

Tidy Towns Competition 2017

Adjudication Report

Centre: **Portlaoise** Ref: **313**
County: **Laois** Mark: **304**
Category: **G** Date(s): **09/07/2017**

	Maximum Mark	Mark Awarded 2016	Mark Awarded 2017
Community Involvement & Planning	60	48	45
Built Environment and Streetscape	50	44	45
Landscaping and Open Spaces	50	45	46
Wildlife, Habitats and Natural Amenities	50	25	26
Sustainable Waste and Resource Management	50	17	18
Tidiness and Litter Control	90	53	54
Residential Streets & Housing Areas	50	34	35
Approach Roads, Streets & Lanes	50	35	35
TOTAL MARK	450	301	304

Community Involvement & Planning / Rannpháirtíocht an Phobail & Pleanáil:

Fáilte Port Laoise! Welcome Portlaoise to the Super Valu 2017 National Tidy Towns Competition. Firstly congratulations on your achievement in gaining a silver medal in 2016. Thank you for the warm welcome for the adjudicator in your chairman's a letter.

There are 15 people involved in your committee. To have more than 100 volunteers in addition to that is exceptional. You also say that there are more than other 100 bodies such as clubs and societies that work with you. It is hard to imagine how there could be 100 plus clubs and societies in a town with the population which you have - but we believe you! This too is an extraordinary commitment on behalf of the people of Portlaoise. It must mean that every group in existence help you!

You hold fortnightly meetings which are well attended and minuted. A work schedule is arranged for every time of the year and all locations of the town. This shows an organised and businesslike approach to your work.

You list 10 agencies, bodies, and businesses that have supported your activities in various ways, and name each one of these.

You communicate in various different ways - which include traditional communication methods and modern communication methods. This is a good approach as each appeal to a different age cohort. When you mention the 'parish newsletter' - we hope that this also includes notifying minority churches in your area.

You engage with your schools in conjunction with your local authority through 'Green Sustainable Projects'. You also mentioned that the Let's Tidy Up the Town event is well attended by various groups - we assume that you mean under this entry form heading that youth are involved also.

You have entered the competition for the last 20 years. You note that the way in which you see your groups work contributing to the development of a community is "primarily by example and by encouraging civic pride with visual evidence and the betterment of your town's many facilities."

In your entry form you have 'bullet pointed' the various projects for consideration. However Section 3 of the guidelines on completing your entry form asks that each new or continuing project for the current year should be identified by number in your entry form under the correct category - and these projects should also be shown with the same numbers on the key to the town map (where the projects are ones which can be mapped). You did not number your projects undertaken for this year in your entry form. Moreover you did not show nor number all your projects on your map.

The Portlaoise town map was totally unhelpful to the adjudicator on adjudication day. It was almost illegible, and it was practically impossible to read the street, road, and housing estates names which were shown thereon. This is much too small a scale map for the purposes intended. Google maps are not to be used as per the entry form guidelines. Whereas the map extended to the outer limits of the town, none of the approach roads were named. It is also critical that you submit a detailed street map of the town centre when you are dealing with a town with your population. It is very difficult for an adjudicator to adjudicate the centre of a large town without a street map. It also makes it well-nigh impossible to have accurate references in this report. You are asked to show all key public buildings. Several key buildings were omitted from your map - such as the railway station, the various churches, etc. Please clearly mark and name each housing estate on your map. This absence of an adequate map is even more surprising and disappointing in light of the fact that last year's adjudicator said "no map was provided which made adjudication a more difficult task." This adjudicator spent the first part of the day walking around the various hotels to find a street plan of your town - as the tourist office was closed. This report would not be as well referenced or complete without the detailed street map which the Heritage Hotel kindly provided when the adjudicator called by there, after this adjudicator found 'itself' in the town 'mapless.' We are unsure as to who publishes this street map but we think it is the Laois Tourism Offices. This map in fact we found is to be seen on an information board in the square. Whereas the map that the adjudicator found in the hotel was helpful - it is still obviously not a map in accordance with the requirements in your entry form. It merely helped the adjudicator adjudicate the town centre. Please read the guidelines carefully in relation to map submission before drawing up your map and submitting it with next year's entry. Look for help if necessary, but do not let a third year go by without a proper Portlaoise town map in accordance with the entry requirements. It is very helpful to an adjudicator to have a good clear map on adjudication day. If we have made errors in referencing roads, building locations, housing etc. in this report - it is simply due to the lack of adequate mapping.

