as graffiti and dirty signage are something that they can do something about and the Portlaoise Committee has been very proactive in this respect. It is good to note that the Portlaoise Traders Association actively dissuade people from fly posting on vacant shop windows, there were a few dissenters on adjudication day, and this has been taken on board by the vast majority of owners of such premises or others who uninvited have taken liberties in the past. One has to say that many active businesses have too many notices on windows and it is noticeable that there is an upsurge in this practice right around the country so Portlaoise is no different. A few public places such as the area in Fitzmaurice Place which was quite weedy at the base of steps also Portleix House is in need of a little revitalising treatment as it looked a bit untidy. Some weeds were observed at areas such as the otherwise excellent St John's Square on the Borris Road Junction. The adjudicator thought that the sign on the railing of the Dunamais Arts Centre at the entrance was a little out of place and not in keeping with existing stonework of this impressive building. On the plus side there seems to be an improvement in the management of the Bring Bank Centre which is a public space and with the exception of a few pieces of litter it was quite ok.

Residential Areas:

Portlaoise has in the region of over 70 of what could be termed as housing developments or estates. Some like the inner town area of St John's Square are older established and well kept estates where people have presented their premises to a very high standard with an odd exception. Others like Harpur's Lane area has benefited from the siting of An Treo Nua Resource Centre as the houses in its vicinity were very well presented on the evening of adjudication. The adjudicator visited a good cross section of the estates on the outskirts as well and overall the standard was very good. Most of the areas visited were adjacent to the Town such as Rowan Park, Marian Avenue isn't there one in even each hamlet in Ireland, Parnell Crescent but some were on the outskirts, names allude me, near St Fintans Hospital in and around the Stradbally and Dublin Roads. Some estates had incomplete areas and we have seen this all over the country and there is very little any committee can do about a phenomenon that was not of their making. Suffice to say that the majority of places visited were well presented and the Local Tidy Towns Competition run by Laois County Council is having the desired effect and on the evidence of what was visited and given the vastness of the extremities of the town an increase in one mark is warranted.

Roads, Streets and Back Areas:

One takes on a fairly daunting task when adjudicating the roads, streets and back areas of a town the size of Portlaoise. A good deal of observation as well as driving skills are needed as there are a myriad of inter junctions and external roundabouts to be navigated. The major entrances to the town were very accessible although on adjudication day although the volume of traffic caused some congestion. Yes indeed; I witnessed a dashboard driver on the Ballyfin Road (well that's what I knew it by many moons ago!), who had the cheek to throw a cardboard coffee cup out the window and when I flashed Her - with my lights I hasten to add - she fairly gave me the reverse victory sign. There you go; some residue of the vulgar years of the Celtic Tiger remains with us still. The back areas in and around the town were acceptable, some very good some fair and some quite poor but for a town of its size the overall standard was quite good. A good deal of resurfacing has taken place on entry roads and this has added to overall good standard achieved in this category. Main signs for the most part were visible and clean.

General Impression:

This adjudicator has a soft spot for the O Moore County as he spent a good number of happy years in an educational establishment that one found it hard to get out of in those times, nowadays in its new guise it's hard to get into the place. It was nice to re visit and spend some time in the Town of Portlaoise which has made very positive strides in the Competition over the years and well done to the hard working people of your committee and those in the wider community. It was a hard day on the feet but the plus side was relaxing in one of the town's oldest establishments and viewing all the wonderful photographs of the great sports men and women of the Midlands. You are wished well in the competition in the years ahead.

