

Tidy Towns Competition 2017

Adjudication Report

Centre: **Abbeyleix** Ref: **302**
County: **Laois** Mark: **327**
Category: **C** Date(s): **28/06/2017**
26/07/2017

	Maximum Mark	Mark Awarded 2016	Mark Awarded 2017
Community Involvement & Planning	60	49	50
Built Environment and Streetscape	50	44	46
Landscaping and Open Spaces	50	45	47
Wildlife, Habitats and Natural Amenities	50	36	38
Sustainable Waste and Resource Management	50	24	25
Tidiness and Litter Control	90	52	49
Residential Streets & Housing Areas	50	32	33
Approach Roads, Streets & Lanes	50	42	39
TOTAL MARK	450	324	327

Community Involvement & Planning / Rannpháirtíocht an Phobail & Pleanáil:

Fáilte Mainistir Laoise! Welcome Abbeyleix to the Super Valu 2017 National Tidy Towns Competition. Thank you for your comprehensive entry form. We note that you have taken on board issues in relation to excessive volume of material previously submitted. We have noted your reference to additional material available on a website (reference supplied) and we have gone to that website to read the available material. However we would respectfully suggest that your Tidy Towns Plan should be submitted annually in hard copy. This is a very important document for an adjudicator to have to hand at adjudication time on-the-ground. We note that you do refer (on page 3 of your entry form) to the fact that you refer to 3 documents in relation to drawing up your work plan annually. One of these is Abbeyleix three-year Tidy Town plan. It would have been more important to submit that plan in hardcopy form rather than your Bog Project report which you have submitted in hard copy form. The Bog Project report is excellent, but is relevant to part of your work. A Tidy Towns Plan refers to and details all categories. We also note that last year's adjudicator's report does not refer to a Tidy Towns Plan being submitted in hard copy. (The Bog Project report may of course also be submitted in hard copy if you so wish- or put on your website for the adjudicator to peruse later.) Furthermore, on researching your three-year plan on the referenced website, we found the plan to be most confusing. There are two versions; one appears to have elements deleted due to updating (crossed out / red lines). The second version refers continuously to baselines of 2010 and is in fact very similar to the first version listed. We think it is time to revisit your three-year plan - to submit a new fresh three-year plan in 2018 that is related specifically to your new situations and is not a carbon copy with confusing updated material and (old) dated referencing in relation to other issues. A plan need not be prepared professionally, but you should consult widely locally in preparing such a plan. You should tell us as to how you went about this consultation. A good Tidy Towns Plan which is clear and accurate helps to gain marks in this category.

We would be interested to know if you refer to statutory plans in planning your work. Do you refer to the County Development Plan? Have you had an input into the current Draft County Development Plan 2017 onwards? We note that this is in preparation from our viewing of the Laois County Council website. These are important inputs and resultant documents to take into consideration in your forward planning. They are also very informative in relation to zonings, Protected Structures, Areas of Architectural Conservation, archaeological sites, NHAs, SACs, and so forth. Do you keep up-to-date with planning applications for your town and its approaches?

The original Sustainable Community Plan was drawn up in 2011. It might be worthwhile putting together a short and concise review of achievements and continuing proposals in tabular form in relation to this sustainable plan. Well done on gaining the involvement of the Department of the Environment in this project then. Is the Department in contact re updates? And Good luck with your Etown initiative.

Thank you for your map and for taking the advice of last year's adjudicator in relation to marking projects for the

current year on your map and relating the reference numbers to your entry form. However due to the detail involved and the large number of references we would ask that you provide a map of a larger scale - for the town centre in particular - in 2018. Section 5 of the guidelines on completing your entry form asks that you name all streets and roads as necessary and mark the key public buildings and landmarks. All maps should have a scale attached where a scale is relevant (i.e. unless the map is a sketch map - which type of mapping is more suited to smaller centres with less detail and fewer projects).

We must congratulate you on the amount of work achieved with a membership of 10 people. However it is clear that you work as part of an effective umbrella community development organisation ABC. This organisation represents the business and community organisations in the town. Abbeyleix has a relatively small population but a big heart. One of the reasons you are so effective is that you avoid duplication of work. Being part of a larger umbrella group means that issues get discussed and conflict is avoided. You use resources wisely - as you say yourselves. You understand and accept the importance of coordination and delegation.

This year because of your selection for the Entente Florale you held your AGM in January rather than in April. Perhaps this might be a good idea for the future. After Christmas there is usually a lull - and people are perhaps more receptive to getting out of the house and getting involved in planning for projects/meetings. By April exams loom in households; holidays are being discussed; Easter intervenes, and people tend to be busier. This is merely a suggestion. You know best what suits your circumstances.

You refer to your "excellent" CE scheme. Well done to all those working on the scheme. You appreciate having the RSS scheme looking after Fr. Breen Park. And the TUS scheme is also assisting you with your work. LEADER has been a partner to you to improve your Sustainable Town and to develop your Community Energy initiative (to be rolled out in the third quarter of this year). We look forward to hearing more about this in your 2018 entry. You yourselves get involved in public participation networks - such as the Public Participation Network and LDC. This shows commitment. Most importantly you have "an excellent relationship" as you describe it with your local authority. In particular they have been involved in helping you prepare financially and professionally for your international entry to the Entente Florale competition. We note from your Facebook page in the last few days that the adjudication for that competition took place a little over a week after this adjudicator visited. We enjoyed looking at the photographs of the visit on your Facebook page, and we sincerely wish you every success in the competition!

