

The Blessington Study, 2019

Town Centre Health Check,
Town Centre Strategy and
Suggested Improvements/Objectives for the Future

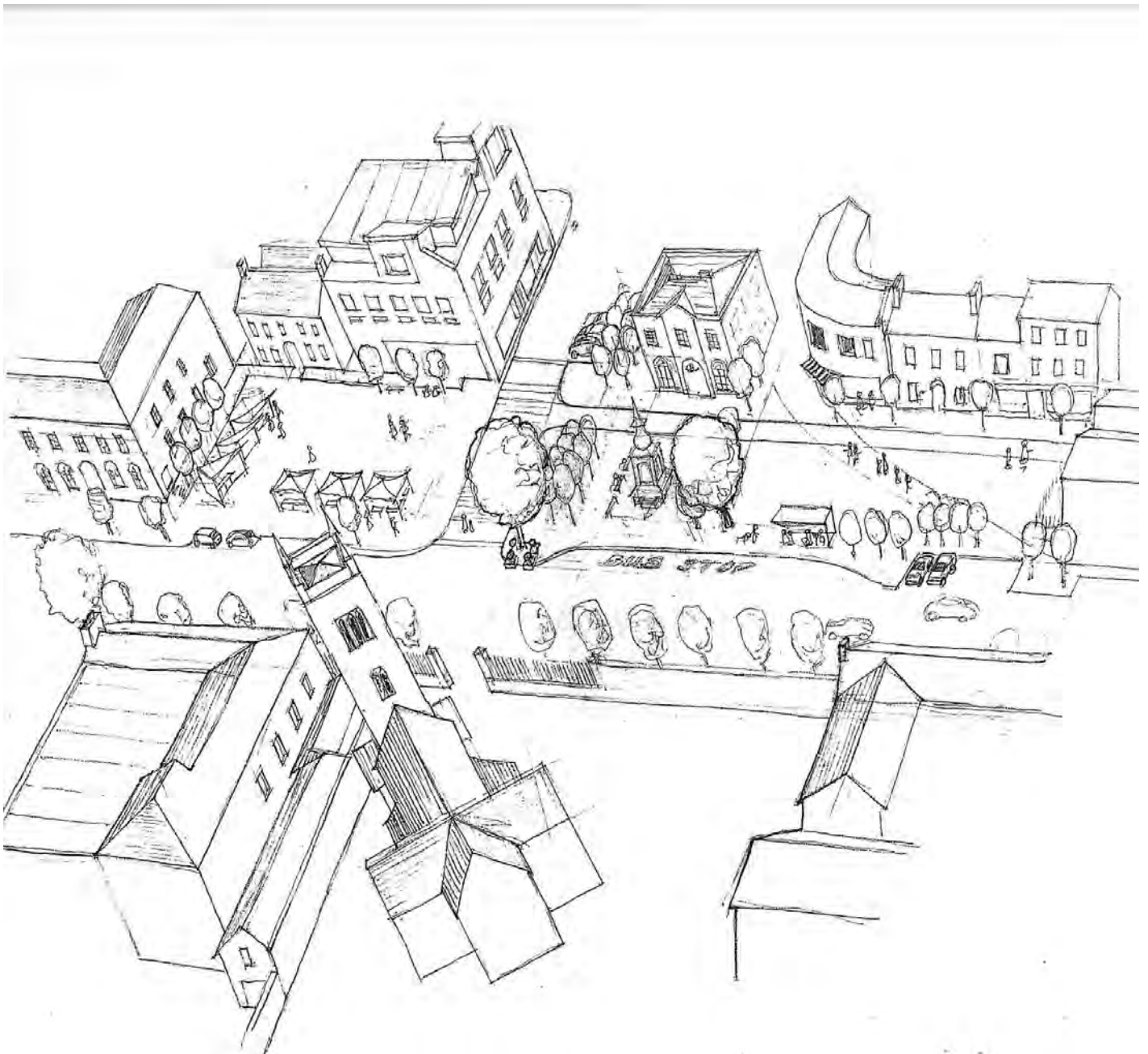


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Chapter 1—Introduction

This study started out a ‘Health Check,’ prepared voluntarily on behalf of the Blessington Forum & Tidy Towns Committee working with the Blessington Town Team, a group composed of officials from Wicklow County Council and local community representatives.

A Health Check is a descriptive tool for determining some of the issues with the town and can be used to compare its ‘health’ or vibrancy relative to other areas. In essence, it is a descriptive tool – describing what it sees and current conditions.

This study relied on some initial survey work, examining firstly the local landscape character and environmental features. As the overall landscape character is the setting for the town, its relationship with its surroundings is important; it can absorb development and it provides the natural amenities that the town depends on. Other baseline surveys included a land use survey, a building condition survey and an urban design analysis which included looking at the heritage features of the town.

The study also provides some suggestions for improvements, some of these are small actions that can be driven by the Tidy Towns Committee with the support of the local community and businesses, whereas other proposals are bolder and may require further consultation with the public and landowners and they will necessitate a higher level of buy-in and commitment and of course funding from private businesses, the Council and central government funds and initiatives. The founders of Blessington, the Hills and the Downs, had great plans for Blessington—and the town still retains its inherent character and structure. This study includes some small and minor improvements and actions that can be acted on immediately, in addition to broader aspirations that may take a much greater commitment (in terms of investment and time) and a longer timeframe for delivery.

The surveys and studies provide the basis for the Health Check, but the Blessington Study includes not just analysis, but a list of actions/recommendations and some suggested development objectives and/or design interventions.

Eoghan Ryan, B.A., M.R.U.P, M.Sc. (Urban Design)

All Maps were digitally prepared by Loci Urban Design Consultants,
41 Dominick Street Lower, Dublin 1.

www.loci.ie

info@loci.ie

Chapter 2—Environmental & Landscape Character

Objective:

To protect the natural and intrinsic character of Blessington that gives it its special identity, while allowing for its sustainable growth and development

Blessington is an attractive town on the Wicklow Kildare border with a rich environmental quality. The most significant features of the landscape in and around Blessington are:

1. The undulating landscape and in particular the esker hills to the north and west of the town, notably Glending Wood.
2. The Poulaphuca Reservoir with its heavily wooded banks.
3. A stream system and its associated ponds and wetlands, that runs from the north of the GAA grounds (and the Quarry Pits) and runs south to Glebe East and Burgage More feeding into the Reservoir.

The significant mature tree stands that define some of the field boundaries and other clusters and groupings as outlined on the 'Environmental Features Map' including those tree groups within the town.

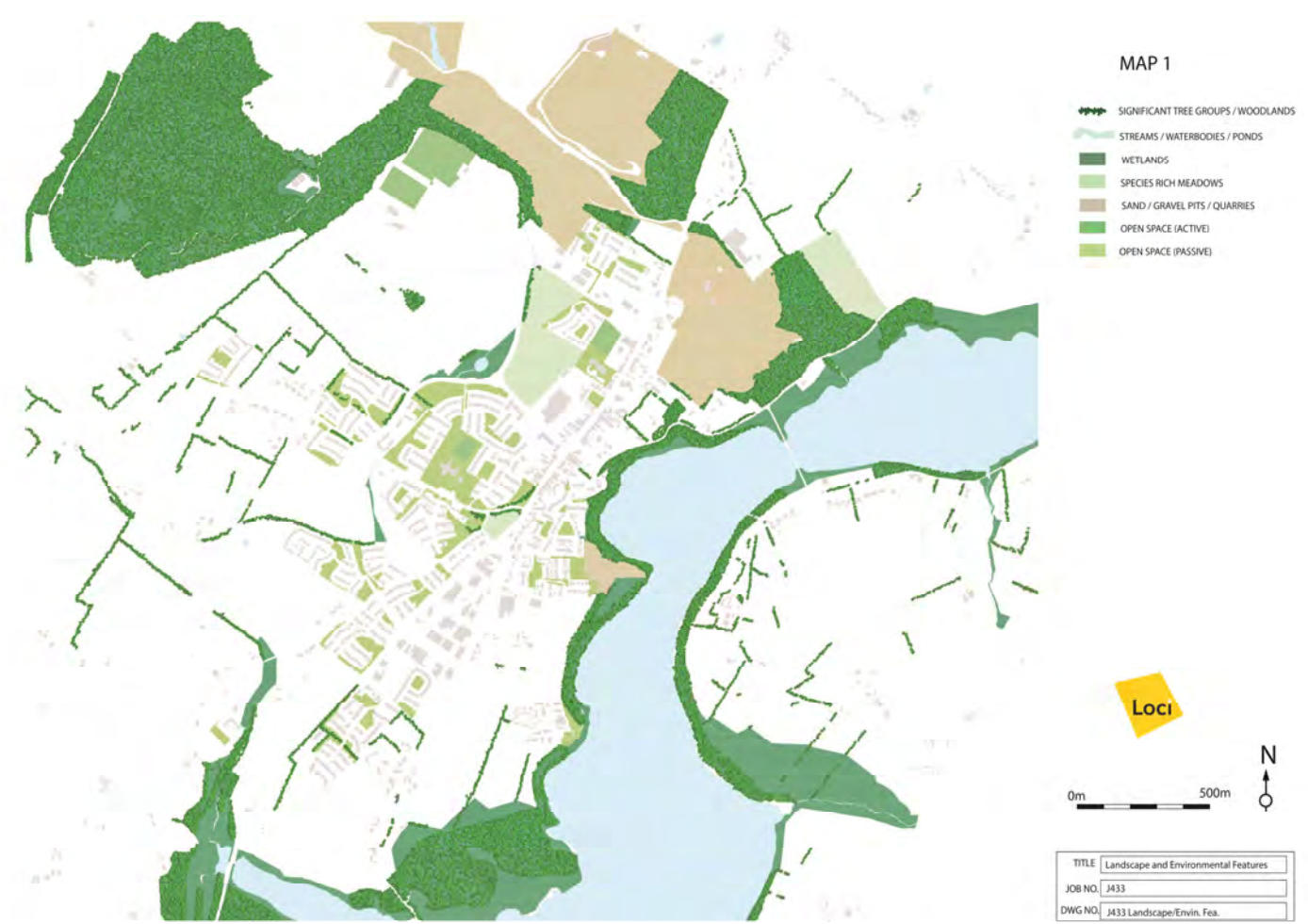
The town is elevated at some 223 metres high above sea level. The landscape is rolling and undulating – reflecting the significant glacial features (eskers and moraines) deposited after the last Ice Age. The town nestles neatly between the hills of Knockieran/Butterhill to the west and the Glending/Deerpark Hills to the east. These latter hills are part of a longer esker ridge that runs parallel to the N81 and continue back to Brittas and Saggart Hill. Indeed, they continue south of Blessington for some distance too. The sand and gravel ridges are ideal for quarrying and the town's proximity to Dublin City makes them attractive and profitable for extraction. The N81 north of the town and the local road system is impacted in terms of the dirt and silt on its surface and its margins, with 'greying' of grass verges and hedgerows. The depth of the some pits goes well beyond the water table mark but modern regulations and planning controls demand that stricter environmental standards have to be met, including regular monitoring and testing and settlement/detention ponds to collect silt and prevent it from entering surface streams in the vicinity. Despite their significant impact on the landscape, ironically, there is some unexpected fruitfulness to be found in these areas – wildflowers grow on sandy nutrient stripped soil; rabbits, hares and foxes are resident; sand martins nest in its sandy banks; ravens and peregrines nest on the newly formed cliffs; while buzzards and kestrels hunt and nest in the vicinity (the National Parks and Wildlife Service have erected nest boxes for kestrels, barn owls and peregrines in disused quarry areas and some of these species are nesting on man-made cliff faces at quarry sites).

