

Tidy Towns Competition 2017

Adjudication Report

Centre: **Stradbally** Ref: **420**
County: **Laois** Mark: **299**
Category: **C** Date(s): **15/06/2017**

	Maximum Mark	Mark Awarded 2016	Mark Awarded 2017
Community Involvement & Planning	60	42	40
Built Environment and Streetscape	50	38	40
Landscaping and Open Spaces	50	43	44
Wildlife, Habitats and Natural Amenities	50	33	33
Sustainable Waste and Resource Management	50	14	15
Tidiness and Litter Control	90	55	54
Residential Streets & Housing Areas	50	36	38
Approach Roads, Streets & Lanes	50	35	35
TOTAL MARK	450	296	299

Community Involvement & Planning / Rannpháirtíocht an Phobail & Pleanáil:

Fáilte An tSráidbhaile! Welcome Stradbally to the Super Valu 2017 National Tidy Towns Competition. You have a small committee but a good number of volunteers - including those in your own group and volunteers from other organisations locally. You say you hold preplanning meetings each week. We assume that this happens during the busy period. It is probably unlikely that you hold meetings all the year around on a weekly basis. We note that you hold your AGM in Spring. You network with other organisations locally and this is good.

You list a number of agencies who assist you - including the local authority and also the Department of Education nationally. Perhaps you could look at the possibility of other national agencies assisting you are such as the Heritage Council, the National Parks and Wildlife Service etc in relevant aspects of the competition. You mention the local church and the GAA club, 'the Electric Picnic', the Allotment Group - however you do not mention any local businesses. Is this an oversight or are they not supporting you well?

Is your weekly newsletter in hardcopy only? We note that you have a Facebook page and you communicate through the school website and through litter control nights also. (We could not locate a specific Facebook page just for Stradbally. We found you in the Laois Tidy Towns Facebook page).

You are involved with the youth - both educationally and in sporting activities. Last year's adjudicator suggested that you develop an honorary spot on your committee for a school representative. Have you considered this suggestion since?

You have participated in the competition for 31 years. This is a great record. We like your simple policy 'meet and greet old and new.'

Last year's adjudicator said that you had not included a village plan with last year's submission, and went on to explain as to how important it was to have such a plan prepared and submitted. Unfortunately we do not appear to have received any plan with this year's submission either. It is very important to submit 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 village in drawing up your work programme. As it is difficult to advance in this category in the absence of such a 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!

Your map was quite diagrammatic for a town of your size. It did not show all key public buildings - for example the Courthouse. Please mark and name each housing estate on your town map. Whereas you numbered the projects under some category headings - and not others - the numbers were not continuous throughout the entry form to correspond with any numbers on the map. In fact there were no project numbers on your map. Section 5 of the guidelines on completing your entry form asks that each new or continuing project should be identified by number in your entry form (as per section 3 in the entry form guidelines) 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). We recommend that you carefully study 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. It is very helpful to an adjudicator to have a good clear map showing all the new and continuing projects numbered and relating to the numbered list throughout the entry form.

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

Stradbally has a good traditional small Irish town built environment. There is great potential for improvement of the streetscape in time through the undergrounding of power lines, the control and curtailment of projecting signage and lighting, and the upgrading of unoccupied premises. We note from our own research that you have a significant number of Protected Structures in your town. We would respectfully suggest that you would consider trying to find funding for an architectural streetscape plan for the main street and square - which would look at future streetscape development advice in some detail and your own work. Your streetscape has remained reasonably intact - free from bad insertions, and it would be great if this could be maximised. We are unsure as to whether your local authority has an Architects' Department. If so perhaps you could talk to them. If not perhaps you could approach the Planning Department and Heritage Officer with a view to considering our suggestion.