Well done on your partnership with Landscape Alliance Ireland. We are sure that the June forum was most interesting. We note that you have been described as a "dynamic progressive community" in the literature published in relation to the forum. You mention your success in competitions as being of importance in improving your profile and providing some funding. We saw and read with interest the certificates and competition success notices on the referenced website. In this regard we would suggest that you update your Tidy Towns (brown signs) at the entrances to the town to include your more recent successes in our competition. They appear to date back to 2011 at present. You might as well "blow your trumpet" in relation to successes since then in the Tidy Towns competition.

We agree that informal communication happens in a small town. You also acknowledge the formal communications under the ABC umbrella structure. It is not easy to hold public briefings. They require a lot of planning and good PR. Well done on holding two such briefings already this year. You say they were both well attended. We would be interested to know the approximate number of people who attended these meetings. You mention your Newsletter. Just perhaps tell us how you circulate it - and how often. Is it in hardcopy? Your webpage and Facebook page are full of information. And we note your recent 'foray' into texting in relation to clean-ups. In relation to your parish newsletter we hope that you keep any minority churches present in your area informed in the same way. Last year's adjudicator praised your Applefest festival as a good communication method. You also mention your participation in parades and your great association with both national schools and the local VEC School. Despite the fact that you tell us about all the Green Flags we did not see any flying on adjudication day. We were unable to gain access to the new large school off the Rathdowney Road, so perhaps Green Flags were flying there.

What an achievement to have been an entrant in the competition since its inception, and we are delighted to hear that the competition provides a valuable structure for your work. We were amused by the fact that it also provides an annual deadline for you to work with! This is true across the board for all work - even an adjudicator has a deadline!

Built Environment and Streetscape / An Timpeallacht Thógtha agus Sráid-dreacha:

Abbeyleix is blessed with an exceptional architectural heritage - both public buildings and private vernacular buildings. Being an estate town there is an architectural style particular to such a settlement. You are aware of this and are very anxious to conserve it. We think your statement "clean and freshly painted tidy buildings are the most important foundation for tidy towns" is a most important and pertinent statement. Whereas new categories have come on board down the years and are very important - should the built environment decay we are left with a sad town or village. Good architectural conservation means protecting the architectural qualities of important buildings, but also finding new uses so as to sustain the buildings into the future. One example of this to which you draw our attention to is the work on the Allied Irish Bank landmark building (which is a Protected Structure) - about which you delight in telling us that a bakery will be established there - proving this point. We note from reading the Laois County Council website that Abbeyleix has an amazing number of Protected Structures. There are approximately 50 listed in your County Development Plan and another 20 in the Abbeyleix Demesne area. This must be close to a record for a small town. As you are involved with encouraging property owners to conserve and maintain properties it is critical that professional architectural conservation advice is available to each person working on any Protected Structures. What is permissible without planning permission under normal circumstances does not always apply to work on Protected Structures. We would like to hear your comments on this issue in 2018.

The NIAH (National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (www.niah.ie)) is another great source of information in relation to Protected Structures. Some very interesting local history can be gleaned from information provided. For instance it became apparent to the adjudicator on researching your County Development Plan Protected Structures list that Pembroke Terrace once housed a Hotel, Post Office and a Constabulary Barracks. (You have dealt with the issue of weeding at this terrace referred to by last year's adjudicator). Such additional information makes a visit to the town very interesting. Perhaps you might consider developing this theme and perhaps ask for funding to obtain professional advice to produce a brochure online or in hardcopy about your interesting buildings. We also would like you to include information about the 'Area of Architectural Conservation' that is part of your town. (see Laois County Development Plan)

All this however does not mean that you neglect the built environment which is not necessarily protected but forms just as important a part of your townscape and streetscape.

You referred to the Northern End Bookend project as having been completed. However we are unsure as to what this 'completion' involved - as last year's adjudicator said that this project was looking very well in their 2016 adjudication report. Perhaps you are referring to extra planting as suggested in that report and indeed to the settling in and maturing of the project. This is an ongoing project.

Well done to all the people who have co-operated in painting and renovating during the last 12 months. You have taken on board comments in relation to Moran's and the Gallic Kitchen made by last year's adjudicator and found solutions thereto.

We are delighted with your Street Furniture painting - especially as your colour choice is not alone attractive - but also a colour which can be identified by people with visual impairment. Too often black is chosen as a street furniture colour. Black is a difficult colour for a person with visual impairment to recognise. This is not the only indication of your consideration for people with special needs with regard to mobility. We are absolutely delighted with your public access Wheelmap project. There are other websites/Facebook pages collating information and working on the same principle at present e.g. collating information in relation to accessibility internationally. Should you be interested in accessing details - this adjudicator can supply the references to the Tidy Towns HQ who could pass the details on to you. Once again for thinking of people with different needs we commend you for your continued support for the sensory garden at Dove house which unfortunately was closed on adjudication day, (you explained to us that this garden cannot now be open permanently to the public) and note the provision of ramp accesses by businesses where necessary - such as that Jade Palace. Your wheelchair friendly Bog boardwalk is another example.