Last year's adjudicator does not mention a Tidy Towns Plan, and we do not appear to have received such either with this year's entry. We are sure you must have a plan considering the amount of work you carry out - and obviously hope to carry out in the future. We cannot credit you with this in its absence. It is very important to have a Tidy Towns plan - as such a plan focuses your mind on your resources and ambitions. A three or five-year plan will focus your mind on the important issues facing you, and it will help you to prioritise your work. A plan should contain at least a simple list of your aims and objectives and a clear timeline, and it need not be prepared professionally, but you should consult locally in preparing such a plan. You should tell us as to how you go about this consultation. You should also consider any statutory and non-statutory plans applicable to your town in drawing up your work programme. You should show your familiarity with - for instance - your Town Development Plan. As it is difficult to advance in this category in the absence of a Tidy Towns Plan - please do refer to the Tidy Towns Handbook for advice in relation to the preparation of a three or five-year plan. We would suggest that you layout your plan on the basis of the competition categories. Good luck with this!

The standard of detail in your entry form - including the lack of detail in relation to project details themselves and their locations - is something you need to address before next year. It is very difficult to adjudicate on projects for which the adjudicator has neither specific locations nor specific details. (Furthermore we read from last year's adjudication that last year some categories were left blank). As a result of this a lot of this adjudication report detail is basically 'thanks' to the result of this adjudicator spending an entire day in your town trying their best to find everything and credit you for work that you have done - which you had not led us to. We recommend that you carefully study all the guidelines to completing your entry form annually. Do not leave it to one person or do not leave it until the last minute. Sometimes groups get so involved in working on the ground that they rush putting the entry form together. This leads to confusion and often leads to the omission of work carried out

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

Heartiest congratulations on being selected for the Adopt a Monument Ireland Scheme in relation to old St. Peter's Cemetery. This is a great achievement. We are delighted to see that the first step will involve conservation work to the original cast and wrought iron gate. We look forward to following this project with interest in the future. With regard to this project we fully understand and agree that it is essential to have a professional plan to work to before works commence. You have agreed to a programme of works now with the Heritage Council and the local authority, the Irish Wildlife trust and Laois Heritage Society. It is great to see the involvement of various interests which are in keeping with various aspects of the site. Old St. Peter's Church plaque on the stone wall looked well. The gate was closed on adjudication day so we could not see inside, but we saw what we assumed is the old tower in views from outside the perimeter. (It is actually quite confusing to have so many St Peter's churches and graveyards in the town and we wondered what connection St. Peter might have had with Portlaoise!!)

Portlaoise town centre has a very interesting built environment which is quite unspoiled. In particular the adjudicator was impressed by the lack of high street generic shop design and signage, and commends both the county council planning authority and the high-street type shops themselves for their efforts to retain the traditional street architecture. This is commendable. We spent quite a long (pleasant) time walking through your town centre. There are some simpler buildings which are very well presented, and other more elaborate buildings which are also well presented. Due to the downturn in business over the years of recession there are some good and bad premises sometimes side-by-side. A small example of this is the delightfully presented two-storey terraced property (which obviously used to be a shop but is now a private residence) called Scully's on Bridge Street beside the now closed - less well presented Downtown Frames disused business premises adjacent. The latter is now for sale, and we hope that it finds a new owner who will bring it up to the standard of adjoining properties. Nearby the Polonez shop front was detracted from hugely by the total covering of the doorway and window glazing by advertising. Bridge Street

itself is a nicely paved street which rises up to Main Street. The hair salon on Bridge Street was also well presented. We very much liked the simple presentation of the Leinster Express building. However in relation to the latter two businesses - and indeed too many others - we would question the necessity of attaching hanging baskets to what are in themselves very well presented traditional vernacular shop fronts. Further up Bridge Street the green and white ground floor sports frontage was somewhat spoilt by the second and third floor which appeared to be in unoccupied condition. We very much liked the Ramsbottom and Sons shop front. The lettering was traditional and very attractive. We would definitely question the necessity for hanging baskets here - which detracted from the integrity of this shop front. Furthermore if this is a Protected Structure the insertion of hanging basket brackets may damage the fabric of the building/shop front. A leaning damaged bollard on the footpath outside also detracted from the shop front.