At its focal point and 'the jewel in the crown' of your streetscape is the market place. Well done on the presentation of this area. We read the shield shaped plaque with interest. This is a very nice plaque, is well-designed, classical and restrained. We also congratulate you on the presentation of the village pump in its lovely uncluttered surrounds. We encourage you to keep it thus. The delightful perennial planting nearby is more than enough of a setting for the pump. We would like to see large advertising signage on property facing the Market House Square removed. It was lovely to see the area being used so extensively also on adjudication day. The only issue we would have with its presentation is - the amount of car parking particularly around the newly lovely landscaped area which detracted from the integrity of the space. Could you protect this area from casual parking? Talk to your local engineer. The properties in this general area are to be congratulated for their good presentation which complements the space.

Another 'jewel in the crown' in your town is the Old Maltings. This is a very significant building and leads the visitor visually onwards towards the fine terrace of convent and churches at the southern end of the town. The very fine stone gate pillars and gate were admired as was the symmetry of the entire site. The nearby bridge is also a significant feature.

Like all Irish towns in rural areas you too have suffered from the downturn in business, with the resultant abandonment and neglect of some premises. There are a few examples along the Main Street and you are aware of this. Do keep approaching the owners/occupiers and also the local authority to help you in your negotiations. However, by contrast there are some sparkling well-maintained properties also. And you have seen to it that the very large convent building is maintained in presentable fashion. You mention the old convent under 'Residential', but as it is a major part of the streetscape, so we look at it here. We note that it is for sale. As it is a Protected Structure we hope that its future is safe. You also have some lovely traditional shop front details remaining - such as an off-white carved wooden entablature - which would benefit from conservation. Talking to your County Architectural Conservation Officer would be important. If your county does not have such an officer perhaps your Heritage Officer can help.

We congratulate you on installing the ramp at the graveyard with the support of your local authority. The Court Square edging on the Green was noted. The new sign at the Athy junction (which you mention under this category heading) is considered under the Approach Roads category.

Whereas the view downwards to the town as one approach from Portlaoise - at the final approach - is very attractive - we feel that the row of satellite dishes on the front elevation of terraced properties detracts from this view. It is a feature of modern day living that satellite dishes are in general use. However, they do look poorly on the front elevation of houses, and planning permission is required for their erection in such locations. On this downhill approach also we noticed a roofless shed.

Pasting a lot of notices on shop doors or windows can detract from the overall look of the premises /shop front and streetscape. We noted one such case at a pharmacy.

The Supervalu car park area and associated housing is very nicely designed and planted. This area gives respite from the continuous flow of traffic on Main Street. The trees in this area were very much admired.

St Colman's National School was well presented, but there were some dirty ramp signs nearby. The nursing home / retirement village was well kept.

The Grandstand was well presented with its colourful exterior. However we considered that the large tea/coffee hoarding adjacent detracted somewhat from its setting. We have noted under 'Landscaping etc.' that the cart was

not showing any planting on adjudication day; neither was the half barrel adjacent.

We are unsure as to whether your Garda Station is functional or not. Probably it is one that is attended on an occasional hourly basis. The street boundary walls are quite dirty, and should be repainted before next year if possible. Nearby a blue street seat projecting from the stone wall would benefit from a repaint also. The Health Centre boundary walls and ramp walls/gate pier are badly in need of a repaint.

You have done your best to make the property beside the Supervalu entrance - which seemed to be 'for sale' look as good as possible during the interim period.

We particularly admired the excellent cast iron railings at the stone works. Painting the supporting boundary wall beneath would set these lovely railings off to full advantage. It seems that these were forged locally in Athy. Moreover we noticed another example of this wonderful craftsmanship from Athy in the railings fronting the old convent. These are excellent locally important features of your built environment and deserve highlighting locally - and to the visiting public through your Facebook page or other communication methods. There are some other fine iron railings in the town and we noticed another near the old convent. We would respectfully suggest that advertising for events in the building which this railing fronts (St. Joseph's Old School?) should be removed from the railing as it detracts from the railing itself, and also from the low stone wall and limestone plaque attached. The group of properties on the old church side of T. Handy (including the T.Handy property) were well presented. The Credit Union was clean. We are unsure however of the necessity of so many hanging baskets on this frontage.