We really like your honesty in relation to your admission of problem areas. This shows that you are aware of shortcomings and very anxious to make changes. Obviously some have been successful - like the AIB building, strategically located on an entrance to Main Street corner. You have indicated that you have tried to make progress on some of the other issues. Keep up the encouragement and hopefully these too will come to fruition in 2018. Meanwhile we hope that the extensive window coverage/signage in the restored AIB premises will be removed in due course. We noted that some of the signage referred to the upcoming Entente Florale competition. The posters describing Abbeyleix in past times were read with interest. Perhaps when this building is occupied with a permanent tenant these posters may be displayed on a freestanding sign elsewhere. An elongated premises set back from the street North of the Library looked a little 'sad', but we note that this premises is for sale. We hope that it will find a new owner shortly. Just north of this a building with excellent cast iron railings (despite a broken missing 'gap') requires repainting of its retaining walls, and would benefit from plaque improvement. One particular plaque was defunct and ugly. The blue coloured electricity substation beneath the railings also requires attention.

Towards the northern end of the town a pink coloured house with colour coordinating hydrangeas looked well. However this house and its neighbour had projecting satellite dishes on their street elevation, which detracted from both houses. It is important that you have a policy in relation to front elevation satellite dishes - as they are becoming more common and can destroy a streetscape visually - increasing clutter. Planning permission should be sought for satellite dishes on any front elevation.

You mention power washing the public Library. Power washing any Protected Structure is discouraged, as it can damage the stone fabric. Discuss this with your County Architectural Conservation Officer or Architects' Department. If neither exists ask your Heritage Office to obtain professional advice for you with regard to cleaning the building.

Well done on the replacement litter bins and also on the upgrading of the seating with recycled seats. Bus stop signage was clean and attractive.

Trail signage throughout the town is good. The old cast iron gates at the Lord's Walk are very beautiful. The restoration of the gates at the hospital might encourage more attention to iron work appreciation and maintenance throughout the town. You have a goodly amount of traditional cast iron work. Take care of it! Your Main Street post-box was admired.

Both the Church of Ireland and the Catholic Church are a credit to their congregations and clergy - as they looked resplendent. The Garda Station looked very well with its lovely shrub bed at the frontage setting off its site.

It was good to see the Father Breen Park being so well used even on a wet evening. We noted the outdoor gym. We also noticed the excellent painting work carried out recently on the container there which was cheerful. Perhaps you could continue the colour scheme painting on the end wall of the container? The public toilets door here needs improvement.

If Bonham's on the Carlow approach could be painted this would create a helpful visual introduction to the Main Street approaching from that direction.

We noticed some 'for sale' signs and some 'sale agreed' signs. You have informed us that things are improving economically in the area and hopefully these properties will - when they receive new owners - cooperate with your overall improvement plans.

Although you mention the improved lettering on the Capri building under the Residential etc. category it should rightly be credited here under this category and is credited here. The gable at the Northern end of Jade Palace would benefit from painting before next year.

While there are many properties that this adjudicator admired it would be too lengthy to name each and every one. We particularly admired the delightful gilt signage on the Medical Hall and loved the old Horlick's sign which has been retained on the door fanlight. We admired the Quinn property with its simple frontage at ground floor level and its traditional timber sash windows - all of which were presented in exceptional condition. The H and M fashions/Laois Cleaners - with simple lettering and white-gated arch was very well presented. Bramley's was admired. Abbeyleix Post Office is exemplary in its presentation - in the simplicity and lack of clutter and advertising. It could be held up as an example to many other Post Office premises around the country. Its neighbour - a solicitor's office also presented a clean uncluttered facade. Another solicitor's premises (White O' Donoghue) caught the eye. Breslin's Supervalu looked well, but the many projecting spotlights look cluttered. Where the insertion of down-lighting is permitted (check with your local authority Planning Office) down-lighting is preferable as it is discreet and does not create clutter. We noticed a number of other visually intrusive projecting spotlights on quite a number of other premises such as the Vincent's shop. The car park sign for Supervalu is a classy informative but unobtrusive example of a directional sign at a supermarket. However we felt that there was excessive advertising signage in the shop windows here. Otherwise Supervalu was presented very well indeed at both street and upper levels. This is a great feature of your town - that you give equal attention to ground floor and upper floor building levels.

We considered the advertising signage on the J. Bergin property to be excessive, and the large green signage on the adjacent Fyffe property also to be out of scale with the building. We also noticed a lot of signage in a butcher's shop window and over its name sign, and also a very extensive covering of the glazing with advertising at the Credit Union building - although the Credit Union building was otherwise well presented and had restrained down-lighting. There was some clutter on the footpath outside the otherwise well presented Cleland store, which included two sandwich boards and an advertising sign on a gas cylinder. This - taken in conjunction with the trolley park and the adjacent litter bin, together with the nine advertising signs on the shop glazing - detracted from the premises.

The simple treatment of the public space around the Library building with its classical stone bollards looked very well. Do keep this space clutter free as it is very effective as it stands. The monument and its integrated waterspouts North of the Library were clean, functioning properly, and free of litter. A significant feature of your town - which we praise you for - is the cleanliness and brightness of the alleyways between the terraces, shops, and houses along Main Street.