One of the most significant features in the town is the Blessington Lake lying immediately west of the town and extending for some 20 square kilometres. Although manmade, the Poulaphuca Reservoir is fed by the



Top Photo: Views of Blessington Lakes from the Kilbride Road; Second from top: Blessington Town with Wicklow Mountains backdrop; second photo from bottom: A significant group of trees within Deerpark; bottom photo: view southwest showing esker ridge and mature beech trees.

Map 1—Environmental and Landscape Features



Map 1—Environmental and Landscape Features





MAP 1

- SIGNIFICANT TREE GROUPS / WOODLANDS
- STREAMS / WATERBODIES / PONDS
- WETLANDS
- SPECIES RICH MEADOWS
- SAND / GRAVEL PITS / QUARRIES
- OPEN SPACE (ACTIVE)
- OPEN SPACE (PASSIVE)

Loci

0m 500m



TITLE	Landscape and Environmental Features
JOB NO.	J433
DWG NO.	J433 Landscape/Erwin. Fea.

River Liffey, and it provides a 'natural' edge and defining feature in the town and limits growth and expansion eastwards.

The Poulaphouca Reservoir is a designated Special Protection Areas (Site Code 004063). The site is of national importance for its population of Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*), which is one of the largest in the country. The site provides the main roost for the birds, with feeding mostly on improved grassland outside of the site and particularly lands in the Three Castles area. A range of other waterfowl species occur in relatively low numbers, including Cygnus Cygnus (Whooper Swan), Wigeon Duck (*Anas Penelope*) and Common Goldeneye ducks (*Bucephala clangula*). The reservoir attracts roosting gulls during winter, most notably a large population of Lesser Black Headed Gull (*Larus fuscus*), which in Ireland is rare in winter away from the south coast. The inlet near Glebe East supports significant numbers of waders and ducks.

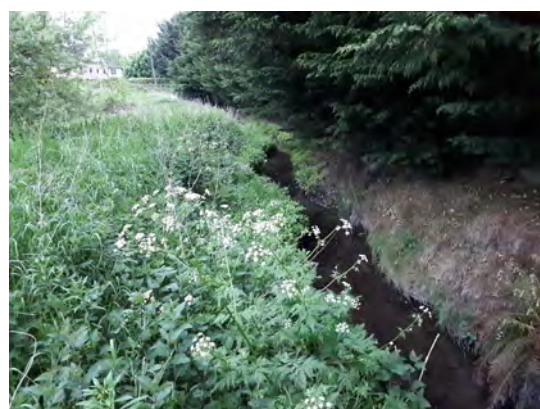
The lakes are a significant amenity, providing opportunities for boating, sailing, competitive rowing, angling, windsurfing, kayaking and canoeing. Although, this continuous and expansive waterway is one of the most significant amenities for the town, and at its nearest point it is just 200 metres from the Main Street, the physical and visual connection and with the lake is rather weak.

The stream system to the west of the town, at first may seem insignificant and small and not more than a drain, but closer inspection reveals that it is an important landscape feature. It would appear that stormwater run-off feeds the stream with silt accumulation on the stream bed, however, the reeds associated with the small wetland and pond at Blessington Demense filters some of the sediment resulting in clearer waters running south between the housing estates of Glenview and Kilmalum where it then is culverted for a distance of 350m or so before emerging again after the roundabout on the Kilmalum (Ballymore Eustace) Road. Minnow have been observed in the stretch between the pond and the Kilmalum Drive. The pond itself hosts moorhen, mallard and herons, while snowy egrets have been also been observed at the pond and both above and below the culverted section. This would indicate that the stream is ecologically significant.

The OPW have identified areas of flood risk in Blessington (Map 1B page 11). The riparian corridor associated with this stream course is identified as a flood risk area. It would appear too that another stream from Glending Valley/Newtown Park feeds this stream but has been culverted from the housing estate at Glending Way to somewhere in the vicinity of the Ashton Estate. This area is also identified as a flood risk area.

Future urban development in the vicinity of these streams is likely to significantly increase the rate of run off and if any of the culverted sections got blocked there could easily be surface water flooding in existing residential areas as highlighted on the Draft OPW Flood Map. Such an event already occurred on the 24th October, 2011.

The undulating nature of the landscape, combined with strong hedges and mature tree lined field boundaries assist in absorbing and assimilating housing development into the landscape. In particular, there



Photos: These photos follow the stream course on the west side of town; it is a rich ecological corridor that commences north of the GAA pitch and runs towards the John Kelly Roundabout, then into the wetland and pond near Glen View; before flowing



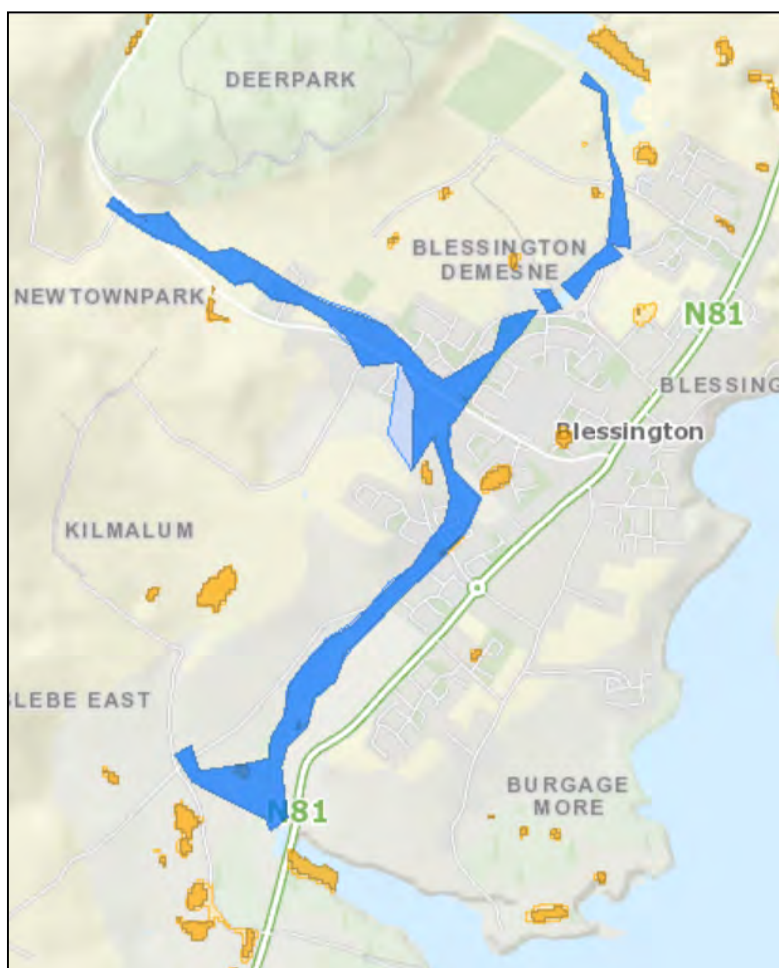
south between Deerpark Court/Ashton Estates; then south to Kilmalum Estate, where it is culverted for several hundred metres before re-emerging near Blessington Abbey on the Ballymore Eustace Road where it then runs south into the townland of Glebe East and flows under the N81 and into Poulaphouca Reservoir.

are very mature beech trees lining field edges in the townlands of Kilmalum, Newtown and Blessington Demense (refer to the 'Environmental Parameters Maps'). When the Poulaphouca Reservoir was constructed, the banks of the lake were planted with conifers (scots pine, etc.). The lands east of St. Mary's Church (south of Haylands) display a number of older period homes, in a low density sylvan glade. Other significant tree groups include:

Glending Wood - which combines a good mixed woodland in the area to the west, leading to an expansive mature coniferous plantation in the middle; and some more mixed deciduous woodland to the south. Notable species include sparrowhawk, buzzards, jays and long eared owls; with notable mammals including rabbits, badgers, foxes and deer. The lower stretch of the woodland along the Naas Road reveals a significant spread of rhododendron which ideally should be controlled.