Both the Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland are a credit to their congregations and to their clergy. They were maintained in an excellent fashion, with good planting and stonewalling. The railings at the Catholic Church would benefit from repainting to conserve them. The Church of Ireland (?) School with its stone walls and turquoise coloured wooden fretwork porch looked extremely well. Perhaps a notice board could be placed in the grounds - so was to remove the notices from the windows which detract from the architectural integrity of the structure

We loved the Daniel Dunne Wines and Spirits property, which was presented very well, and we particularly admired the lettering along the elongated shop front. Although lights were projecting - the choice of gilt colour to match the lettering - helped to assimilate them in the overall context. We noted an old coach entrance on a white property with red doorway which retained its original jostle stones - which had been picked out in the same red colour. This detail looked well. We admired the stone building with yellow paintwork set back between terraces of houses. This was very well presented, as were the enclosing terraced houses presentations.

The Napper Tandy premises looked well with its bright red paintwork contrasting with the exterior stonework. It should be remembered however that exposing stonework - from a conservation point of view - may not be always the best solution due to the possibility of water ingress - as stone built premises were usually 'finished off' with lime mortar finish.

The row of properties beside the Gala premises was very well presented as a terraced unit. It is a pity however that in some cases here and generally in the town that uPVC fenestration has replaced the traditional sash window. We admired a lovely old disused shop front with the bright blue painted door. We hope that this will continue to be conserved in the future.

Your Courthouse is an elegant building, but its railings need repainting. Its signage is well-designed but requires cleaning. In fact it is difficult to read the signage through the iron railings, and we wonder if it would be better to place the signage outside the railings - freestanding. The Arthouse use of this building inter alia is a great amenity. We would encourage you to remove the signage from the large green gate on the side elevation and provide it in a freestanding form.

Finally we admired the lovely artisan terrace of stone cottages near the Athy junction. These were presented excellently and were set off by the lovely row of semi-mature trees along the footpath.

Remember too that this category considers the use of Irish within the town and also accessibility issues for people regardless of age, size, ability or disability. One suggestion would be to look at the possibility of providing a wheelchair friendly item addition to the playground - perhaps a wheelchair friendly swing.

Landscaping and Open Spaces / Tírdhreachú agus Spásanna Oscailte:

Your planting at the Market Square was most suitable - visually and in choice of species. We congratulate you on its presentation and terrific maintenance. The choice of plants and colours within its gravelled surrounds, together with its artistic boulder plaque looked extremely well.

You list eight projects under this category heading. Some of these are in residential estates and another is on an approach road, and we credit them under the Residential category and under the Approach Roads category also.

Court Square is a delightful public space. We would be less inclined to break up the grassed area with any more insertions - as it will become perhaps too 'fussy' and take from the lovely sweeping views to the Courthouse - framed by good mature trees. Nonetheless we admired the existing rose beds at the Court Square. Facing the square the copper beech tree fronting the Dunne property looked well. The O' Higgins Memorial forms a counterpoint to the Courthouse - each at opposite ends of the square. The playground hedge planting looked well, and the grass lawn cutting is an ongoing high maintenance project.

Last year's adjudicator suggested that you consider the use of shrubs or herbaceous perennials in some of your displays rather than a dependence on resource hungry annuals. The planting of the perennial beds at the Market House - which you mention under Built Environment - we credit here also. Perhaps you would start to curtail pot planting and concentrate on in-soil plantings also. Neither have you mentioned as to whether you have invested in spring bulbs or not. We suspect that you have not as last year's adjudicator suggested that if so - you would include an image for this year's submission. Perhaps next year you can elaborate on these two issues.

The pony and trap planter appeared to be a 'late starter' this year as the plants had not appeared above ground on adjudication day.