Shuttering on shop fronts such as that observed on the Golden Grill give a fortress-like impression to a streetscape by day and leads to a darkened street by night. Security shutters can be applied behind a window display, which also allows light to filter onto the street at night.

We admired the red brick building at the top of Bridge Street, although there were many power lines distracting from its frontage. It seems a pity that a building still holding such a nationally well-known brand name as Shaws is now seemingly dependent on the local pharmacy to upgrade its window displays. (This they also did last year as read in that adjudication report). Well done to the pharmacy and the Hollywood theme was interesting. Nonetheless the upper floor needs attention and the projecting lighting over the now removed name sign is quite obtrusive. Who owns this building now? Can you approach them? The hood moulding on the upper floors of 'De Barbers' shop was admired.

Quite a focal building in the Main Street area is the Courthouse/Arts Centre. The lovely bright blue plaque was pristine. We felt that the building could benefit from a repaint as soon as funds allow. Whereas the paintwork is not very dirty - neither is it gleaming. The stonework on the Church Street side of the Courthouse building and the timber sash windows were much admired. We read your explanation about the dirty doorway near the EBS. Could you ask the Architectural Conservation Officer in your local authority to help - or your Heritage Officer? Around a corner the blue colour of the Bay Tree Cafe with its lovely stone first-floor - together with the McCabe property opposite looked very well. The Bay Tree café's lighting and that of the McCabe property was unobtrusive recessed down-lighting. It is noticeable that neither had projecting signs nor projecting lights. Well done! Two redundant hanging basket brackets should be removed from the McCabe property. An example of a huge number of projecting signs was noticed on Portland Barbers and the adjacent fashion shop. This is a pity because both of these properties were very well presented in themselves. Overall we felt that the prevalence of projecting lighting, projecting signage, hanging baskets, lanterns etc. from many buildings along the main streets detracted from an otherwise very good set of streetscapes. We would strongly suggest that you consider engaging architectural advice on the treatment of your otherwise lovely streetscapes. The important thing is to keep and maintain the properties and the architectural individual qualities - not to create 'fuss' and visual intrusion. Michael Kavanagh Cycle is to be congratulated for its restraint in the presentation of the shop premises - which has neither projecting lighting nor external signage. Well done on a classically simple and effective presentation of the business! O' Loughlin's Hotel is a fine imposing structure. A gable end rising above the Blue Door (on the Square end) needs repainting. We thought there was quite an amount of clutter on the stone and green building opposite Bull Lane. A blue building on Bull Lane would benefit from a repaint, and the shuttering in the same building detracted somewhat from this otherwise pleasant laneway. The garage building called 'Browns' at the end of the laneway was neat, but there were a few little enclaves in this area which needed some upgrading.

We were visually drawn to the simple classical reuse of the church on Church Street and to the treatment of its shop front. Well done to the local architects! Not too far away the Department of Social Protection building is badly in need of a facelift, and across from this we admired the bright blue window frames of the premises occupied by Sharon Levy. Around Millbrook a large wrinkled banner on Dunamase College building looked poorly. Otherwise this old school building was presented well, with particularly good treatment of its painted boundary walls.

In the modern precinct which includes Supervalu, we felt that the complex which includes the Euro building had a lot of unnecessary first-floor advertising, and the gable of the ground floor required painting - as it has a small amount of graffiti. The white part of the canopy over Oxfam and An Post needed cleaning. In this shopping square we admired the interesting stone bench with slatted backing. An arched area - leading between the Supervalu square and the Meehan Court area was a little run-down looking. The Leabharlann Phoiblí/ Library tower and gable would benefit from repainting.