The **Kilbride Road leading to the Red Lane**, reveal a significant woodland (predominantly sitka spruce) that screens the gravel pits between this road and the N81; while there is another plantation along the western boundary of the N81 adjoining the Roadstone Quarry Entrance.

The southern most part of the study area also reveals significant tree groups and woodland areas – a relatively recent plantation of ash and other species in the wetlands around **Burgage More** create an alluvial woodland in this area and the route of the greenway connects it to the bridge crossing at the inlet and associated wetlands at **Glebe East**



where there are significant groups of spruce and pine trees. Both areas support good numbers of deer.

Within the town itself, the larger trees are used as rookeries for nesting and roosting for rooks and jackdaws.

The predominant agricultural activity is sheep and cattle grazing. The undulating landscaping and farm system is peppered with small ponds that are frequented in the winter by various species of duck including wigeon, teal and mallard. Human disturbance from any one allows refuge in the others. In the long term development of the town, opportunities should be sought to incorporate these ponds and streams into an overall open space network of meandering linear parks. Some of the less intensively grazed and farmed fields near the town reveal a greater grass and wildflower diversity and there are also a few notable damp (wetland) species rich meadows containing ragged robin, orchids, vetches, etc. (indeed such species can even be found on the margins of the N81 on approaching the town from the North).

Overall, the town and its environs reveal a multitude of habitats with a healthy and diverse range of species of flora and fauna.

Alien Invasive Species

Japanese Knotweed: There are a few locations close to the town where Japanese Knotweed is growing. These have been noted on the road verge on the N81 on the southern approach opposite Rocypool Villas; along a section of the N81 on the Tallaght side and on lands adjoining the Mountainview Estate.

Cherry Laurel and Rhododendrons: Cherry Laurel exists in the area between the skateboard park and the broad green verge adjoining Oak Drive Estate and significant numbers are noted on the northwestern edge of Glending Woods, close to the Naas Road. Rhododendrons are present at Blessington Orchard Estate. Both Rhododendron and Cherry Laurel species are unpalatable and likely toxic to mammals and probably invertebrates due to the presence of 'free' phenols and diterpenes in Rhododendron and cyanide in cherry laurel species and supports little wildlife. These species produce a dark sterile environment, which suppresses regeneration of native. The upper slopes of the Glending wood (above the area of Cherry Laurel) encompass areas with native bluebells and native flora will have difficulties in regenerating itself if the rhododendrons are not controlled.

Montbretia: Another attractive plant is Montbretia (Scientific Name: *Crocsmia x crocosmiiflora*) with its bright reddish-orange flowers (flowering July – September). It is considered by many to be one of our native plants, however this is an introduced species and is a hybrid between two South African species. It appears to like acidic soil and if left unchecked Montbretia can invade most low-growing habitats such as wet grasslands, gardens, hedgerows, pastures, waste areas and roadsides. The biodiversity of ecosystems can be significantly affected by an infestation of Montbretia. Once established, it out-competes the local flora and forms large dense stands. The Department of Agriculture, Food



Photos to left: A series of photos revealing some of the species rich meadows as highlighted on Map 1.

Photo below: A view of the Wicklow Mountains from Mountain View and Carrig Glen Estate.

and the Marine have prepared an Invasive Plant Information Note on Montbretia.

The species was identified in two areas during the survey period in Spring 2018 – one was a small clump in the rough undeveloped land immediately west of and adjacent to Oak Drive Estate (it is likely that this has re-colonised by inadvertent dumping of discarded plants; it is capable of regeneration from corms and small fragments of rhizome). It was also spotted in a small green (open space) within Lakeside Downs and appears to have been deliberately planted on the spot.

Action Points/Recommendations:

Opportunities for the Enhancement of Natural Amenities:

There is a significant opportunity to enhance the relationship between the town and the lake, by

AP1 Developing waterside walking routes and/or trails to connect with the proposed greenway route north and south of the town. The greenway is proposed to commence at the Avon Ri Holiday Resort (as it currently does) and to circumnavigate the lake via Vallemount, through Ballyknockan, Lacken and returning via the Knockieran Bridge and entering the town via the Kilbride Road. As the town develops and expands, it is likely that the lands between the Mountain View/



Carrig Glen estates and the Avon Ri will be developed and there is a significant opportunity to create a linear parks along the waterfront lands, with a walkway/cycleway/trails that link the vicinity of St.Patrick's Well shoreline to the Avon Ri. Connections back into the town should be promoted and developed so as to ensure that the town has every opportunity to benefit from the economic potential from the expected high volume of visitors.

AP2 Mountain View and Carrig Glen Estate – the adjoining lands including the depressed pit area could be considered for one of the following (1) enhanced woodland planting; (2) the development of an enhanced wildflower meadow (these can be difficult to maintain in the absence of selective grazing and/or other management techniques); (3) a community orchard; and/or (4) a community pet farm along the greenway route. There may be opportunities for the community orchard/pet farm could be supported by a local Community Employment Scheme.

AP3: St. Patricks Well – the old access lane to the lakeside should be cleared and resurfaced with a compacted gravel/hoggin material; overgrown vegetation should be cleared and walls should be repointed/maintained.

AP4 Maintaining a break in the tree line opposite the rear of Supervalu Supermarket (or sites in its vicinity) to ensure there are panoramic views of the lake (this is likely to require engagement and agreement with the relevant landowner);

AP5: Demsey's Lane – this is an attractive laneway at the southern end of the town. Young beech saplings should be planted in this area so that they will regenerate and replace older trees in time. The woodland floor should be planted with native wildflower species such as bluebells and primroses (the native variety of both). The concrete wall separating this area from Beechdale Estate has been subject to some anti-social behaviour and graffiti, so the planting of dense band of holly may counter-act this. It is noted that the low rubble wall along the route near Dempsey's shop was broken and needs to be reinstated.

AP6: Oak Drive Amenity Area: There is an opportunity to redesign and re-landscape the open space adjoining Oak Drive. The area displays a significant variety of shrubs and trees but these are planted in a very discordant way which is difficult to maintain (weed free), despite some maintenance the area appears untidy and lacks a positive visual impact (Refer to sketch/photo A).

AP7 Removal of Invasive Species: Educate local communities and remove the invasive species, particularly the Japanese Knotweed from the N81 verges and Montbretia species from the site adjacent the Oak Drive Estate and from the Lakeside Down Estate.

AP8: Invasive species at Glending Wood: Work with the landowners of Glending Wood and seek funding for the clearing and eradication of the rhododendrons on the western side of the wood, north of car park on the Naas Road. A partnership approach to address the issue should be undertaken between the landowners (Coillte/Roadstone?), the local Community Employment participants working for the Blessington Tidy





Top Photo: An insect/bee hotel on the grounds of Supervalu.

Photo top left: A view of the old gravel pit near Carrig Glen Estate.

Photo middle left: A mown path provides access to the Blessington Lakes and provides an opportunity for incorporation into the proposed Blessington Greenway network.

Photo below left: The lane leading to St. Patrick's Well and onto the Blessington Lakes.

Towns CE scheme and the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Funding may be possible through LEADER funding under the biodiversity pillar of the Local Economic Development Plan.

AP9 Consider a visual information panel displaying the local native flora and fauna at key locations such as the pond, stream and wetland area opposite the Glenview Estate; and at intervals along the lake shore/St.Patrick's well (in addition to the future Greenway route).

AP10: Work with the Men's Shed to develop bird boxes, bat boxes and insect/bee hotels for erection on public lands and identified amenity areas.

Flood Mitigation Measures: In order to counteract localised flooding, it is recommended that the following proposals are implemented:

AP11 No section of the stream corridor to the west of the town centre is to be culverted except in exceptional circumstances such as new road crossings, and even in such areas bridging is preferred to culverting and where installed culverts should be significantly wider than the existing stream width.

AP12 There should be a generous set-back from future development in the vicinity – a minimum of 10m either side but regard should be had for the local contours and should be seen as an minimum guideline – this area should be developed as a continuous linear park and ecological corridor – interconnected between developments (where possible).

AP13 Additional storm water attenuation/retention features, particularly ponds and constructed wetlands, should be developed along the stream course – particularly before the Kilmalum Drive area, but also future development lands to the west of the stream that feed into it.

These measures will not only add to the amenity of the area, but also should be seen as practical measures in the provision of 'green infrastructure' and will go some way towards combating the impacts of climate change and adverse weather events.

Chapter 3—Land Use Survey and Assessment

Objective:

To identify the most vibrant areas of the town/village and in particular to focus on the weak areas where vacancy is most prevalent.

The land use map shows the current land use in the town (May 2018). It should be noted that the land use survey relates solely to the ground floor areas (the upper floors were not surveyed as the predominant use is on the ground floor level). This map could be used as a baseline study to allow comparative trends over subsequent years – i.e., to determine whether the vacancy rates along the Main Street increase or decrease.

The town centre is a relatively small area that extends along the Main Street from the Maxol Service Station (junction with the ring road) in the north to the junction with the Naas Road to the south. The length of this area is approximately 800m – which represents a very walkable area. The retail units (coloured red) and the commercial units (coloured orange) are the most vibrant parts of the town and these units are well distributed throughout the town centre. The larger convenience shops are key generators of activity in the town and the key anchors in this regard are Supervalu in the centre of the town on Main Street; Aldi at the northern end of Main Street and Dunnes in the modern shopping centre just behind Main Street. Retail activity in the town displays a good variety of other uses such as butchers, health foods, pharmacy, gift shop, florists, jewellers, a bookshop, hardware store and a specialist camping and caravan store.

There are also two banks in the town, two service stations, one news-agent-smaller convenience shop, a range of pubs, cafes and fast food outlets. While there are two or more pubs offering evening meals, there is otherwise a dearth of standalone restaurant open during the evenings. The Downshire Hotel has been closed for a good number of years and there is no accommodation in the town centre either.