The Lake area including the delightful avenue with its wonderful mature deciduous trees is a rare amenity for the town to have on its doorstep. The avenue area was well maintained and clean. A few dead branches here and there might be removed.

We wonder if it is necessary to put up sponsorship signage on an actual small flower bed. Could you acknowledge this in another way? We do not think that your street needs a huge amount of embellishment in the form of hanging baskets or potted planters, as we consider it has good lines architecturally and is an interesting streetscape of itself. Sometimes damage can be caused to the fabric of structures by insertion of bracketing and also the clean lines of vernacular Irish towns' streets can be interrupted through the indiscriminate placing of unnecessary planters. Planters can be transferred to less important or needy derelict or run-down town areas.

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

We would like to hear more about the use of the lake area for nature study days seasonally by the schoolchildren. Engaging with the schools on - even elementary nature study surveys - can lead in time to the further analysis and interpretation/presentation of the findings of work carried out in order to appreciate and present your natural surroundings in a fit fashion. Last year's adjudicator said that we looked forward to the development of projects for this section of the competition. We would like to know more about this next year.

The river is maintained by the fishing club at the bridge area. Perhaps they might engage with you in some survey or research into river life?

Although you tell us that you plant up to 50 tubs annually around the town you do not name the species which you have chosen for this year - which you say 'attract bees, wild life and bird life to the street area'.

Have you sought any expert advice in this area? You live amidst rich undulating countryside. You have a river and treed parkland in the town. There is a natural world awaiting discovery. You might engage with the County Heritage Officer - and with the County Biodiversity Officer - if your County engages such an officer also - in exploring ways in which to further your knowledge and interpretation in this category. The Tidy Towns Handbook is also there as a relevant helpful publication. The Heritage Council's 'Wildlife in Towns and Villages' booklet is another useful resource.

Have you attended any relevant workshops?

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

You mention three projects in relation to recycling including the bottle and clothes banks. You support the charity shops which recycle clothes and old furniture. The shops are members of R Pak It would be interesting to know statistics re paper and cardboard recycling taking place at the business premises. We noted a solar power traffic sign on the 60 speed limit flashing traffic sign on the Portlaoise approach.

You tell us that the re- location of the bring bank is still ongoing.

Well done to the schools on their composting. Have you any statistics in relation to the amount of material which is composted annually at the compost areas?

Mostly however the projects are recycling projects. Remember that this category is about reducing waste before it is produced - not just about recycling. Recycling is the bottom of the pyramid in relation to sustainable waste and resource management. Would you consider joining the Green Homes scheme? We would strongly recommend that you contact the Environmental Awareness Officer of your local authority whom we are sure would be very happy to advise you as to how to advance in this work/category.

The Tidy Towns Handbook will also help you to come up with ideas. This adjudication category has been expanded and updated with a new advice sheet prepared for communities in 2014. You may find this information sheet on the Tidy Towns website or you may request a copy of this advice sheet if it is not already in your possession (from the Tidy Towns unit HQ). This will help you also to understand and move forward in relation to sustainable waste and resource management. There is also a local waste prevention website - which you can link to from the Tidy Towns website.

Tidiness and Litter Control / Slachtmhaireacht agus Rialú Bruscair:

Well done on your weekly litter patrol nights from May to September. At weekends you also carry out spot checks on the Main Street. However from our visit on adjudication day we think that with the town of your size and business it is necessary to do more frequent litter checks. We found a scattering of litter on the footpaths in the street. It was not a serious littering problem - but it was noticeable in a few areas. We found litter inside the large access gates to the Lake Road. The Lake signage inside and outside the access gates is in need of renewal due to wear and tear and graffiti. There was a considerable scattering of litter on the entrance to the estate off Main Street. You have not shown this stone walled bordered and treed entrance to - what appears to be the remains of an old estate with associated fine gates - on your town plan. This was one area where we noticed quite an amount of litter. As it is a significant offshoot from your Main Street and a lovely amenity in itself is a pity that it is neglected. Furthermore the red planted pots at the entrance to this area were in need of repainting. In this area we noted a very dirty black and white pole / traffic sign 'no through road'. We also noted an old and tattered 2014 planning site notice attached to a pole adjacent. Moreover both sides of the entrance to the estate gates were very weedy. Litter is lodging in these weeds. We noted an opening in the stone wall to the wooded area and wondered if this was a public walkway or not? There was no indication of such. Dead branches had not been removed and appear to be damaging the stone wall in one place. This is a lovely enclave off the busy street with its mature trees and dappled light on a sunny day, and deserves to be looked after.