On Railway Street we admired an excellent cast iron railing bounding a site for sale - and across from this a lovely terrace of houses including a guesthouse.

The Market Square area was a bit of a disappointment insofar as it appears to function as a traffic thoroughfare with much parking and signage and little sense of restful enclosure. Nonetheless it was tidy. St. Peter's Church of Ireland which is strategically located on the Square marks a point of interest in the Square. It was well presented - apart from the large sign - although informative - we felt it was out of keeping with the building and surrounds.

You tell us that the Garda Station precincts are continuously being improved in conjunction with the OPW, Laois Gardaí and your local authority. This is good cooperation. The local authority offices is a very fine modern building, but some staining on the road-facing walls would benefit from repainting.

St. Peter and Paul's Church at a road junction is in a strident location with a lot of hard landscaping and car parking. Nonetheless this modern church building looked neat and tidy.

The prison building understandably requires security arrangements. However its architectural conservation appeal is limited by the security fencing. The hospital building looked bright, although the boundary walls could be repainted. It is hard we understand to keep walls clean with all the traffic on this stretch of road.

The Fire Station was extremely well presented and we admired the flowers there. A derelict garage with a very bad canopy and security railings in proximity to the Fire Station looked poorly.

The Minch Norton property is a very fine old stone/brick building, but a rusty sewer vent pipe and bent railings detract from its appearance. Likewise the Odum's building is interesting and is located in a peaceful area.

The hotels in the town were extremely well presented The Heritage Hotel in the town centre has a very attractive hard landscaped area - immaculately presented facing onto Jessop Street, and the Killeshin hotel on the Dublin Road which also looked very well - together with the O' Loughlins hotel on Main Street which forms part of that lovely streetscape. Jessop Street itself is a nice enclave with good tree planting and some new housing development.

The railway station and its huge high retaining walls are significant features of your built heritage. The buildings are architecturally - typical railway buildings and are seemingly in a good state of conservation. We walked through the station and admired the platform- side traditional buildings and lovely metal bridge which is now closed off. Hopefully this bridge will be conserved. The notice on the bridge is worn and part of the metalwork is beginning to become rusty and neglected. Otherwise the station was presented in a very clean and tidy fashion. Well done to the staff there! We admired the VR post box on the platform, and would recommend that conservation works be carried out to the post box by An Post. We also had heard about the William Dargan plaque, and we found that on the platform on the opposite side.

One very 'sad' building and a very strident building in the town was the old convent beside Scoil an Chlochair Port Laoighse. The building itself is very unattractive in its present condition, and the various notices attached to the gate adjacent (for example 'Wheels of Fun') should be removed as they seem obsolete. We noticed the blue plaque in relation to the earlier Catholic Church of St Peter and Paul church adjacent. The railings and gate in front of Scoil an Chlochair Port Laoighse need treatment to prevent further rusting The Holy Family Junior School was well landscaped. We wondered about the wire railings with two large signs above its stonewall boundary. Is this wire boundary necessary?

On the town outskirts the splay stone walling and access to Scoil Chríost Rí /St. Mary's CBS was very good, but it would look more attractive if the gates were painted. As this is a very large campus and was closed on Sunday, we could not see if a Green Flag was flying or not due to the presence of the lovely treed landscaping inside the gateway. Nonetheless we did notice two empty flagpoles inside the gates. Not too far away we noticed an ESB substation which was well landscaped.

Remember the importance of providing for the use of Irish and accessibility issues under this category heading. You already have a good use of Irish in signage and particularly at Parc an Phobail. Perhaps you could consider providing bilingual name signs for your housing estates on a phased basis? Could you look into providing wheelchair friendly picnic tables and playground equipment in your park areas?

The signage throughout the town with regard to mowing regime which you enter under this category heading rightly belongs in the Landscaping category, and we and credit it there. Likewise the floral arrangements which you list as a project under this category heading are also considered under the Landscaping category.

