

Tidy Towns Competition 2018

Adjudication Report

Centre: Abbeyleix	Ref: 302		
County: Laois	Mark: 334		
Category: C	Date(s): 28/06/2018		
	02/08/2018		
	Maximum Mark	Mark Awarded 2017	Mark Awarded 2018
Community – Your Planning and Involvement	60	50	51
Streetscape & Public Places	50	46	47
Green Spaces and Landscaping	50	47	48
Nature and Biodiversity in your Locality	50	38	40
Sustainability – Doing more with less	50	25	25
Tidiness and Litter Control	90	49	50
Residential Streets & Housing Areas	50	33	34
Approach Roads, Streets & Lanes	50	39	39
TOTAL MARK	450	327	334

Community – Your Planning and Involvement / An Pobal - Pleanáil agus Rannpháirtíocht:

Cuireann an moltóir seo fáilte roimh Abbeyleix (Mainistir Laoise) chuig Comórtas na mBailte Slachtmhara SuperValu 2018 agus chuig Ceiliúradh 60 Bláin an Chomórtais.

It is hard to believe that you have a core committee of only 10 considering what you achieved.

It's being a very busy year for you in 2017-2018. Well done on your silver medal in the Entente Florale competition. A special congrats to all involved in the Bog Project winning the Presidents prize for biodiversity. You were singled out for praise by the Irish Times for the Bog Project as a prime example of the importance of community involvement in protecting the environment.

Reviewing your Facebook posts highlights the sense of fun you seem to bring to your project s Last year adjudicator referred to your map and requested a map of a larger scale. From your submission it is obvious that your committee puts in a huge amount of work into the submission, into negotiations and obviously into the projects mentioned. The map does let you down though. Tidy Towns does not want to put extra work on any committee. Sometimes the solution is not a new map but using a current one more effectively. When your map was folded in landscape into four quarters the outside 2 quarters had no specific project's relating to those areas. They only provided space to mark a long red line showing the projects location generally in a town area. Is it possible to get this map "stretched out"? This should give you greater room to just put maybe small round stickers on the actual locations. (Maybe even using different colours to different categories).

Streetscape & Public Places / Sráid-Dreach & Áiteanna Poiblí:

The value Abbeyleix places on its architectural heritage is impressive. This is highlighted extremely well in your Free Heritage map, which not only illustrates the most significant of your buildings, but the short history of each place is very well written. Is this studied in the local schools? It would certainly be a worthwhile project to engage in.

The worker in your Abbeyleix Heritage House is to be commended for her enthusiasm when handing out this brochure

As you refer to in your submission, teamwork and cooperation is the driving force behind this encouraging the pride in your built environment. Your policy of approaching new owners to make them aware of potential shopfront grants, to discuss appropriate painting etc. is bearing fruit.

One of the most significant transformations is shop displaying your information board. Your photos helped highlight this.

Not all historical buildings can be or should be used as museums. Places evolve and we have to adapt or be faced with the scourge of derelict buildings on our streets. The transformation of a former bank building to Mueller & O'Connell Bakery is one which we wish we could see more of in other locations.

Thank you for highlighting the work you do on some areas but unfortunately are dealing with those who do not wish to cooperate. It shows the adjudicators that as much as can be done is being done.

The row of traditional shops behind the former market house has to impress. We realise that this doesn't happen by accident. Your push to encourage as many businesses as possible to paint their buildings for the Entente Florale competition has left a great legacy.

While your buildings provide your impressive backdrop, the street lighting is one of the most striking features when entering Abbeyleix.

Looking well is obviously important, but ensuring that these areas are accessible to all is important for the whole community. We look forward to the results from Laois County Council and how this feed into action.

Before adjudication we hadn't realised that Abbeyleix is the Town of the Fountains. Your project in restoring the fountain on the Mountrath Road is well done. With the emphasise particularly in the previous year on the unsustainability of single use plastic, especially for single use project bottles, our towns in the future may be calling for the installation of future working town fountains.

Green Spaces and Landscaping / Spásanna Glasá agus Tírdhreachú:

You have a wonderful array of open public spaces that are well-kept. A lot of thought has obviously gone into this over the years. We are glad to note that you have always favoured spending your resources on native tree and plant shrub planting over transient displays of annual flowers. A nice small example of this is outside the Garda Station where the shrubbery plants instead of containers brighten up this area. A large nice example is the pollinator friendly planting at the South School.

The use of narrow wooden planter boxes on the Main Street ensures that they do not obstruct the footpaths. Your continued planting of native trees was noted in a number of areas.