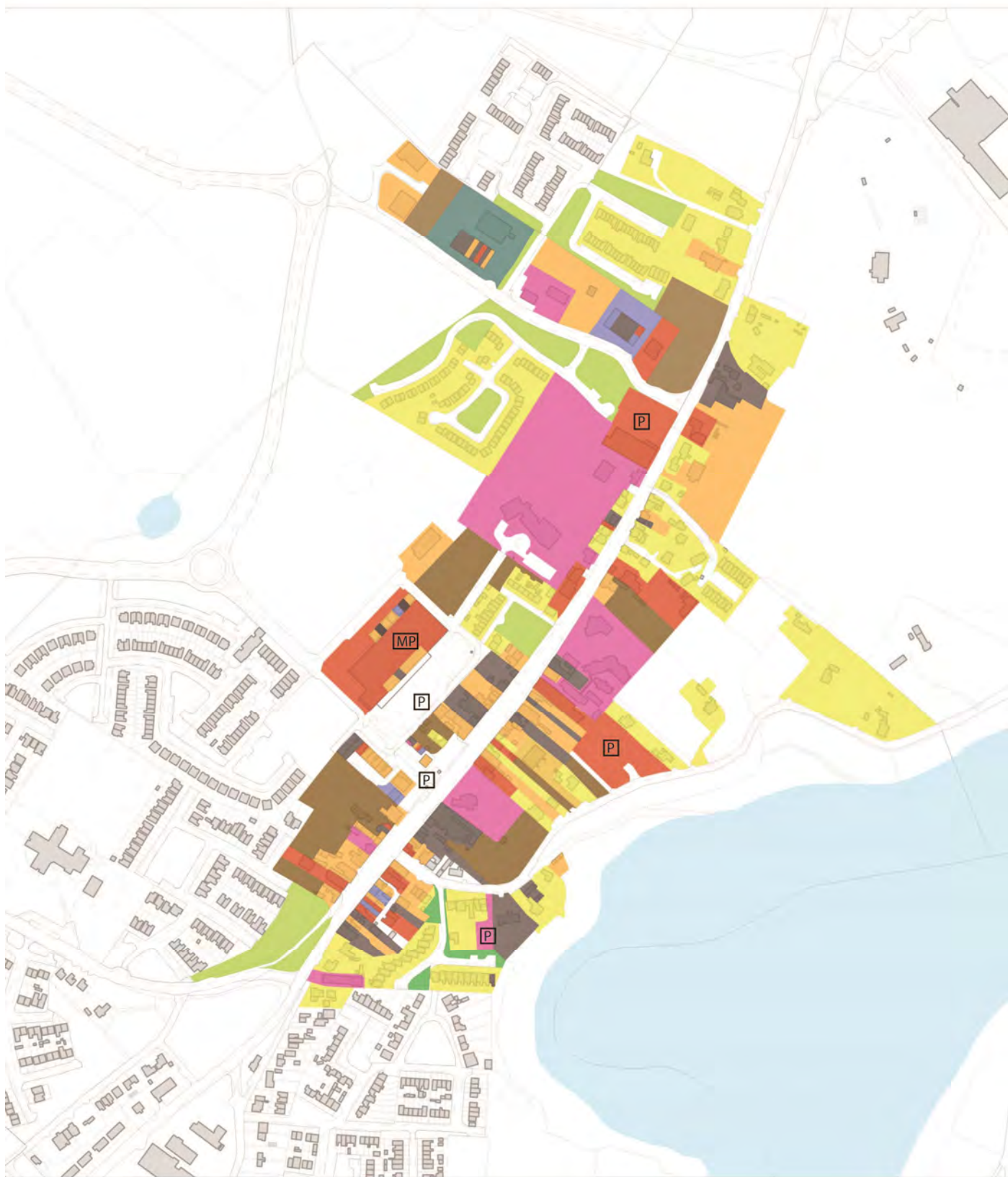
The land use maps reveal a reasonably good range of uses in the town, particularly for a town of its size. The main public/institutional uses in the town include the Church of Our Lady, the Church of Ireland, St. Mary's National School, St. Joseph's Hall and St. Kevin's Hall (which are used by a variety of community groups and sporting clubs). The environs display a good range of primary education facilities with the No.1 School, the Educate Together School and the Gaelscoil (temporarily housed in pre-fabs on the old Ballymore Eustace Road). There is a modern public library at the new town centre development. There is a good range of sports and recreational facilities, notably the GAA grounds (with all-weather astro-turf), soccer club, boxing club, in addition to martial arts/kick boxing, cycling club, a junior rugby club, a canoe club, boating club and sailing club. Some of the woodlands in the local and broader environs are used for mountain biking.

Apart from the northern end of Main Street, residential use is rather sparse on the street and many of the older residential properties have been vacated. Indeed vacancy (highlighted in black on the Land Use Map) is fairly significant particularly (and ironically) in the very centre of



Photos to left: Image of uses on the traditional streetscape (top) and the new town centre (below).

MAP 2: Town Centre Land Use Map



the town – between Supervalu and Dunnes; but also in and around the vacant Downshire Hotel and further south on Main Street in the area opposite Dempsey's. It is hoped that the recent sale of the Downshire Hotel will lead to new and vibrant uses in this area. A key challenge will be to encourage new uses and adapting older buildings while maintaining the intrinsic character of the area.

The Main Street now competes with more modern accommodation in edge of centre locations (such as the Polish shop in the Aran Centre; the smaller retail units at the Dunnes Shopping Centre and even other uses such as auto parts and veterinary clinics in what might be considered 'industrial sites' around the town). A discussion with the Town Team around conservation, planning, rates and car parking standards along the Main Street should be initiated to ensure that obstacles to redevelopment are minimised and to ensure there are clear expectations for prospective developers and/or business people thinking of investing in the town.

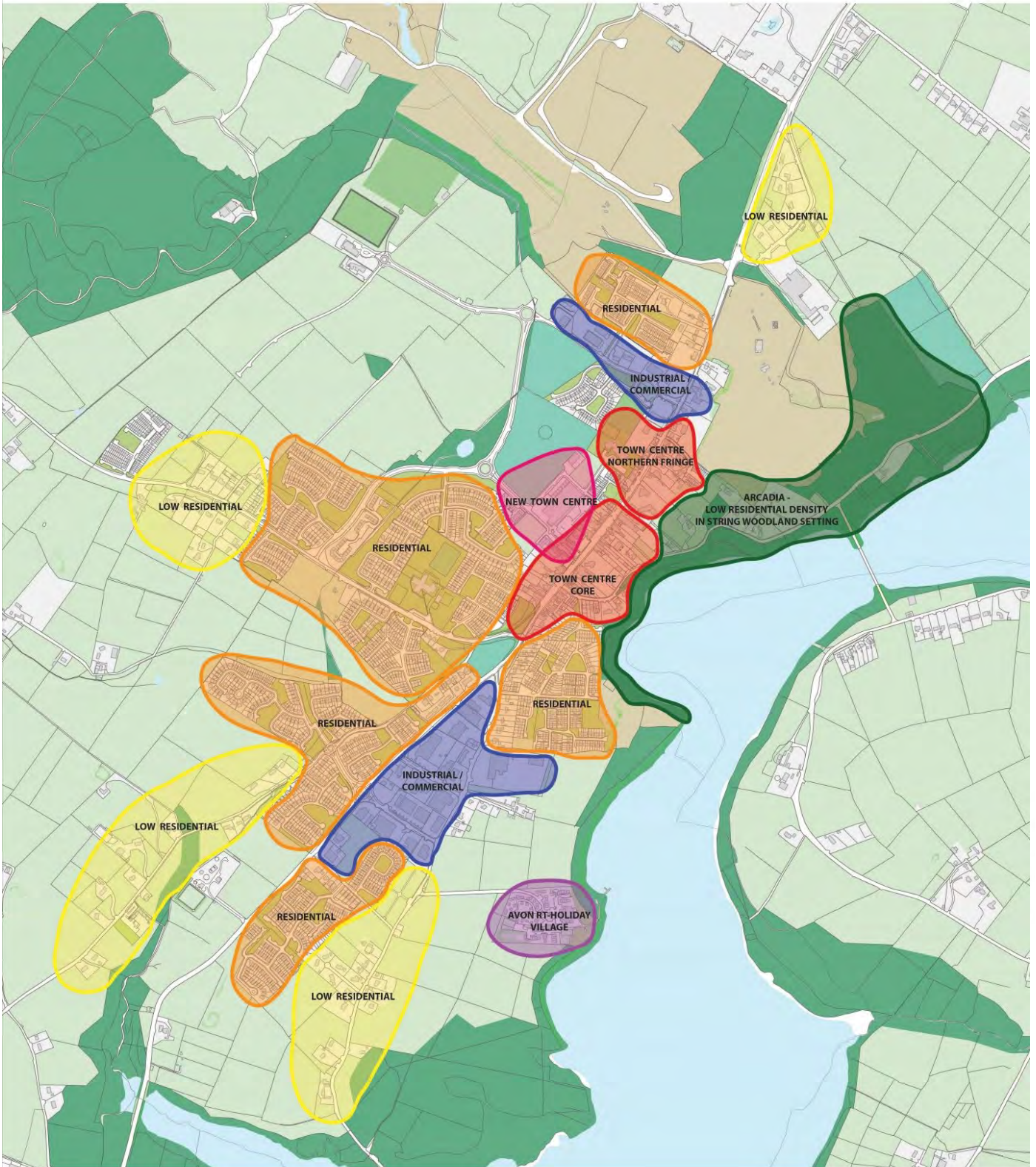
An annual survey of vacant and derelict sites along the Main Street may be warranted so as to monitor if improvements and/or deteriorations take place and this might allow a discussion around what interventions might be considered.

The land use map highlights the fact that there are deep plots on the western side of the Main Street with significant levels of under-utilisation, vacancy and brownfield sites. There has been some recent residential development in the rear of these plots creating new frontage onto the lakefront and Kilbride Road. Unfortunately, without a coherent approach in the form of a site development brief or design guidelines the pattern of development is slightly haphazard in terms of design, building line and overall building form.