Landscaping and Open Spaces / Tírdhreachú agus Spásanna Oscailte:

Here we consider some projects which you listed under the Built Environment category but which belong here. Firstly we admired the floral arrangements throughout the town in conjunction with Downtown Portlaoise and your local authority. There were colourful. With regard to floral displays showing off the architectural heritage of your town there is a balance to be struck. Sometimes floral display can achieve this objective, in other cases they can be a distraction from the architectural integrity of the building(s) concerned. We suggest that you seek architectural/landscape architectural advice from your local authority. Does your local authority have an Architects Department? Does it have an Architectural Conservation Officer? Such departments in local authorities can provide such professional advice The County Heritage Officer or Planners can advise you also.

Secondly the mowing regime signs are relevant to both this category and to the Wildlife category and we credit you on this in each.

You say that you carried out a project on the swimming pool area and playground area on the Ridge road. However you do not say what that project involved.

The grassy knoll at the Fairgreen is maintained by you, and you have plans for this area also. Future Plans should be included in your Tidy Towns plan.

On our travels around the town we admired the lovely hedging along the Kyle shopping centre boundary and across the road along the retail park site boundary. We also commend the good shrub beds around the Portlaoise Leisure Centre. We particularly admired the lavender and montbretia. We also admired the many trees at Portlaoise College.

We very much liked the tree planting at the Bridge Street end of Main Street and indeed along Main Street itself - which together with the outdoor pavement cafes added to the atmosphere of the town centre on a sunny day. Across from the area with the lovely semi mature trees and pavement cafes we admired the stone raised bed with the wooden bench seating all-around. The floral display here was colourful. The trees in the area of the tourist office, together with the bright green paintwork on items such as doors and hand rails looked well. The green space with the interesting quirky sculptures opposite Robertson Low insurance office was well tended and had good trees.

Parc an Phobail is an award-winning area. You play an integral part in the maintenance and enhancement of this area and of the linear park. Your comment in relation to the bat population here is credited under Wildlife. Parc An Phobail was visited, and the entrance belies the beauty of the park itself. The wall on which the brown sign is placed needs repainting, and we thought that the green security railings at the entrance looked very ugly and were out of keeping with the beauty inside. Is it necessary to have these fences? And if so - could some landscaping be provided to ameliorate their effect. We loved the bright red tripartite sign and commend you on the use of Irish in all the signage. (We have learnt a new word for orienteering "as Gaeilge"!)

We just wished at the end of a long day we had more time to stay and enjoy the park's many amenities. We were worried to find a lifebuoy missing from the yellow lifebuoy holder, and we made contact with the Irish Water Association on the following day to ask for urgent replacement. A lot of small children were playing in the Solas na Gréine area.

National Tree Week annually contributes greatly to the greening of Irish towns and villages. Have you availed of this opportunity to plant trees?

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

Although you mention the bat boxes in Pairc an Phobail under Landscaping and Open Spaces, we credit you here with the work carried out, and are delighted that you have now found that two of your bat boxes are inhabited by Leisler bats, a fact you say was confirmed by the Irish Wildlife Trust. Perhaps you will organise some Bat walks during the coming year?

The other projects which you say have been undertaken for this year under this category heading are bullet pointed as 'bird boxes' and 'bug hotels'. You also showed the symbol for the all Ireland pollinator plan. This is a very simplistic entry in your entry form. You do not tell us where the bird boxes are located. Neither do you tell us whether you are monitoring them or not. You do not tell us where the bug hotels have been sited. And of course your map has not shown their locations either.

Last year's adjudicator referred to a Portlaoise Biodiversity Plan saying it will be a great asset to help you understand what habitats you have. Has this plan been published yet? And if so how are you using it? If not when do you hope to receive the plan?

Do look at the relevant sections in the Tidy Towns handbook and also try to get a copy of the Heritage Council's booklet about Wildlife in Ireland's towns and villages.

We are delighted that the plans for St. Peter's old cemetery take in wildlife aspects. This is important as such locations are very valuable natural habitats.

We noted some apparently recent hedge cutting on an approach road. 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.