Your use of embracing your natural environment is most obvious in your extensive enhancements to the Abbeyleix bog. The two new pergolas entrances to the bog from the Manor Park Hotel are a great addition to your amenity area. Even those who are unaware of the walk would be drawn to this area in the carpark and surely will want to see a little down the inviting path. Barely a few steps down through the one of the left you are walking on study planks which makes it feel like there is something more adventurous down this path. While the information sign is very bright and colourful and does have some interesting information facts, when people are committing to a walk they like to know more about the time involved. You mention a 2 hour circular loop, but it might be a good idea to highlight how long it takes to just go down the blue path.

Fr. Breen Park. Your park is a fantastic community open space for all the community from the very young; to teenagers right up to the bright yellow well-kept equipment for adults ensures something for all. For a town your size your sports facilities are impressive including the Abbeyleix tennis club in this area.

The improvements to Church of Ireland grounds beside the South School were noted. It is already an impressive open space in your community but your continued small steps improvements is why you continue to score highly in the Tidy Towns competition.

Last year's adjudicator did not manage to gain access to sensory garden at Dove House. Fortunately for this adjudication this was not an issue. It is unfortunate that you mention it is no longer possible to have this area open full time. This sensory garden provides a peaceful haven in the centre of your town. The array of plants appealing to the senses of sight, touch, smell. There are also many different seating areas to ensure enjoyment of this area. The thatch pitch above the information sign was admired.

Public spaces are an important asset to our all our towns and villages. They provide people many opportunities to come together and engage with each other. Your community has an impressive number for a town your size. The GIY Garden, behind the post office provides this space right in the centre of your town. The Monks Garden in Heritage House provided the children with an opportunity to be part of the growing in your community. Your Community Allotments at St Michaels (which had three members working away on day of adjudication) is another impressive example.

Nature and Biodiversity in your Locality / An Dúlra agus an Bhithéagsúlacht i do cheantar:

Your description of your Abbeyleix Bog project as "one of the premier community led biodiversity projects in the country", is hard to disagree with. Although community lead you rightly pay tribute to the many agencies and organisations that make this such a collaborative success. This success was recognised internationally by the invitation of the European Economic and Social Committee of the EU inviting your representative Chris Uys to present at their conference

There are so many facets to this 500 acre natural heritage area project. From habit management, running events such as talks, maintenance on site, upkeep and extension to the trail network and various ecological surveys. The highlight last year must have been the formal opening of the Wetlands Forum Conference by President Higgins. The photos you provide of your "Bog Trotter" committee on a reciprocal visit to Ara an Uachtarain show the social aspect to this project.

Creating a "fun" element to this project was also demonstrated by your "Bat Bonkers" dedicated group going out on what looked like a chilly evening. Your "Family Fun on the Bog" day looked inviting.

The table of the review of progress on the Implementation of your strategic plan for this area showing the increasing number of each of these held. We do realise the work that is behind this one page symphonise. Every walk, workshop, conservation project etc. requires a group of dedicated individuals to ensure success.

The amazing vegetation on the bog walk is evident from the first steps. Even to the most uninformed casual visitor on a bright sunny day (of which we had many this summer) will realise that this is a butterfly friendly area. While you have a specific sensory garden in the village, this area has something for all the senses too. The area was alive with

birdsong.

Bird boxes and bat boxes were spotted throughout.

Bugingham Palace was looking well inhabited (a very clever name!).

The landscaping at the South School was very impressive with the shrubbery adding a lot of color. But this was nowhere near as impressive as the Outdoor classroom. There are so many elements here, from the bug hotel, to the informative wildlife posters (although it was surprised to see a snake on this). It is not surprising to see that the school were rewarded with their Green Flag for biodiversity.

The many aspects to this projects means you will also be given consideration for this under Sustainability.

Success follows success! Following your success of the South School Outdoor Classroom well done on your support for the parents group at Scoil Mhuire to establish their own New Outdoor Classroom.

The innovative water harvesting project by Michael Malone a local is certainly very innovative. We look forward to seeing the results of the school using this in next year submission.

Gardening is often overlooked in the school curriculum, however, it can help to develop a number of life skills, as well as teaching about environmental awareness. We wish both gardens well for the future.

Your new Habitat map of Abbeyleix will help highlight the amount that is being done in this area to the community.

Sustainability – Doing more with less / Inmharthanacht - Mórán ar an mbeagán:

Your inclusion of facts and figures on the savings made in many of your project (apples pressed, recycling figures, energy credits from the Tennis club,) highlights savings that were made. Amongst the most impressive figures you highlight is the saving by the Manor Hotel Energy Upgrade project. A 27% and 18% saving in heating and electricity help demonstrate that being environmentally friendly doesn't have to always be a cost for businesses, it can be a help.