Promoting the use of Irish within your village attracts additional marks in this category. We know that you have an interest in bilingualism as is evidenced by your bilingual new stone signs on the approach from the South at the bridge and on Well Road - as well as at the Killamuck Bog directional sign with its 'Slán Go Fóill' message. We actually thought it was a little strange that the 'Slán Go Fóill' message was actually facing one as one entered Abbeyleix from the South. Well done on your bilingual directional trail type signage. In future perhaps any new housing developments might consider using an Irish name which relates to the geography - or some other heritage aspect of their immediate area. We look forward to seeing more use of Irish in Abbeyleix.

Landscaping and Open Spaces / Tírdhreachú agus Spásanna Oscailte:

The Northern Bookend project incorporating the 1916 commemoratives space is an excellent piece of hard and soft landscaping. This was a project that was completed for last year, but is maturing and being maintained. It is also a functional space providing seating. The triangular shrub bed with its apex at the town end points nicely towards and leads into the Main Street. The semi mature trees give this area a vertical interest also. A directional sign above the Stradbally and Ballyroan directional signage here needs replacement or removal. The entire project in the foreground of views to the Heritage House frame that interesting building. The design concept of the stone seating is unusual and appealing. The seat commemorating the midwife of 1916 is an unusual aspect of 1916 commemoration and catches the eye.

We loved the raised planted bed on the Portlaoise approach to the Main Street at the 'Welcome to Abbeyleix' stone sign. These are delightfully colourful and vibrant plant choices with a nice vertical emphasis including foxgloves, lupins, and bright blue delphiniums. All looked very well with the contrasting stonewall and hedging behind. Another project which really caught our eye was the new Bog sign on the southern approach. We loved its etched dragonfly. It is very creative - and as you say provides a very good photographic opportunity - which in turn is good for tourism and the image of the town. The use of wood material is appropriate. Your Tree Week planting was an amazing

achievement insofar as you planted 1000 tree/hedge plants at various locations. The ongoing 'Grow It Yourself' and Edible Landscapes projects - as well as the Allotments have a landscaping aspect, but also contribute hugely to the (next) Wildlife category. We look forward to seeing the maturing of the Monks' Garden at the Heritage House. The street planters are not overwhelming and fussy. Keep them to a minimum - and consider taking up on last year's adjudicator's suggestion about looking at possibilities for extra tree planting in the ground along Main Street. Well done also on removing the metal tree surrounds and for providing grease traps. The views obtained of the straight line of trees from either end of the Main Street - located as they are on the edge of the footpath and on the out-shots - is very attractive. We admired the lovely avenue of mature deciduous trees leading to the Church of Ireland.

Well done to the hotel on their hard landscaping and indeed green landscaping in the precincts of the hotel. As it is suggested to the users of the Bog amenity that they may park in the hotel grounds (well done to the hotel for that facility) it is of great public benefit that these hotel surrounds are so well landscaped and maintained. We particularly loved the deer sculptures. They are very engaging! We liked the perennial filled stone planters at the National Looped Walk sign nearby.

The entire Bog natural landscaping management work is being carried out with great professional guidance. We wondered about access from the entrance to the boardwalk in a wheelchair - as the access from the gate entrance seemed quite rough for normal wheelchair usage - along what is a fairly uneven woodland path insofar as wheelchair wheels are concerned - i.e. how does a wheelchair user get from the parking area at the hotel or indeed across this busy roadway from the Railway setback to get to the excellent boardwalk wheelchair facility with ease? This is purely a question as it really does not concern this category from a marking point of view.

Wildlife, Habitats and Natural Amenities / Fiadhúlra, Gnáthóga agus Taitneamhachtaí Nádúrtha:

There is no doubt about it but Abbeyleix Bog is "the jewel in the crown" in relation to wildlife habitats and natural amenities. This is a project that has been ongoing for some years. However you have continued to develop and manage this project and have now drawn in most excellent advice and research elements from national and academic institutions to ensure that this conservation project will be managed and progressed in accordance with best practice into the future. We salute you for your ongoing efforts in this regard. Meanwhile voluntary labour has been exceptionally busy locally in providing physical safe access to what is a unique and special place. Your Bog Report was read with great interest and a revisit to relax (without adjudicating!) in Abbeyleix to see this project into the future will be on this adjudicator's bucket list! It was amazing to see the list of ongoing survey work in your bog project report on pine martens, bats, otters, moth trapping etc, art-related projects, educational days, actual on-the-ground work - for instance pathway improvement and clearance of rhododendrons. You must have been delighted to form the cover picture for the Peatlands journal last December - and even more delighted to be counted amongst the top 10 conservation projects by the National Biodiversity Data Centre. The importance of your work was acknowledged by the presence of the President of Ireland in May at the Bog. We notice also your publicity related work in radio, field clubs, signage and Heritage Week events to highlight this extraordinary project. The Abbeyleix bog signage showing the site layout map, describing background and history, walking routes and safety advice etc is pristine.

Your town Biodiversity Plan guides you well, and the associated Biodiversity school workshops will introduce the youth to the concept in a gradual and stimulating fashion as will their trips to their own Bog!