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

You list just one project under this category heading for this adjudication year. That is that the local bars have pioneered a sustainable watering regime for their outdoor areas. You give us no idea of the number of bars which are involved - nor their location. We need you to tell us what exactly this regime involves. Have you any figures in relation to the numbers of litres of water which have been conserved as a result of this effort? Is it through the use of water butts on each site? Last year's adjudicator mentioned water butts. Have you expanded the numbers of water butts in the town in the last year?

The photograph which you show under this category heading belongs to the Tidiness category and we credit it there. (That is the anti-cigarette butt initiative)

Last year's adjudicator mentioned the fact that the town now had 14 Green Flags. We were also wondering had you considered the suggestion which the adjudicator made with regard to joining the Green Homes programme? Although you say that you are continuing to encourage businesses to use undertreated water where possible - while you yourselves only use rainwater to manage your baskets and tubs under the Residential Streets and Housing

Areas category, we credit it here in its appropriate category. It is a pity that you did not give us any details as to where and how you collect this rainwater in water butts.

Strangely you never mentioned one of the most interesting features (relevant to this category) in your town to this adjudicator which was the solar compactor litter bins. Well done to the local authority for the provision of these bins.

This adjudication category has been expanded and updated with a new advice sheet (printed in 2014 and updated in 2015) for communities called 'Sustainable Waste and Resource'. It is available on the Tidy Towns website. Or you can request a copy from the Tidy Towns unit HQ. This will help you also to move forward in relation to sustainable waste and resource management. The Tidy Towns website has lots of other information including a links to relevant website. The Environmental Awareness Officer in your local authority will have a fund of knowledge and advice on this category.

Tidiness and Litter Control / Slachtmhaireacht agus Rialú Bruscair:

Well done on the anti-cigarette butt initiative which you show under the Sustainable Waste category, but belongs here. You certainly have taken on the idea of controlling cigarette butt litter which was referred to in last year's report. We can see that litter control is always a priority for you, and this shows. You are improving your litter free status year-on-year. But we found pockets remaining. Litter was accumulating at the edges of an empty site surrounded by lovely cast iron railings just off Market Square as one turns for the downhill approach to the station. We noticed some litter on Jessop Street especially around the new terraced housing area. There was some litter outside some bookmaker's premises. There were also a (very) few pieces of litter just outside the gateway to old St. Peters Church. There was a lot of litter at the Clothes banks beside a garage on the Dublin Road. There was a distinct necklace of litter - getting worse as one approaches the last roundabout onto the motorway on the Dublin Road. A little litter was noted near the Topaz garage near the Tullamore Road roundabout. There was a small amount of litter in the green space on the far side of the road from Robertson Low insurance offices. We noticed a little litter on some of the green roadside spaces on the Dublin approach road and near St. Paul's School.

You list your 'Adopt a Road Plan' as having been initiated for a trial period and has proven very successful. However you do not indicate which roads have been adopted. We saw no related road signage.

We observed a broken post box opposite the Catholic Church. The car park area by the watercourse (beside the Park with the war memorial) was very clean and tidy.

We admired the modern sculpture at Fitzmaurice Place. We thought that the precincts were a little bare on the stepped side. There is also part of the limestone plinth damaged, and needs replacement. This is part of the plinth to the left of the stone engraving.

There was a lot of advertising on the Lismard roundabout. There was a lot of advertising signage in the industrial area at Cloninam.

We saw some torn fly posting on Railway Street - on a pole across from the guesthouse. We also saw some old fly posting on a directional pole/light beside a trolley bay at Supervalu in town. Further fly posting was noted for a summer camp close to the AIB building. Near the charity shop adjacent to Meehan Court we also saw further torn fly posting.

There was a considerable amount of graffiti in the general area beyond a launderette and between the Tourist Office area and Meehan Court area. This seems to be a forgotten area of the town when it comes to tidiness.

Although you do not mention weeding under this category heading - we found the town to be very weed-free.

The recycling centre near the GAA stadium/Supervalu modern building had very dirty old bins. The paving underneath needed sweeping as there was a lot of small pieces of litter about. It is hard to engender pride in such a bring bank where the receptacles themselves are so uninspiring. In this area we saw a very old (2009) battered planning application 'for the erection of large mesh PVC banners on a south facing gable.' We are glad to hear that the local authority is planning a new bring bank system and locations. Perhaps a little more detail on this would have been helpful.