What is particularly impressive about a lot of your projects under this category is that the concept of "Community" is tied up so well with them. Your Community Gardens/allotments and school gardens (as mentioned above) seem to be an integral part of your community.

Your Community Charter for a Sustainable Abbeyleix has some strong commitments which should serve you well. We await with interest the results of your 3 year partnership with SEAI on the Sustainable Energy Communities Program. We feel you are a group well capable of achieving much here.

The concept of "think Local" is sometimes underestimated into the significance of what the results may mean for the wider community. Extending this remit into a subtheme of your Applefest festival should get this message out to more in the community.

We note that from other Tidy Towns submission this year that Michael Malone has very generously shared this "water ram" project with other groups.

The 3 year research project by Trinity College Dublin on Climate Change research on Abbeyleix bog is one which we are looking forward to see a lot more on in the future.

We welcome the project for both primary schools operating a "Walking Bus programme". There was a group of about 8 children of varying ages and an adult all decked out in hi vis vests spotted walking after 2pm. We presumed these were part of a walking bus. This is a great initiative to encourage young school children to create good habits as well as the having good social and environmental benefits.

For some participation may be more difficult. The road out to the Ashbrook estate by the Rathmoyle road was surprisingly narrow. It must make it difficult to travel both by car and by foot. Considering the short distance from the estate to the school this is unfortunate for those wishing to walk to school. Is there a workaround here?

While Fr Breen Park hosts an array of sports facilities (which obviously ensures less carbon footprint), again here the narrow roads might be difficult especially for young children to navigate. Is widening here being explored?

On day of adjudication a car was spotted utilising the e-car port at Temperance Street.

Tidiness and Litter Control / Slachtmhairreacht agus Rialú Bruscair:

We concur with the sentiment on the sign seen in Dove House "No Litter Please, Beauty Dies where Litter Lies".

Your submission mentions your resolve to ensure an improvement in this area given a drop in marks this year. We salute your efforts. Your clean ups and messages seems to be working. After the remarks from last year's report Fr Breen Park was paid particular attention when adjudicating and was found to have minimal amount of littering. We hope this is a result of users littering less. The

While the Bog walk was littler free there was a substantial amount of dog fouling. It was particularly bad in one spot not far in which dogs seem to favour. Maybe the owners are just waiting until they are out of sight in this secluded area. It is unfortunate when some see this practice as part of nature as it means others have to look down instead of around at all the amazing sights. We noted that you launched your Responsible Dog Walking Code in January this year. Hopefully this message will get out more into the community.

There was litter spotted on the Rathmoyle road to Ashbrook estate. It must be hard to clean up these pieces given the width of this busy road.

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

Your overall community approach for pollinator plants is evident in many of your estates planting.

You are fortunate that Abbeyleix does not suffer significantly as a result of unfinished estates. Some of the houses were occupied in De Vesci Hill, with estate agent signs being viewed also. We would hope by next year's

submission this potentially fine estate will be fully occupied. We would hope in the future they would wish to commit to the same standard of landscaping as other areas.

It is welcoming to see that the estate on Mouthrath road is also now occupied.

Community seems to be at the heart of the residents of Vesey Close which has a well-kept communal green complete with a communal barbecue area.

The Fairways are to be commended for continuing high standards. In an area of some very well maintained estates it is commended to be the representative housing estate for the Entente Florale competition.

Ashbrook is very well maintained.

The playground beside the heritage house has some very adventurous equipment in very good condition. The wooden bike rack was very innovative. The sign at the front was in need of repair and the outer red could do with being repainted.

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

This area was dealt with extensively from last year's adjudication report. We realise that this was a very busy year for you in so many areas and that maybe you could not dedicate as much time to this aspect.

The verges on approach roads were well kept as were the speed signs.

Putting the results of your walkability audit into concrete projects (literally), through the new footpaths should enhance the connectivity of your town. This was particularly evident at Thornberry.

The hospital grounds did look well in addition to the flowers. The new planting at the Garda Station was admired and really does brighten up this area (as mentioned under landscaping). The houses on the opposite side of the road did in general look well with a number retaining their original facades. The wall at the front of these could do with painting.

The old Abbeyleix Constabulary Barracks with the red hanging baskets echoing the bright red door on the building provide a nice feature on this approach road.

The road on the opposite side to the Fairways was in need of weeding. It was noticeable because the other side of the road was perfectly clear.

The new perimeter fence at the tennis court does improve this area.