Car parking in the town centre is predominantly on-street car parking and there would appear to be a relatively high turnover of occupancy of car parking spaces. Off street car parking, while limited, can be found at the new Blessington Town Centre (by Dunnes) where there is both a surface car park and a multi-storey car park; there is also a smaller public car park adjoining the vacant Health Centre, less than 1 minute from the Main Street. Car parking is free throughout the town.

There is no formal town park in the town centre, though there is a significant – though perhaps under-utilised amenity in the centre in the form of the green in front of St. Joseph's. With some design interventions (such as the removal of the low wall) – a more open and active park could be provided – with the cooperation and in consultation with the local residents (Refer to last section of the plan for proposals).

Map 3: Land Use Character Areas



Chapter 4—Building Condition and Redevelopment Opportunities

Objective:

To identify where the building fabric appears to be deteriorating or weak, so that sites can be identified in a systematic, unified and holistic manner and targeted for specific interventions (such as a ‘cosmetic’ lift/public painting initiative or for inclusion on the Council’s derelict site register and/or targeted for other interventions).

All buildings along the Main Street and secondary streets would be surveyed and marked for a cursory, external visual inspection as either in Good, Fair or Poor Condition. Various intervention measures can then be considered in terms of approaching land owners, public initiatives or inclusion on the Derelict Sites Register. Like the Land Use Survey, the study could be used as a baseline study to determine trends over subsequent years.

In general, the building condition survey reveals that most of the buildings along the Main Street are in good condition, with the vast majority falling into this category. Overall, one’s perception of the town is positive as dereliction and decay are not readily apparent. However, there are a number of buildings in fair or poor condition, however, the numbers are small and they are peppered along the Main Street and side streets without any obvious concentration in any one area. However, on closer inspection, it is clear that there are four or so buildings close to Supervalu – two opposite and two close by on the same side of the street – which could do with regeneration with new uses. A planning permission has recently been submitted for one of these sites, the former Motor Factors site and the Tidy Towns Committee have also earmarked some of these sites for repainting which enhances the façade and overall streetscape.

Also, a key and landmark site in the town of some significance is the former Downshire Hotel, which is also in fair to poor condition. This latter site has extensive broad plot width (site frontage) and extends deeply in a L-shape fronting onto the Lakeside Road, with significant redevelopment potential.

Plot widths are relatively narrow being in general 5-8 metres in width, though some amalgamation has taken place over the years with plots double this evident in places. In terms of plot depth, there is significant variety – with depths of c. 50m evident along the centre of Main Street backing onto the Blessington Town Centre Car Park; but deeper plots south of this between the Ulster Bank and Dempsey’s (between 75 – 110m). The opposite side of the street also displays a variety of plot depths of similar range, however the deepest plots are found between the former Downshire Hotel and the Supervalu supermarket, where depths of 125 – 175m are evident. There has been some redevelopment in this latter area with a mix of single houses, at least one apartment development and various uses ancillary to the main commercial functions.

MAP 4 —Redevelopment Opportunities





Photo (above): Example of poor building condition on the Main Street.

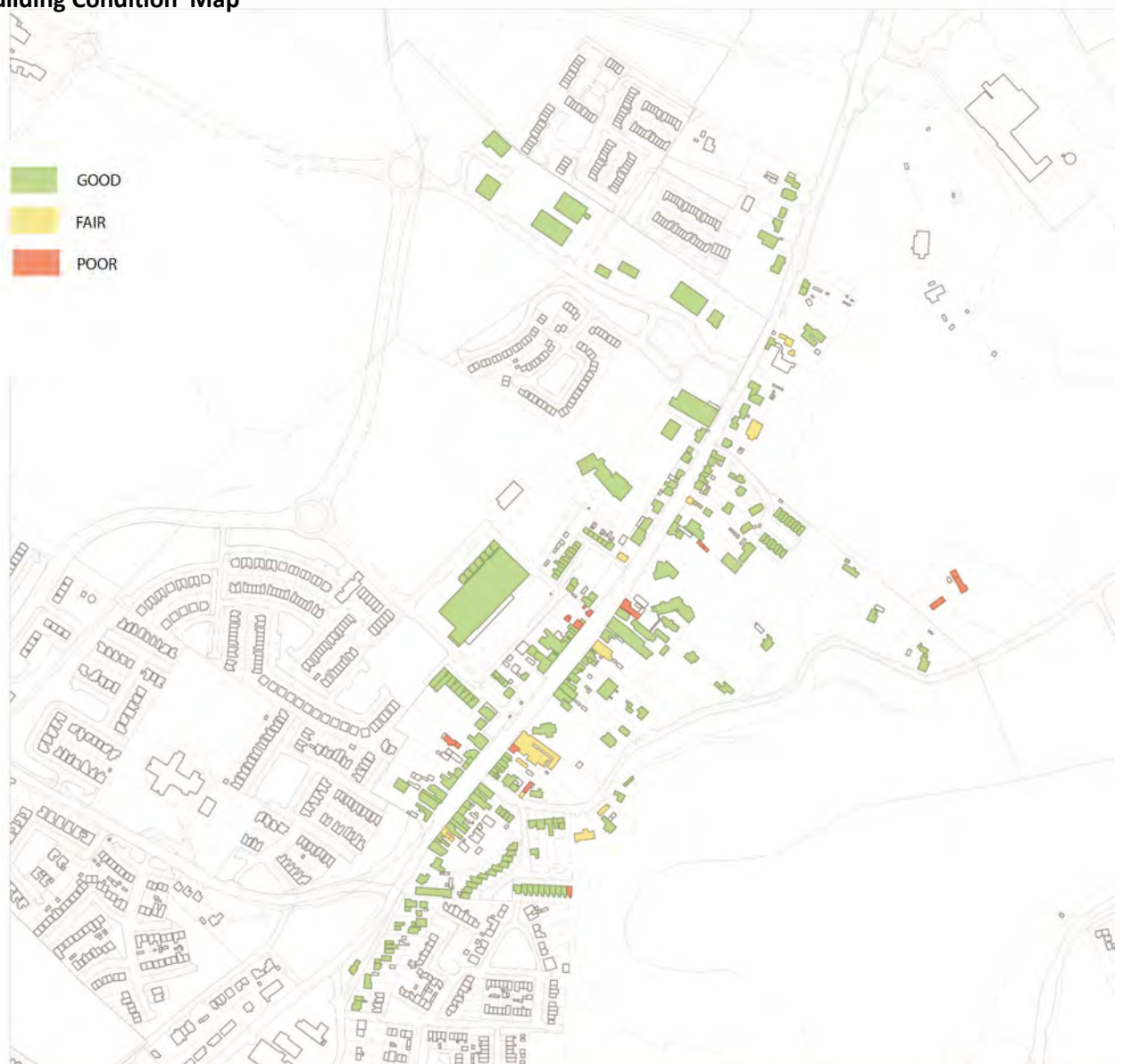
There is significant redevelopment potential in these areas, but there is a need for a more coordinated approach to the development of some of these areas, particularly where they are likely to have an impact on the public realm. Of the following areas, the first two in particular, have been identified as being of particular significance in terms of the potential prominence:

The backland area fronting onto the surface car park at the Blessington Town Centre development – here there is an ideal opportunity to create a new street frontage, with active uses and/or dual frontage (to current uses fronting the Main Street).

The backlands (rear of plots) from the Downshire Hotel to the Supervalu site – overlooking the lake. There is an opportunity to create a new building line and street front along this area, while having regard to existing residential units.

The larger plots to the rear of the Garda Station and Ulster Bank which also adjoin a larger square shaped site opposite the Dunnes Stores development.

MAP 5 —Building Condition Map



Chapter 5—Public Realm Analysis and Townscape Management

Objective:

To identify the intrinsic character of the streetscape (buildings) in the town centre including vernacular features such as the granite door and archway surrounds. Key/focal buildings and sites, landmark buildings, buildings of character will be identified – with possible design interventions to protect and/or improve the area; and to review the public realm to determine if the quality of the streetscape within the control of the Council is adequately maintained – the focus would be on footpaths, kerbing, public litter bins, signage, wirescape, treescape, etc.

4.1 Historical Development and overall Building Form

Blessington Town is a landlord town, developed initially by Michael Boyle, Archbishop of Dublin, Primate Archbishop of Armagh and Lord Chancellor of Ireland. (The town's development which commenced around 1667 is linked to two families – the Boyles and the Hills - the latter were more generally known as the Downshires). Boyle was granted a royal charter to establish a new town and developed a demesne and deerpark, richly planted with a variety of trees, extending to over 440 Irish acres (though the estate itself extended to some 10,500 Irish acres or 17,000 statute acres). By the late 1700s the town had been inherited by the Hill family (one of the wealthiest landowners in Ireland and England) but the town had failed to expand as hoped and perhaps as a result of the practice of an absentee landlord and then following the 1798 Rebellion.

In her book, 'The Blessington Estate', Kathy Trant highlights the fact that –

'the layout of the town as we know it today, the road frontage of most of the houses and the dimensions of the accompanying sites have their origins in the plans drawn up by the first Marquis of Downshire in the 1780s which continued to be implemented by the second Marquis. The entrance to Blessington House, opposite St. Mary's was recessed, thus creating the present town square...'

Typical with most landlord or estate towns it has a wide Main street. It runs in a general north-south axis. St. Mary's Church, the Church of Ireland building in the centre of the town was built on the axis with the former estate entrance to the west of Main Street (interestingly the Catholic Church was at Crosschapel, 3 kilometres outside the town). Opposite the Church is situated the former Market House (the current Credit Union Building) which was built in the late 1830s (and originally included a magistrate's assembly room and a jury room on the first floor) and a number of other buildings which are setback from the Main Street and define a 'market square' as the heart of Blessington. A forge also was situated on the square. Today, a granite monument to the Earl of Hillsborough (1865) together with the four granite balls at the base of the lime tree are notable historical features within this space along with some of the more impressive historical buildings of the town.