Your tree and hedge planting projects will be special places for native wildlife. Your bird box project management is ongoing, and you have provided some new boxes in the Heritage House precincts. The new hedging along the Portlaoise approach recently provided is both a visual amenity and will become a wildlife corridor. The Scoil Mhuire planting of native hedging means that the younger generation will continue your good work into the future - as will the adoption of the Junior Pollinator Plan earlier this year. The South School projects likewise will probably produce some future biodiversity academics - as will the guided wildlife tours. We notice your appreciation of the species-rich possibilities at the graveyard. The Incredible Edible project is an ongoing project. The solitary bee project is new for this year. It was impossible to read the Community Water Officer's e-mail copy contained within your entry form on page 24, but no doubt the advice as to how to best manage waterways is good. The funding in the past from Avonmore to the Golf Club re acreage in conservation was farseeing. The wildlife enhancement area at Busy Bees opposite the exit to the street from the Well Road was noted.

As with other photographs we enjoyed the extra views on the website. Plans for the forthcoming year in relation to the wildlife meadows etc. should form part of your Tidy Towns plan and not your entry form details.

Some hedges appeared to be fairly recently cut as one approached the 50 K pH speed limit sign on the Gallow Woods approach road. There was also some evidence of apparent recent hedge cutting on the road connecting Father Breen Park and the Portlaoise road. Hedge cutting of recent origin on the main Portlaoise approach was noted. Remember that it is permissible to trim hedging along cultivated ground (e.g. gardens) throughout the year. However with regard to hedge trimming bordering non cultivated land - you are reminded that it is an offence under the Wildlife Act 1976 and Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2006 to cut vegetation in a hedge or ditch on lands not cultivated between 1st March and 31st August annually - this is for the protection of nesting birds. Before trimming any such hedges please consult with your local authority who will deal with this issue if there is a safety aspect involved. Birdwatch Ireland (www.birdwatchireland.ie) has a very good website which gives lots of information on this issue.

Sustainable Waste and Resource Management / Bainistiú Acmhainní agus Dramhaíola Inbhuanaithe:

The self watering systems for your street planters is a good project - as is your innovative water ram – the technology for which you are sharing with visiting groups since commencement last summer. You acknowledge the contribution made by the Women's Development Group in relation to craft work. Your on-going projects here are improving the standards in this category locally. These include Buy Local., Applefest, Community Oven, your weekly Farmers' Market, Grow your Own, Community Garden, Incredible Edibles and Allotments projects - as well as the multiuse facilities at Father Breen Park. Well done to the children in the South school and the crèche for their recent vegetable growing project using harvested rainwater. The WEEE bring centre is facilitated by a Tidy Towns committee member, together with a water harvesting demonstration.

Your recycling has expanded to include compost of waste. The fact that this expansion is free of charge is unusual and praiseworthy. Thank you for the statistics in relation to can and glass recycling. Remember that Sustainable Waste and Resource Management asks us to try to reduce waste before it is produced. Obviously the school's participation in the Green Flag programme helps both the schools and the broader community to understand and implement good projects under this heading. An example of this was your cycling weeks/get active program/the May 2017 bike week as well as the walking programs adopted by the schools.

The recent installation of LED lighting in the vicinity of the Library contributes to the aims of this category. The TCD study of sustainable communities which has commenced will be expanded into the future. We look forward to hearing about your Energy Charter in 2018. We observed the Trinity College Dublin requests on the bog walk gate asking how bogs can help with climate change.

We wish you luck with the ongoing plans for a green transport initiative using the old railway line bisecting the bog. Once again future projects should be included in your Tidy Towns Plan rather than in your entry form. The entry form should contain information on new or continuing projects which are on the ground.

It is great to see that the local businesses are interested in getting involved in waste management. It would be interesting to see some tables / statistics worked out over the next calendar year in relation to measured ongoing achievements. We noted your solar powered school signs.

Supervalu is inter alia recovering 95% of waste and out-of-date food for other productive uses. Perhaps you could tell us what these uses are. And in relation to food waste have you considered registering with the Green Home programme? We would recommend that you contact your local authority's Environmental Awareness Officer and ask for guidance on joining. Perhaps they can organise an information evening for the community to guide you on this.

Tidiness and Litter Control / Slachtmhaireacht agus Rialú Bruscair:

Despite the fact that you appear to have had only one sponsored street clean by the local authority street cleaning unit, you are managing very well in keeping litter away from the main town centre. However the same cannot be said about some other areas which we shall now discuss.

As with other Laois towns and villages you to participate in the Clean Up Laois week. Other organised cleanups take place and you patiently remove fly tipping on parts of the bog. The graphic designer who is voluntarily providing communication posters is to be praised. However please be advised that these should not be attached to lighting or other poles as fly posting.