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

We are sure that the annual Tidy Estates competition is - as you say - a main player, and is always well attended and its achievements highly prized.

A lovely row of houses was noted on the south western side of Railway Street as one approaches the railway station close to the Methodist Church. This area is leafy and mature.

A row of houses between the station entrance and the Square included some dereliction. However on the opposite side of the road we admired two semi-detached houses of six bays with a pristine boundary wall. Between these houses and the large terrace of houses near the railway bridge there is a house for sale with a boarded-up ground floor bay window. This looks poorly. We noted a house with boarded-up windows at first-floor level on the corner of Bridge Street Centre.

There is an enormous amount of new housing development along the Dublin road approach. However it is all very well assimilated with green frontages and plantings and is set back from the approach road to the town. The Holdbrook estate off the Dublin road appears to be an unfinished housing development.

Ashley Gardens sign is difficult to see from the approach roads. On this new roadway within the town some estates have no name signs obviously attached as yet. Perhaps you could encourage identification of each estate on the ground.

We very much admired the nice sign welcoming the visitor to St Brigid's Place. This is an important location - being close to the Leisure Centre.

There is another unnamed estate off Railway Street and the high walls to the left of the approach to this estate are very dirty.

.We have already mentioned how much we admired the landscaping at the Portlaoise Leisure centre and Playground. The fine Astro turf pitches are a great facility at this site. Moreover we loved the idea of allowing for a large green grassy space where on a sunny day we saw lots of people lounging on the grass. Great use was being made of the playground on our visit. Likewise the play area in Parc an Phobail was being used extensively on our visit.

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

Your attention to good appreciation of first impressions for new visitors is praiseworthy. You say this should have an extremely positive initial effect for those entering our town for the first time - and this is true.

The Tullamore approach road is a fast straight section of road approaching the first roundabout into the town. Some treatment of the hard shoulder with regard to surfacing and weeding would make this approach more attractive. This is particularly true in the foreground of views to the Fáilte sign which is supported by the traditional brown Tidy Towns sign. However we can understand how difficult it would be to carry out any work yourselves on this heavily trafficked route, so perhaps you can suggest this to the local authority. The Tidy Towns brown sign should be updated if possible to recognise your achievements more recently than 2014. Blow your own trumpet! Although it was a Sunday when we visited your town we noted three large blue rubbish bins located outside a property on the lead-up to the welcome sign to Portlaoise. It is unlikely that Sunday was a collection day. Perhaps bins can be kept within site boundaries on non-collection days. There was also a small area of dead vegetation on the left-hand side of this approach to the signage. The roundabout itself was neat and well maintained, although the red brick paving looked a little bare. We admired the nicely maintained green hedging around the curved boundary of the Topaz site. Some apartments facing the roundabout would benefit from repainting. Nice low shrubs were planted around the apartment buildings. There was a little litter just outside the access to the garage. Three advertisements on a timber fence at the roundabout was a little 'overkill' considering there was a large official high median located advertising structure on the roundabout itself. Could the additional advertising be added to the high structure? Nearer the town we noticed the sign for the Lions located beside good low hedging.

The Dublin road approach is very leafy and elegant, but an extremely busy road. The bicycle lane road markings need repainting along stretches of this road. The bus stops were clean, as were all the litter bins along the Dublin road. However we were disappointed to find a distinct necklace of litter - getting worse as one approaches the last roundabout onto the motorway. There is also a very rough surface on the southern side which catches litter in potholes just near the roundabout. It must be very difficult for you to clean the on/off ramps to the M7 motorway given the amount of traffic on this route. How do you do this safely? A large hoarding in relation to a housing estate was observed, and on the road L6769 we observed a falling hoarding in relation to a festival. Here too we noted some hedge cutting near the 80 K pH speed limit sign. Please refer to our comments in relation to this under the Wildlife category. There was an amount of advertising signage on this approach. A lot of signage on any road takes from its appearance. The Portlaoise town sign looked very well on the green verge with hedging and trees as a background and a colourful floral display beneath. The planters looked well on the islands, but the green incidental spaces on either side of the road with mature and semi mature trees looked even better. We did notice a little litter on some of these incidental spaces. A site beside AXA was overgrown along its frontage. Conversely the adjacent National Learning Network site looked very well. The Health Centre was well landscaped. We noticed two 'headless' traffic pole signs near the outer roundabout. At St. Paul's school we did not see any Green Flag, and the gates would benefit from painting. Yet again we saw a little litter in this immediate area. There is a huge amount of new housing along this approach road. Other roads join the Dublin road approach such as the The Durrow/Abbeyleix approach road. We observed the O' Moore Park /GAA sports ground. The rugby club advertisement was a bit worn, and was located on a derelict site. Nearer the town we noted a truck and strawberry sales on the footpath.