Concluding Remarks:

You refer in your submission to the considerable momentum in the community following on from success in recent local, national and international competitions. It is admirable to see you sharing this momentum. You were given credit from a nearby school but not in your Tidy Towns area for helping them to create areas around the grounds of their school and within their outdoor classroom to promote biodiversity. Your sharing of skills to other groups is to be commended.

We were very impressed by our visit to Abbeyleix. Its status as a heritage town is evident. Your Bog Project could soon ensure that you are known more for your conservation project. You certainly look to your past to support your present and future. With your continued work within your community that future looks bright.

As you highlighted to the judges of the Entente Florale Europe, You are truly "Livin' la Vida Loca in Abbeyleix!"

Second Round Adjudication:

It was a delight to visit Abbeyleix as part of the 2018 Tidy Towns Adjudication. The weather obliged with blazing sunshine and twenty one degrees of heat. The town looked really good on adjudication day and flowers, seasonal and permanent looked fresh and bright. The trees were at their best and dominated the main street in a fitting way. Our first task was to walk the main street and look closely at your many fine public and private buildings. You are renowned for your fine display of traditional shop fronts and these did not disappoint on visiting day. Already alluded to in your first adjudication, the public lighting is splendid and one was only sorry not to be there in darkness. The quality and presentation of the lime trees in particular illustrate how tree planting is our best investment and gives continuous pleasure and value to the environment. Tree management is really good and you are coping well with the cigarette problems often experienced in the metal base of the trees. We liked the retention of the Entente Florale welcome signs featured in 2017 and we feel the participation of Entente Florale has left a beneficial mark on the town, apart from the accolade received.

Landscaping is of a high standard and your numerous displays in and around the town adorn the buildings and streets in an appealing way. We still realise you have some problems with unoccupied houses and the hotel has been empty for some years now. Some 'sale agreed' signs were observed and this is a welcome sight. You also have an ivy overgrown unoccupied house in the town centre at the corner that is proving a problem. The row of houses across the road from Temperance House on the Ballinakill Road need a name plate.

Our visit to The Bog was much enjoyed and this project has been well praised over the past year in particular. You need to refurbish some of the signage and add some confirmatory signage to the entrance and half way down the path to the board walk entry. We timed the walk distance at 20 minutes each way and visitors need to know that in advance. We have seen the distance of 1450 m on the timber plaque but feel this is not adequate.. You need to place yourself in the position of first time visitors with no details of the walk. Some of the Board Na Mona display boards are in need of a cleaning. The Bugingham Pallice needs attention from the overgrowth This bog project is of such importance that attention to detail will be necessary for maintenance.

We feel the Heritage House signage is in need of improvement. The traffic from Portlaoise does not observe the

existing signs until it has gone past the building and this is a pity. You have nine fine flag poles fronting the building, but only two are in use. We are suggesting you fly the national flag, four provisional flags, an EC flag and your county flag. These would create an impressive sight that would almost compel traffic to look at your Heritage House and no extra signage would be required. (take a look at the flags at the Manor Hotel as an example) The current national flag at Heritage House needs replacement. We did not notice any town approach sign on the Ballacolla entrance. You have an ideal site for the Allotments but sadly they are now in a poor state. This site is ideal because of its location, its size and the convenience of access. It also has a supply of water. We wonder if its revitalisation could be worked on for 2019. Our visit to the Church of Ireland site was much enjoyed. The lime tree avenue here is superb and provides a wonderful introduction to the church.

We were unable to gain access during our visit. Our two final visits were to Abbeyleix National School and to Scoil Mhuire. The presence of a green flag is always an adjudicator's delight and on both visits in Abbeyleix the schools obliged. The National school has an entrance unique for its environmental excellence with some fine chestnut, lime, and ash trees. The school approach is further embellished with some wonderful displays, including a well presented bug hotel, a poly tunnel and a lovely open air classroom. At Scoil Mhuire we were welcomed with a new and developing school garden that offers wonderful potential: *Ár Spás Glas, nach deas an teideal é*. The list of supporters displayed on the fence guarantees great support for this garden and we look forward to a wonderful Gairdín Scoile in the future. We suggest all plant and tree labelling be trilingual, Irish, English and Latin, as this will also add to the educational aspect of the gardens.

Finally, we are interested in the background of the town's name Abbeyleix – Mainistir Laoise. You are one of 37 Cistercian Abbeys founded in Ireland 1142 - 1272. The mention of 'Monks Bridge' fired our interest, so we made our way to the bridge and went no further. You have performed well again this year and we commend you for your performance. Abbeyleix seems to have the ability to optimise the partnership ethos led by Abbeyleix Tidy Towns and richly supported by the Abbeyleix Employment Scheme and a host of other agencies. *Ni neart go cur le chéile*, how true. We wish you every success for the future.