Even though you discuss the new bottle banks under the Built Environment section it is here that we discuss them for the following reasons. You say that the bottle bank was renewed in April of this year 2017. You say that they look considerably tidier than the old shabby ones and that the proposed removal of the clothes banks will improve the general tidiness of that area. However we have to disagree on this issue. Has anybody looked closely around the vicinity of the bottle banks in recent months? Some surprise awaits the careful observer. Dead vegetation (dead branches of trees) and associated litter were observed and the sight was pretty awful on the day of adjudication. Tin cans, disintegrating paper, plastic bottles etc. were noted amongst the dead vegetation and some of this litter had blown onto the adjacent side road. And this appeared to the adjudicator to be a mixture of old and new litter - not all recent litter. Furthermore the signage is - even if new - is now quite grubby - especially the white background area which is stained especially on the edges and at the top. Furthermore foliage encroaches on the left-hand side of the signage as one looks at the sign. The openings in the bins can be accessed from both sides. This is hazardous as metal projections in groups of four protrude from the concrete base on the side away from the road. This adjudicator tripped - but luckily survived - over these protruding objects. They should be removed or at least a warning sign not to try to 'feed' the banks from the rear should be made clear. On adjudication day there were still two clothes banks on site.

Another area of extensive littering was in Father Breen Park under the seats along the parish hall elevation facing the playing pitch. Several drinks cans and plastic bottles, a small vodka bottle, and paper cups were scattered extensively on the ground and on the benches. This looked extremely poorly in what is such worthwhile amenity area. A small amount of graffiti was detracting from the colourful mural at the gable end of the Parish Hall. We note from a recent Facebook page entry which you made that you have ongoing issues with regard to littering in Father Breen Park. It would appear that a daily patrol is necessary - if not a twice daily patrol. As you mentioned the RSS scheme helping you in looking after the Park, perhaps they could share this patrolling for littering with you. An educational message also perhaps needs to be addressed in relation to respect for the amenity. On the evening of

adjudication the Park was in much use by players on the pitch. Perhaps the sports clubs could be encouraged to take part in regular cleanups as part of their outing to the Park. Attractive and functional litter bins should be freely available. Is this litter a result of unsocial night-time use of the Park? Even if this is the case it should not be still in place at teatime the following day.

The Rathdowney Road approach was lightly but significantly littered. Fly posting was in evidence. Details of this littering and occasional untidiness are discussed under the Approach Roads etc. category. For the sake of non duplication of detail please refer to that category for details - but its impact is felt on both categories.

Fly posting for a radio station was noted on the road near Thornberry Estate junction and also on the Portlaoise Road.

Has the required statutory time requirement for displaying the large school National Development Plan sign ending in 2013 been passed? If so could this large intrusive sign be removed?

The new bin flaps prevent household rubbish being deposited in public litter bins. Well done on the upgrading of the street furniture and planters in Main Street which have contributed to a general aura of tidiness in the town centre seen on adjudication day. The older and smaller wooden boardwalk bog project sign on the bog walk entrance gate is becoming somewhat illegible through weathering.

Residential Streets & Housing Areas / Sráideanna Cónaithe & Ceantair Tithíochta:

Under the Built Environment category you credit the residential users with their building maintenance. Of course the residential users are part of the Built Environment category and contribute to it in great numbers. We acknowledge this under this category heading also and consider that the suburban and town residential properties are exceptionally well maintained in keeping with the ethos of the town itself. An example of a residential property forming part of your streetscape was admired. This was located near one of the out-shots on the street - a duck-egg blue coloured two-storey terraced residential property with a red hall door (with traditional timber sash windows) looked pristine and attractive. Gardens are likewise well tended and leafy.

Estates generally were of good quality especially from a landscaping point of view. We read with interest the extra effort that has been put in various estates with regard to sustainable planting. Grallow Wood estate was well presented. The fact that that estate is now largely occupied contributes to a dramatic improvement you say. Some 'before' and 'after' photographs would emphasise your point.

You say that a significant proportion of De Vesce Hill is still unoccupied. The De Vesce Hill estate access way could be enhanced by painting of the high rear curtilage walls (of the houses facing the main road) which bound the access. The area which is unoccupied is cordoned off by ugly concrete bollards. We would disagree that the view from these bollards inwards to the unoccupied section is well maintained. That was not our experience on adjudication day. We noticed some wild orchids in a small open space near the access to the main road where a number of semi mature trees are planted. This conversely was an attractive feature. The inhabited area is well presented.

Vesey Close estate is very verdant.

Ashbrook Estate is to be commended for the on-going wildlife initiatives and its good planting.

Sli na Nóir and Gort na Nóir on the Mountrath approach were well presented. A long end wall on the right-hand side needs antifungal treatment.

Balladine Heights estate is delightfully planted. A broken wall opposite the exit to this estate would benefit from repair. A rubbish bag beside a litter bin at the entrance to this estate was hopefully awaiting collection having been removed (hopefully officially) from the adjacent litter bin!

Ballyroan estate was neat.

Well done Fairways estate on your pollinator friendly planting! The residents must have been honoured to be chosen as the representative estate for the Entente Florale competition. Planning for the estate is in ongoing implementation.

The house painting which you were arranged on Temperance Street looked stunning even on a wet evening! The restoration of St Mary's cottage is to be welcomed.

Approach Roads, Streets & Lanes / Bóithre Isteach, Sráideanna & Lánaí:

You divide your approach roads projects entry details into the cardinal points. These are the main approaches, but we also looked briefly at feeder approaches - which should not be forgotten.