Photos—Top: Historical view near Town Square looking south.

Middle: A view of St. Mary's Church from the Credit Union building (former Market House).

Bottom: View of the Credit Union Building



Top Photo: Four Ball Tree at the Square.

Second Photo from Top: Horseshoe Archway, at a former Blacksmith entrance c.1810.

Third Photo from Top: Single Storey Cottage at the North End of Main Street.

Bottom Photos: Typical Granite Door Surround and wrought iron gate—a sample of some heritage features that add character and richness to the streetscape.

This area includes some fine townhouses (notably the former Downshire Hotel and Ulster Bank Building, a former inn) and although they are only two storeys in height, they are notably bigger in height and scale when compared to the typical two storey form of the Main Street.

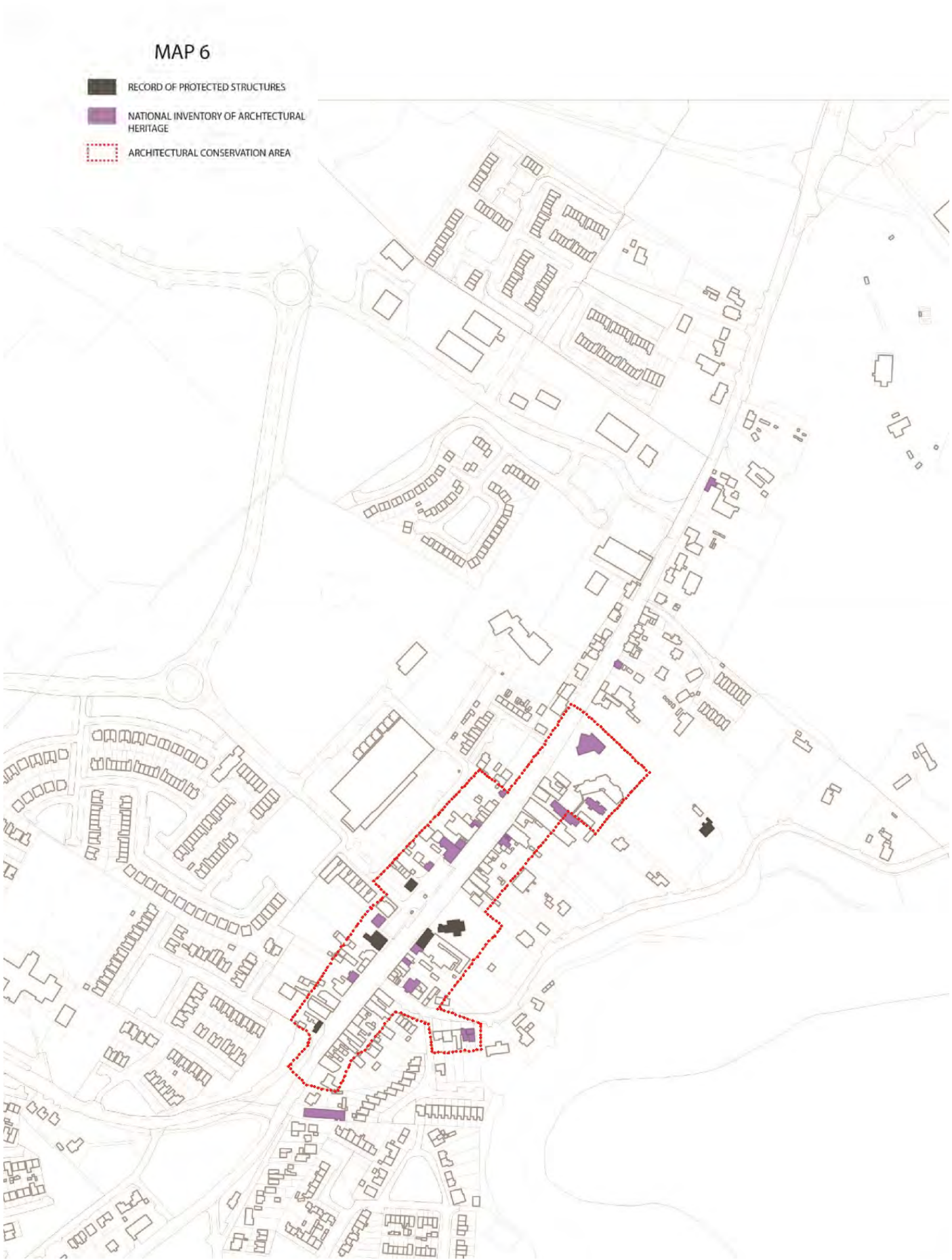
Longfield's Map of the town in 1806 (refer to Kathy Trant's *The Blessington Estate 1667 – 1908*, p.126-7) shows that the large plots of land were assigned to various prominent families and were subsequently subdivided into smaller building plots. Interestingly, it shows that the site boundaries were splayed heading towards Dublin to create a broader space marked as 'Fair Green' which no longer exists and was subsequently redeveloped as a wide street as we know it today. The building lines are typically straight along Main Street with just a few subtle deflections in the vicinity of Dempsey's at the end of the street and in the vicinity of Supervalu in the heart of the town.

The building lines and rather uniform heights define the street and provide a good sense of enclosure throughout much of the Main Street. At St. Joseph's Square/Terrace the mature street trees provide a strong edge treatment and sense of enclosure and continuity of form. However, there are a greater variety of buildings in terms of their age, land use, character and set-back in the northern fringe of the Main Street. This area also includes two service stations whose scale and materials are inappropriate and out of character with the Main Street.

4.2 Heritage Features

Map 6 displays the Record of Protected Structures and the Architectural Conservation Area (from the Blessington Local Area Plan, 2013-2019) and also those other buildings and features identified in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage. Most of these features are present in the southern end of Main Street, between the Church of Our Lady of the Most Holy Sacred and the junction with the Naas Road. Some of these buildings, such as the Tollhouse, date from 1810. There are also mile markers noted in the town (on N81 leaving the town). The Urban Design Appraisal Map (Map 7) identifies a significant number of additional heritage features from the streetscape highlighted. These include specific features that exist within the public domain and/or define its edge within the streetscape – such as granite flagstones within the footpaths, granite plinths, granite kerbing, granite pillars, a stile and archways. In addition, there are doorways, fanlights, porticos and window sills all made of or defined by granite. There are also traditional wrought iron gates and rubble stone walls. These features enrich the character of the place and are evidence of the local vernacular materials, notably the former granite quarries from Ballyknockan and its environs. Traditional doorways have panelled front doors, chimneys with coraballed caps and clay pots; two over two timber hardwood sash windows; natural slate and cast iron rainwater goods; and semi-circular radial fanlights over doors.

Map 6—Building Heritage.





4.3 Record of Protected Structures:

The Local Area Plan identifies the following structures for protection:

96 The Rectory

97 Blessington Main Street

98 Main Street, Downshire Hotel (top photo)

99 Main Street Credit Union House (photo previous page)

100 Main Street, Church of Ireland (photo previous page)

101 Main Street, Former Catholic Church

102 Dempsey's, Main Street

The Local Area Plan also identifies an Architectural Conservation Area (Refer to Map 6. ACAs comprise of groups of buildings and/or other features that collectively add to the character of the area and it is generally focused on the exterior appearance that is to be protected in particular. ACAs can include areas which add to the appreciation of a Protected Structures as the setting is an important part of its character.



Top Photo: The Downshire Hotel (RPS)

Middle Photo: Ulster Bank (RPS)

Bottom Photo: The Forge (NIAH)

Photo (above): Dempseys, Main Street (RPS) - part of the Architectural Conservation Area.

At 'the square' and along the footpaths to the south, there are traditional granite kerbs, but elsewhere along the Main Street, more modern concrete kerbing predominates and in a number of cases this is broken or chipped from vehicles in the areas around street trees.

Some of the Heritage Features could form part of a Heritage Trail in the town and incorporated into a social history of the area. INSERT AS A BOX

4.4 Street Width

The street is widest in the Town Centre Core (refer to Map 7) but starts to narrow in the vicinity of the Catholic Church and St. Josephs (leading to the Northern Fringe of the Town Centre). In the core, the street is so wide as to allow for car parking perpendicular to the kerb on both sides of the street, whereas it is limited to one side of the street in the northern fringe of the town centre. Perpendicular parking allows for an increased capacity and intensity of on-street parking than what might be available in areas of parallel parking.

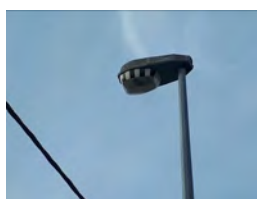
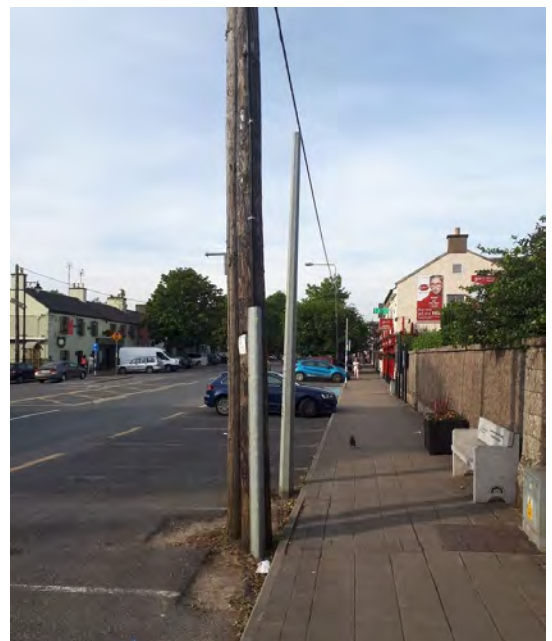
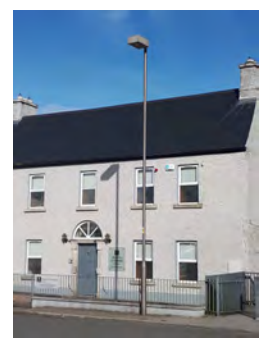
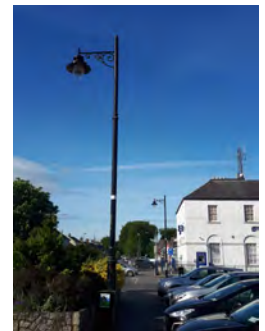
4.5 Street Lighting

It is noted that there are a variety of street lights present along the Main-street – there are at least two different types of neo-traditional street lights in the vicinity of the Square, but close by there are traditional poles without any lighting fixtures outside the Downshire Hotel and further up the street there are more utilitarian street lights of galvanised steel and also lights affixed to timber utility poles. A more consistent and uniform street lighting would be desirable, would reduce the 'visual clutter'. A consistent design, preferably one that has a neo-traditional or modern design that is in keeping with the character of the streetscape, would be desirable.