When you say you do one weed killing in April - we assume that this is chemical weed killing. We would encourage you to try to change this practice to one of manually or organic weeding. We noticed such 'burnt' surrounds to a flower bed on the Portlaoise approach. We also noted burnt grass verges in places. Nonetheless the town and the approaches were mostly weed free. We noticed weeds at the base of a street tree and we also noticed some broken kerbing around another street tree. One area of very noticeable burnt weeds was on the Main Street inside a black and gold wrought iron gate. Nearby fencing in front of the small old church on the street was well painted. (This 'church' appears / appeared? to function recently as a restaurant).

We observed some old fly posting for a circus near the Supervalu exit onto the main street - as well as fly posting on a wooden power pole at the Portlaoise approach (beside the stone wall and signage facing the Abbeyleix approach). Another fly post was noticed on a high lamp standard outside the old Maltings. The small section of wall between the Supervalu signage and the seemingly uninhabited house adjacent needs painting. A large auctioneering sign appears to suggest that this property is for sale, and we hope that it will find new owners in the near future.

It is a big commitment to clean and wash all litter bins on the street. We see that you are visited every six weeks at most by the local authority street cleaners. Do you take part in Laois Clean up week? Do remember to credit yourself with this participation if it is in order.

We are sorry that you get "little response from NAMA and failed business sites". You say that you contact them each year to ask them to help you in your work in cleaning up their sites. Perhaps you could let us have some details in relation to the correspondence or phone calls etc. /approaches which you make to these site owners - and the response which you get from them. Talk to the local authority about this issue also.

We noted a somewhat rusty green and white pump near a dead tree on approach to the town from Portlaoise. A blue bin near Brockley Park needs replacement.

We observed some graffiti around the GAA premises including a wall/gate. The walls of the GAA premises and its signage need renewal and painting.

We would ask you to discourage people from parking cars which are for sale in a street parking space. One such was noted just outside the entrance to the old house/estate below the Grandstand premises.

We noticed some broken glass on the footpath outside a disused business premises on the Main Street. Disused hanging basket brackets should be removed from street frontages with particular care if a Protected Structure.

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

You let us know a lot about the estates within your town. However this category also applies to houses within the town itself. We are particularly impressed with the standard of residential presentation within Stradbally town. We would like you to congratulate all the owners who keep their houses looking so well along the Main Street and at Courthouse Square as well as at other locations which are not necessarily housing estates. In the town we particularly admired the house beside the Church of Ireland with its brick window surrounds and lovely perennial planting on a raised stone bed. This property appears to belong to the church. The nearby rectory house is architecturally attractive and extremely well presented. We also admired many well-kept houses throughout the Main Street and on the side streets. A row of three properties really caught the eye - two ochre colour properties with white window paint in a terrace beside a cream colour property with red coloured window paint. One of the ochre colour properties had a lovely fanlight.

At Kyle Beg Manor we liked the entrance area to the estate. You have undertaken to repair and replace the new fence. The roads remain unfinished and are very poorly surfaced. You refer to this issue yourselves also. The open space is very neat and has good trees. A 'sold-out' hoarding is presumably obsolete and should be removed.

At Oak Vale new fencing has also been provided at the car park. The boundary walls here would benefit from repainting. We would also suggest that you ask residents to desist from parking on footpaths in this area. Parking on footpaths damages the paths, and also creates an obstruction for people with mobility issues or for people with buggies. We liked the open space here with its natural hedging boundary. Well done on the disability seating.