Firstly we have to sympathise with you in relation to the endless heavy traffic trundling through your beautiful town. It seems a shame that some national initiative is not identified to ensure that such traffic is assigned to the available motorway. It makes the experience of walking in your town less pleasurable, as one is almost swept off the footpath by the tailwind of some of the vehicles. We wonder how the elderly or mobility challenged people manage. We also

wonder how they can cross the street - and if their business is in the centre of the street - they must travel to either end to safely cross at a pedestrian light. Would a central pedestrian crossing be possible to facilitate the elderly and serve as traffic calming and an encouragement to heavy vehicles to abandon a route which slows them up?

In relation to the southern Gateway project which you say was completed for last year's application you note that 18 of the new trees failed. Despite the fact that you replaced these in the spring of this year we noted a number of dead trees as we entered Abbeyleix from the South. On this major approach road (just before the renewed stone Millrace bridge area - and indeed within its vicinity) - there are a lot of weeds in the rough surfacing on the outer town side of the bridge in a recessed area enclosed by black timber please fencing. The waterway area under the bridge is also quite weedy. However we saw some lovely wild orchids along the roadside at this point also. The bicycle lane markings need to be repainted in this general location, as do some of the hard shoulder would wonder that anybody should be encouraged to cross this very busy heavily trafficked road from the old railway bridge recessed area to the bog site.

The Topaz garage was beautifully presented with its neat classical shrubbery along the perimeter gravelled area. The entire site looked well and the owners/occupiers are to be complimented. Unfortunately the same cannot be said about the adjacent property to the south. This has been the subject of comment heretofore in previous Tidy Towns adjudication reporting. There is a need for screening of storage within the site and amelioration of the security fencing through landscaping - together with the removal of the torn flag and generally the tidying of the site. This is even more important as a car park is provided roadside here with a 'Fáilte to Abbeyleix' brown sign and a National Loop Walk signage adjacent. Cars parked in this parking area face this site which requires attention. Generally there seem to be too many signs announcing one's arrival to the town on this approach. The large boulder with the Fáilte s sign is attractive. There is the large-scale road/traffic signage. There is a Tidy Towns brown sign and the green and white town sign also. Can anything be done to rationalise the situation? Across the road from the Topaz garage there are some dead unremoved branches remaining inside the footpath and grass margin (in a gap) in the otherwise lovely leafy approach. The 'children at play' sign was partly obscured and trail sign for the town and Park were almost completely obscured by straddling vegetation on the southern approach beyond the hotel.

We are delighted to see that you have this year replaced the broken down chain-link fence on the long approach from the North. Thank you for the relevant 'before' and 'after' photographs. The planting of the native hedge will mature nicely and impress the visitor travelling through your town. The new stone wall (as one approaches the Heritage House) was a good project also The Northern Bookend project incorporated the 1916 commemoratives space. This was a project that was completed for last year, but is maturing and being added to with planting and maintenance.

You referred to the approach from Ballacolla as also being a Southern approach also. You have carried out work to the broken wall on this approach which was admired including the bilingual stone plaque. The removal of two redundant flower beds is also mentioned. On this - also the Rathdowney approach - the footpaths were weed-free. In fact weeds were conspicuous by their absence on mostly all sections of approach roads. Well done on this! However there are some issues to be resolved on this approach road. For instance the 50/80 K pH speed limit sign appears to be turned around each facing in the wrong direction on the side of the road as one approaches the town. Another speed limit sign is angled. One speed limit sign leaving the town required cleaning. Another was partially hidden by tree branches brackets close to the stone bridge). Another road sign was tilting. Quite an amount of individual pieces of scattered litter appeared in the grass margins. Items such as drinks bottles and cans, occasional paper were evident on this approach to the town. This is quite a pity as this is very attractive approach by the estate. We were disappointed to see the old factory area untidy precincts just off this road with the rusting gate, disintegrating signage, and a metal falling sign. We note that the house on the approach to the old factory appears to be under reconstruction and heaps of spoil material opposite are probably temporary. Broken timber fencing together with a bent and rusty field gate across the road (in the factory access area) from the lovely stone schoolhouse looked poorly. A wooden pole on the footpath on this approach has a truly horrible array of fly posting secured with black tape. The only legible part of this fly posting was at the top portion and read 'caution.' Reading over past adjudication reports we note that the second round adjudicator remarked on the seemingly identical 'caution' fly posting in 2011. So this fly posting appears to have been in place for six years without removal! Conversely we admired the lovely roadside incidental shrub planting, the semi circular enclosure just outside the inner speed limit sign. Some road markings have been renewed along this road, but at the junction of the road with the Well Road road markings need renewal - e.g. the stop sign on the road junction of the Ballacolla road with the L5731. One litter incident was noted around the water spout at the junction. Some cable ties were also observed a wooden pole near the 50 K pH speed limit signs near the same junction. The solar powered school sign beside the 50 K pH speed limit sign was partly obscured by tree branch growth. We admired a well painted traditional field gates with nice stone pillars through which one views the church of Ireland building. We would highly recommend that attention be given to painting field gates in general - whether they be traditional or modern tubular gates on all approach roads within the speed limit areas. This delineates a sense of arrival for the visitor and boundary formation for your work. Road surfaces as one approaches the town on this approach are poor in places.

On the approach road serving Grallow Wood estate some rusty gates were noted. Security fencing at the yellow brick Eircom property would benefit from landscaping. Dead branches just inside the entrance to the same property should be removed. The wall and parapet/roadside wall on this property require repainting. There was some vegetation overhanging the footpath on this approach also. A rather untidy site was noted where a van seemed abandoned. However the site had some delightful ox eye daisies at the town end of the field. Nearer to the junction to the main road a small amount of dead foliage was observed in the hedging.