4.6 Wirescape and Utility Poles

The presence of overhead wires is a very visually intrusive element of the streetscape and is particularly evident on the east side of Main Street. The undergrounding of the wires would allow an opportunity to redesign the paving, kerbing, street lighting and provision of street furniture. In addition, it was noted that in an Access Audit in 2008, the fact that downpipes from gutters along Main Street emit water across the footpaths and that this is potential slip hazard to pedestrians particularly if it were to freeze over; so this issue could also be addressed simultaneously. It is noted that there are numerous poles situated in what are designed as parking bays, limiting their use; these could have been integrated into the footpath and with other kerbed areas. It is also noted that there are old lamp stands in front of the Downshire Hotel with no lamp heads – again, additional poles which are unnecessary and/or not functioning should either be repaired or removed to reduce clutter.

Photos Below display a variety of street lighting in the town, both neo-traditional, modern, attractive and utilitarian. There should be greater consistency along the Main Street.



Top Photo (below): Strong tree group on west side of Main Street.

Middle Photo (below): Poorly cropped trees on the east side of Main Street due to overhead utility wires.



Bottom Photo: Tree stump on the east side of Main Street—with rejuvenated growth which needs to be removed.

4.7 Street Trees

The street trees in Blessington are another very important characteristic of the streetscape and one of the most notable features within the town. The location, distribution, species, age and general condition of street trees has been surveyed and examined. There is no uniformity of street trees evident, rather a variety of species have been planted over the years, with lime, oak and sycamore being particularly common, interspersed with the occasional chestnut, maple, cherry and birch species. The northern end of Main Street has a more discordant building line, more detached buildings and single storey buildings and the sense of enclosure found elsewhere along main street is not as evident, yet the predominant species here is Rowan, which while attractive, has a weaker form and structure than lime, sycamore or oak which predominate further south. Any redoing of paving should consider the either supplementary planting in this area and/or replacement planting.

The negative impact of overhead wires has led to the cropping and butchery of trees by the electricity supply company and/or their contractors and an uneven and weakened form on the eastern side of Main Street. This is less evident in summer months during full foliage. It is highly desirable to have these overhead wires replaced underground and this would afford an opportunity to remove dead and live tree stumps that are evident in the area and to consider the removal of existing trees and their replacement with new species or a more uniform planting along different sections of the street (the removal and replacement of existing trees can stir emotive reactions but has been successfully achieved in O'Connell Street and along the Churchtown Avenue in Dublin with very positive end results). If the older trees were to be removed, then this will lead to a loss of some amenity and character, at least in the interim, however examples from O'Connell Street and Churchtown Avenue in Dublin both show how the new tree planting arrangements can quickly establish themselves with a resulting arrangement that can be as good if not better than the earlier planting scheme. A key recommendation would be to establish a greater consistency and uniformity in the tree species chosen along the Main Street, at least along sections of the street, such as from one junction to another or from one landmark building to the next junction.

Advice of a landscape architect and/or tree surgeon should be sought in this regard and as part of a more detailed design process. While the cost of undergrounding of wires is expensive, this would allow an opportunity to redesign the kerbed 'islands' with the provision of new streetscape furniture such as lighting, street seating, bike racks, etc.). Another alternative to undergrounding wires would be to investigate the costs of removing poorly formed trees and their replacement with more formal planting of lime trees like what was done on O'Connell Street, where the entire tree crown can be kept tightly and evenly trimmed in a box profile.

Photos to Right:

Top: Inappropriate scale of signage within town centre; poor sense of enclosure on streetscape.

Middle: Lack of enclosure—opportunity for new street front.



Photo—second from bottom: broken kerbing on North Main Street.

Bottom photo (above right): Focal Site—key site at junction with ring road.



Photos:

Far Left: Examples of quality urban design—new paving and quality street furniture.

Mid Left: Historical Monument adds character and a focal point to the Square.

Immediate Left: Granite Portico at Garda Station and granite flagstones further up the street, add character and a sense of place, from the use of local natural materials.

Tree guards – there are damaged tree guards near the AIB bank on the Manor Kilbride Road and also in the vicinity of the Credit Union/entrance to new town centre. These should be repaired and reinstated.

At the base of many trees along the Main Street, specifically where these are situated on kerbed islands, there are weed barriers showing through pea gravel. The pea gravel is easily dislodged revealing the weed barriers which are not deep enough and not covered to a sufficient depth. This creates an untidy appearance. It is suggested that the weed barriers should be reinstated (deeper) and that a hoggin material is used to replace the pea gravel. Hoggin is a compactable ground cover that is composed of a mixture of clay, gravel, marble and granite chip, which produces a lovely buff coloured compacted surface.

4.8 Street Furniture

Street furniture is the term that is used to describe the numerous elements that are placed on the street/footpaths for public use and amenity and typically include street seating/benches, bins, planters, bicycle racks and tree guards.

A few observations can be made in relation to street furniture in Blessington. In general, there are two types of bins in use, the 'black bin' (see photos on opposite page—top right and centre) which is found on the Main Street and the Omos stainless steel bin associated with the newly landscaped areas around the 'new town centre' (there is a one-off plastic blue bin noted in the park associated with the St. Josephs housing development in the centre of the town). The different types of bin in different character areas is acceptable but the more modern bin type would look well on the Main Street too.

There is limited street seating in the town centre, with the provision of just one granite bench in front of St. Mary's Church. Bicycle parking/racks are limited and provided at just one location – on the east side of the central pedestrian crossing in the town centre. There is scope for additional bike racks and seating along the Main Street.

Post boxes are provided at three locations along the Main Street (Refer to the Urban Design Map 7) and at one of these locations a traditional box stands alongside a more modern design.

There are timber flower planters along the Main Street – mostly inserted on the kerbed islands where mature trees have been removed. Bollards are limited but noted in the area south of Dempsey's on the west side of Main Street. Many of these bollards are missing the reflective bands. Overall, much of the street furniture – particularly the bollards, bins, bike racks, post boxes and bus stop signs are dirty and need of power-hosing and/or cleaning and there are a few that may benefit from spray-painting.

A particular noteworthy street furniture element that is evident on the street is the proliferation of sandwich boards used to advertise local shops, cafes and restaurants. In limited and singular use these can be





attractive and non-intrusive, but where multiples appear they can lead to visual clutter on the streetscape and are also a significant obstacle to visually impaired persons. In some cases, business owners have developed a double height sandwich board which is chained or strapped to the adjacent street trees and these are even more visually intrusive. In other locations, there are businesses with 3 or more sandwich boards outside the one premise. It should be noted that the Wicklow County Development Plan, 2016-2022 (Development and Design Standards, Section 5, Retailing) states:

‘Sandwich boards will not be permitted as they can give the appearance of clutter in the townscape and can be a hazard to the disabled and visually impaired if not carefully designed and positioned’.

There are a number of salt boxes (dispensers) provided along the Main Street. These bright yellow plastic bins/boxes, while functional, detract slightly from the traditional streetscape character, but their number is limited. If there were plans to increase the number of these in the future, design and location should be carefully considered.



It is noted that in the Summer of 2018, a number of flower planters were introduced along the Main Street. These were in timber, painted black and provided good colour, though ongoing maintenance is likely to be an issue.

Although not strictly part of ‘street furniture’ it is noted that some trees along Main Street still have Christmas lighting decorations in place well into the year and this unseasonal element adds to the visual clutter.

9 Vistas and Views

From the Main Street the topography slopes eastwards towards the lake and westwards towards the by-pass before gradually rising to the hills in the east (to include the ridge along Glending Woods). The rich agricultural hinterland, with undulating countryside and significant mature trees and hedgerows means that it absorbs urban development rather easily. In general, the town has maintained a strong ‘urban (village) – rural divide’, so that the development is limited west of the by-pass. This presents good vistas to the more elevated Glending Woods and the adjacent hills from the streets and roads that run west from Main Street. From the Square and the new town centre there are ‘Glimpse Views’ of this countryside.

Likewise, from the countryside there are some focal views of the landmark buildings in the town, notably St. Mary’s Church of Ireland building (see photo C).

From the Manor Kilbride Road east of the town centre and from the vicinity of the Supervalu Car Park there are very good vistas over Blessington Lakes and beyond to the Wicklow Mountains.



Photos: Example of street furniture in Blessington—tree guards, planters, seating, post boxes, litter bins and sandwich boards and free standing advertising.

4.10 Townscape Management

Townscape management means the tending and care of the whole townscape as a permanent cultural asset of society and is focused on managing changes in an appropriate manner as opposed to simple conservation or preservation.