The playground was looking very well as a result of your endeavours.

The enclave of housing off the Main Street at the Post office/Supervalu car park was very pleasant.

Brockley Park is beautifully landscaped.

Woodview is, we noted, an award-winning estate in a sylvan setting. We observed a dirty ramp sign and an empty hanging basket bracket.

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

You planted flower beds on approach roads.

We are delighted to see that the car park spaces and road markings have been freshly repainted at the Market House. The Main Street has also been re tarred with new markings.

On the Portlaoise approach road trimming was needed around the town sign and also inwards from the 60 K pH speed limit sign. The left-hand side speed limit sign was turned. We appreciate that there are huge traffic volumes on this fast stretch of road. Perhaps you can get the local authority to help you here. Two hoardings for a bar/restaurant and a Tractor Run were noted on a rough grass margin near the Abbeyleix approach road junction. These looked untidy- especially as the bar signage was leaning against a sub standard boundary fence. This is otherwise a nice treed leafy approach. The directional 3 item signpost at The Heath junction would benefit from upgrading. Only the GAA directional finger post is new/clean here.

On the Abbeyleix approach we admired the lovely estate wall and the careful strimming on that side of the approach road. However the opposite side was left unstrimmed. The town sign name was very overgrown and strimming was required here. We also noticed some fly posting for a parish mission from March 22 to March 27. We assume this was March 2017 and should have been removed by now. The set-back/recessed space in front of a row of houses would benefit from surfacing. A redundant sign at a gated entrance/stone wall beside a bed-and-breakfast establishment was noted. Some boundary walls would benefit from freshening. A neat estate on this approach did not appear to have any name sign.

We admired how well maintained the Heath approach was kept, but did not observe any town sign. The colourful planted pots looked well against the good stone wall and tall tree background. (We did notice one broken pot). Again we would suggest that it would benefit this approach if the set-backs fronting the properties approaching the junction on the left-hand side could be surfaced.

The final - dipped approach - into the town as one approached from Portlaoise/Abbey leaks/The Heath looked very attractive, and we admired some nice rose planting in the triangular bed on this approach.

Around the area of the grouped towns sanitary services site there are lovely vistas across rolling countryside. Some poor surfaces and chemical weeding were noted nearby

We would suggest that you consider asking local landowners to consider a painting field gates on approaches to the town in a uniform colour. This gives a sense of arrival to town and creates a niche impression.

Near the Glebe estate we noted a 'bashed' Athy sign. The Fáilte/ Sráidbhaile/steam engine sign was welcoming. The 50 K pH speed limit seems to be quite far out along this approach, and the town sign much closer to the village. Some strimming was required on this approach also. We noted fly posting for a County show. We observed a vacant untidy site with green security railings. Perhaps this is one of your NAMA or other 'failed business sites'? The long summer bedding in front of the security railings help, but the railings need painting and more vertical planting to screen the site.

On the Carlow Road approach there is a lot of advertising at the Athy junction despite the new sign at the junction. Your graveyards have good gates. A rough area bordering the road on the left-hand side on approach was noted - as was headless traffic pole. The hard surface in front of the fire station needs resurfacing. We complement you on the bright and clean painting of your wheelchair spaces.

On the Lake approach the good stone splayed access way to the Lakes is in need of repair and the signage in need of renewal.

Concluding Remarks:

Stradbally is a small town with a very intact built heritage. Despite the fact that your Main Street is a very busy

through route you are doing your best to preserve its character and local importance to your residents of the town and of the local hinterland. It seemed to be a busy town and this bodes well for the future. Hopefully the empty premises will find new uses with an improving economy. The changes of level along the streetscape add interest to the town. We think you have much potential in your built and natural heritage advantages. We wish you continued success this year and into the future. Go n-éirí libh i rith na blianta atá romhainn!