On the connecting road between Father Breen Park and the Portlaoise road some rusty gates need painting. On this road it was nice to see a wheelchair user road sign near the stone bridge. On this road also one farmstead with a lot of machinery parked on the site might be screened. At the junction of this connecting road with the main road there was some vegetation in the hedge cut and not removed, but this may have been a temporary arrangement as worked appeared to be ongoing close by on a residential site. The upright pole of the stop sign at the junction was rusty. Works were ongoing at the junction to the waterspout. This was good to see as last year's adjudicator asked if there were any plans to restore the waterspouts.

On the Mountrath approach there were some few scattered litter incidents such as a tin can, a bottle and some paper. The industrial estate is neat and has nice trees, but could some of the security fencing be planted? At the estate we noticed a considerable number of cars parked on the footpath despite the availability of lots of parking spaces. This is a practice to be discouraged. It causes obstruction to pedestrians and particularly to mobility impaired footpath users and to buggy users. It also looks untidy and causes damage to paving. Could the railings be planted at the Casserly property? The First Ireland Spirits sign needs renewal. The large Portlaoise road directional sign opposite Dunnes hardware was torn. Large advertising hoardings on the same premises should be renewed or removed. Parking on the footpath beside a continuous white line approaching the junction on the Mountrath approach should be controlled.

The approach road from the graveyard inwards looked well and the footpaths were weed free mostly - particularly admirable on such a long stretch of road within the speed limit markings. We thought it rather unusual that you ask the public to park cars (in Manor Hotel car park or) across the road in front of the railway bridge recess. We found the nice narrow boardwalk from the rear of the hotel car park into the bog site. However we area. The '50 K pH ahead' sign was dirty and one speed limit sign was turned. Two tyres in the roadside graveyard recessed area should be removed.

The Mainistir Laoise black sign on the Carlow approach looked a little dirty and could the nearby garage be screened? Furthermore the (signposted) junction to the workhouse graveyard needs tidying. A 'clatter' of signs at Thornberry junction needs rationalisation.

As with last year's adjudicator we admired the lovely poppies here. Some metal was abandoned in the hospital recessed area.

Within the town's Main Street some wheelchair parking spaces need repainting. We also noticed a (skid) road sign towards the northern end of the street which was obscured by lower branch tree growth. Some on-footpath parking was noticed on the approaches to the Catholic Church. This is obstructive to wheelchair and buggy users. On the day there was no service in progress.

Concluding Remarks:

We feel that you have recently concentrated your work to a large extent on the town centre and on the Bog project. The results are magnificent. Furthermore you have been really busy preparing for the entry to the Entente Florale competition. Interestingly you have devoted only three pages of your entry form and overall submission in hardcopy to the question of approach roads, streets and lanes. Your tidiness section also amounted to three pages. By comparison your landscaping category consisted of 10 pages. Your wildlife category was very extensive and included the hardcopy bog project report. Your sustainable waste and resource management category numbered 15 pages. We think that it would be a good idea now to divide your efforts so as to perhaps concentrate on your town approaches and your tidiness and litter issues - whilst still maintaining your overall standards in all nine categories and moving forward in all categories We feel that you can continue to go on to achieve great things. You have amazing energy for the work in hand. You are consistent, organised, and persevering from the commencement of this competition almost 60 years ago! And that is one of the reasons that this report is rather long and detailed. We hope this will give you confidence and will encourage and help you in future work. We wish you continued success this year and into the future. Go n-éirí libh i rith na blianta ata romhainn!

Second Round Adjudication:

Since we last visited Abbeyleix we felt that the central area had seen an uplift. The retail premises looked brighter and livelier too. You're indeed fortunate to have such a strong heritage framework and that has been enhanced with the sensitivity that it deserves.

We found residential properties get the same close attention, with well-presented open spaces and play areas. We commended the choice of planting you have used.

Abbeyleix's architectural heritage has been, quite rightly, highly praised. On this visit, one of the pleasant reminders was the view of the flank of the Church of Ireland to be seen from the Rathdowney road. The long elevation stands back a few hundred metres but the flat green field in between allowed us to see it all undisturbed. Then you come across a broad straight tree-lined avenue leading up to it. This is a charming combination of architecture and landscaping, all well looked after. Our only reservation was with the church roof where the slates (of two colours) deserved to be cleaned to reveal the lovely horizontal bands of contrasting grey and terracotta.

The bog walkway is amongst your foremost features. We were delighted to recall how the causeway embankment of the former railway now provides you with an elevated pedestrian way. Our time spent there set us listening to the

rustle of the closely planted trees in the wetlands along either side. Wrens flitted by and butterflies such as the Green-veined White zigzagged along. This variety of wildlife is a great attraction, which you are caring for. On our next visit we hope to see the very scarce Marsh fritillary that you mention.

Along the gravel path of the bog walkway we were disappointed at the frequency of dog fouling. This should be discouraged where nature is the priority, especially as concerns arise over introduced parasites or viruses.

We saw the signs for the forthcoming collection of farm plastic. Certainly a commendable initiative. Well done.