The Timahoe approach was poor - despite the well-kept houses - due in part to the very ugly security fencing along the Mart site, and due to the presence of litter on this approach. Letters were missing from the Mart site sign and there was no screening. Next door the Laois County Council Water and Sanitary Services Department site was quite untidy with green security fencing which would benefit from landscaping - as well as dead vegetation at the splay entrance. Torn notices and weeds including ragwort were observed here, and all this just before the nice Portlaoise town sign. Advertising was also observed stuck on timber fencing along this roadside. An old notice hoarding was upside down and another two empty advertising poles were observed outside KW S. At KW S a huge length of unscreened fencing bordered the roadway, and the adjacent site was weedy and contained a Portakabin - this at approximately the 50 K pH speed limit sign. We admired Lismard House which was beautifully landscaped. A

second Water and Sanitary Services Department site was noted - but this was tidy. Yet again the security fencing would benefit from landscaping at this second site. Further crude security fencing was observed with a falling banner near the roundabout. There was a lot of advertising on the Lismard roundabout. The roundabouts in the region of Ashley Gardens are bare red brick constructions. Nonetheless, there is a good bicycle lane leading to the new school CBS. A disused site opposite Forest Park might be screened. It would be beneficial if the green security fencing on a farm 'sale agreed' site were landscaped.

In relation to the railway station - on arriving at the station from the town side we wondered about wheelchair access. For a first-time visitor it would seem essential to indicate to people arriving at the station from Station Road that there is another access to the station which is wheelchair accessible and signpost it thus - both from this location i.e. at the Station Road approach and also pointing towards the cul-de-sac from the road which leads out of Market Square (opposite the Minch Norton property).

At the Portlaoise Leisure Centre there were lots of wheelchair spaces which were being respected. Well done to the people of Portlaoise! Well done on your bright blue cleanly marked wheelchair parking spaces on Bridge Street and Main Street. Elsewhere some wheelchair parking spaces were very much in need of repainting. One example was opposite the 'Fruit and Nut Place' near the Tourist Office and also the two spaces directly outside the library.

Road markings were poor around the approaches to Bridge Street Centre, as was the road surface in places. Elsewhere some other road markings - such as that on the approach road from the railway station to the Square which require renewal.

The recent Sí na Sláinte initiative is a worthwhile project - and yet again it would have been helpful if you had shown the route on your map.

You mention weed management in this category, so we assume you refer to weed management on approach roads in particular. The approach roads were generally significantly weed-free.

Concluding Remarks:

Portlaoise is a very busy and pleasant town. It has character and has not 'fallen prey' to the homogenisation of high street branding. It has grown exponentially in recent years but that growth has been well managed visually.

This adjudicator realised very quickly how much more there was to your town than appeared in your entry form. That is why we spent so much time and energy - in fact eight hours - walking around your town and driving around its outer precincts. We saw so much worthy of praise and adjudication that you told us nothing about! Equally we saw some things that require improvement. We really think that you need to address seriously how you go about preparing your entry form and support documents next year. This is the second year when your entry form and map situation has been an issue. You are working very well on-the-ground, and we think you can progress very well both on-the-ground and in the competition. We also arrived in town on your church gate collection morning, and we hope that all that standing around on that warm morning and cheerfully greeting all churchgoers was worth your while! (Yes - we did contribute!!!)