The success of towns like Westport in the Tidy Towns Competition has been down to the joint efforts of the Tidy Towns Committee and the local County Council (and formerly Town Council) and indeed the whole community. Specifically, a town architect was appointed to comment and oversee on all planning applications with strict adherence to key design principles. Similar initiatives have been tried in other countries where 'Design Review Committees' have been established to input and comment on planning and development applications prior to formal review by the Planning Authority. Such committees are typically formed by local professionals with an interest in architecture and design, in addition to local members of the community. Consideration could be given for trialling such an initiative in Blessington.

Key Urban Design Proposals:

UD1 Underground the overhead wires and remove obsolete utility poles – with particular attention to the east side of the street.

UD2 Reinstate Street Trees – review kerbing alignment and ground treatment at base of trees (pea gravel at present with weed barriers visible, i.e. around the silver birch outside Supervalu – reinstate with a hoggin material in buff colour).

UD3 Review the entire Square in the Centre of the Town – recreate/ redefine The Square.

UD4 Prepare Design Briefs for Key Focal Sites – setting out general principles in terms of new building lines/building set-backs, car parking, building heights and forms and linkages (if necessary) to the Main Street.

UD5 Develop the backlands between Dunnes Stores/new town centre and the Main Street – create a new streetscape.

UD6 Liaise with the relevant landowner to remove or reinstate the collapsed hoarding from around undeveloped sites – promote reinstatement of fencing.

UD7 Consider ways to maintain the integrity and character of the traditional streetscape, while allowing the adaptation of traditional buildings for new and alternative uses, through more detailed design guidelines and principles.

UD8 Consider the erection of a wall or permanent screen around the rear of the recycling facility at the new town centre; and re-surface and address potholes in this area (Review on site again).

UD9 Street sign at corner of Main Street (beside AIB) has been bent and needs straightening/replacement.

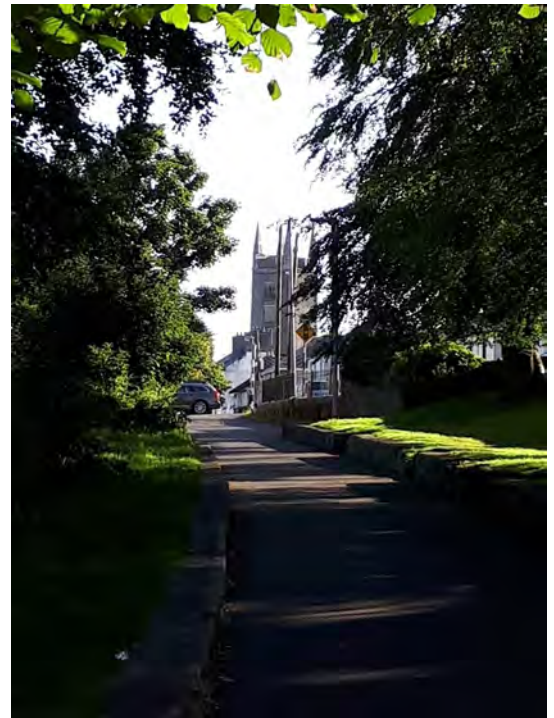


Photo (above): Focal view of St. Mary's Church from Dempsey's Lane.



Photo (above): Site/construction hoarding which has rotten and has collapsed and requires follow up with landowner due to health and safety concerns and poor general appearance (UD6).

Photo (below): Weed encroachment on cycle way and footpaths (near Naas Road Roundabout) - (UD17)



UD10 Replace or repair the tree guard at the side of AIB on the Manor Kilbride Road.

UD11 The approach road or Gateways – entry points into the town – are generally well presented with a green verge and tree lined, however, there is quite a lot of signage, in addition to painted tyres and some of it is superfluous. Consideration should be given to surveying the signage, review/reassess the need (focusing on absolute need) and removing some of the signage (and the tyre minions) to reduce visual clutter on the approaches and entrances.

UD12 Promote the views and vistas as identified on Map 8 and keep vegetation clear to maintain views of the lake.

UD13 Consider the redesign and landscaping of the St. Joseph's Park in the centre of the town. Key considerations here would be to remove the low concrete wall (to provide ease of access and visibility); raise up the level within a portion of the park closest to the street and introduce some formal planting and seating (Refer to Sketch).

UD14 Reinstate/repair rotting timber fencing at Aldi near the boundary with playground and address exposed weed barrier – ideally it should be covered with topsoil, peat or bark chippings.

UD15 In advance on any decision on the undergrounding of overhead wires and repaving (hard landscaping of the street), the weed barrier in the landscape median outside the Church is exposed and needs to be covered over with soil, peat or mulch.

UD16 Roundabouts: There are four main roundabouts in and around the town and in the past year or two, two of these have been newly redesigned (the one south of the town on the N81 near the Texaco Station and the one on the Naas Road). At these and at the other two locations (near the new town centre and at Kelly's Motors) need to be adequately maintained in terms of weeds, trimming, pruning and general upkeep and should be part of a regular maintenance programme.

UD17 Along the relief road and on approach roads, significant weed encroachment is noted on footpaths/cycle lanes and is a significant problem (it is noted that some efforts have been made to address this problem during the Summer 2018).

UD18 Promote the installation of new bike stands/parking at strategic intervals along the Main Street and town centre with a particular focus on the square, close to St. Joseph's park/the Church, the northern end of Main Street, the new town centre and at the playground.

UD19 Promote the installation of new seating and street benches close to bus stops if possible and at the town square, St. Joseph's Square, the playground and on the landscaped islands along Main Street.

UD20 Redesign the boundary treatment of the playground along the Relief Road.

UD21 Engage with Dublin Bus, Bus Eireann, An Post and the County

Council to ensure that all street furniture, in particular signs, bus stops, post boxes and bollards are cleaned and maintained regularly (with painting as required).

UD22 Liaise with Wicklow County Council to ensure that the reflective bands on the bollards between the Naas Road and Dempsey's are replaced and/or reinstated.

UD23 Replace and reinstated broken kerbing as identified on the Urban Design Appraisal Map.

UD24 Repair the old stone rubble wall on Dempsey's lane and at the raised landscaping bed in the town square.

UD25 Work with local community groups and businesses to remove seasonal Christmas decorations and/or lighting from St. Joseph's façade and street trees along the Main Street (in both cases, the decorations/lighting have been in situ all year).

UD26 The older wrought iron gates in the town add character and a sense of history and should be painted and maintained (refer to the Heritage Map).

UD27 Consider, in keeping with the relevant community group, the possible replanting of the 'Tree of Hope' in a newly designed space in the town square as it is likely to compete with an adjoining tree if left in its current position.

UD28 Bus parking signage in the landscaped median outside the Church and Priamary School on Main Street is crooked and needs straightening (consideration could be given to relocating the sign to a more prominent position).

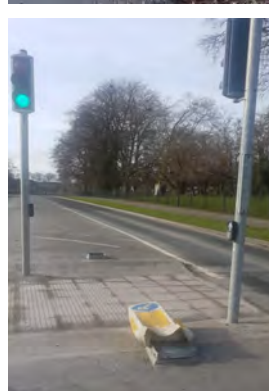
UD29 The pedestrian traffic Island on the inner relief road near Beechdale is severely damaged and broken units should be replaced or removed as it looks untidy.

UD30 The Yield sign on the small roundabout at Kilmalum Rd and Blessington Manor should be fixed in place.

UD31 In general damaged and vandalized signage should be cleaned and/or replaced. Multiple locations to be reviewed.

UD32 The grey safety railings at the junction of the Naas Rd and N81 should be removed.

UD32 In several locations, the signage on poles is cluttered and creates an untidy appearance, consider a review to determine what should remain in place and what should be removed as illegal.



Chapter 5—Town Centre Strategy

Section 3.2 of the Blessington Local Area Plan (LAP) 2013-2019 outlines the strategy for the town centre and retail activity.

The LAP Town Centre and Retail strategy is aimed at creating a more vibrant and attractive retail and commercial core. This based around the following goals:

- Addressing vehicular / pedestrian circulation and car parking;
- Ensuring high quality surroundings and addressing dereliction / vacant sites;
- Protecting the buildings, features and places of heritage value;
- Encouraging a varied mix of uses in the core area and reinvigorating the retail role of the core through application of an appropriate retail strategy.

While these goals have been addressed in the Local Area Plan, there are some additional observations that can be made and these goals can be enhanced further. Sections 3 and 4 above have elaborated on (b) and (c) and there are some Urban Design Proposals for some key areas and sites outlined in Section 6. This section will focus on other (a) and (d).

5.1 Vehicular Movement:

It is an objective of the LAP to facilitate the completion of the inner relief road as this will have the outcomes of diverting through traffic away from Main Street (which would allow for a more accessible and shopping friendly environment) whilst also facilitating enhanced access to the new town centre.

In addition to this objective, and looking to the future of the town, there needs to be an increased emphasis on improved access and permeability and in particular the creation of new interconnected streets – that link back into the Main Street, so that the full development potential of these lands is released, while allowing commercial development to naturally expand. If this is not accommodated retail and commercial development will leapfrog to outer areas and create pressure on the inner relief road and the existing industrial lands to accommodate retail and commercial uses which might in fact undermine the full potential of the Main Street. A few potential routes have been identified on Map XX and these should be considered for inclusion into the statutory LAP.

5.2 Bus Connect

Blessington Heritage Town is served by the Dublin Bus network – Route 65 – directly from Dublin city centre and it also links with the LUAS Red Line at Tallaght. This 14 times daily service will become even more frequent with the planned introduction of the new 'Bus



Connect' services in the near future.

5.3 Pedestrian/Cycle Movement:

The current length of the Main Street is approximately 800 metres. This is a convenient walking distance – taking the average pedestrian 8 minutes to walk from one end to another. Combined with the current provision of car parking, most areas of the town are easily accessible to one another. However, it has been observed that many of the housing estates that have developed around the town centre, have developed as rather 'introverted developments' on a system of cul-de-sac rather than on an inter-connected street network. This means that the pedestrian/cyclist from adjoining areas has a longer trip to schools, shops and facilities along the Main Street, than is necessary.

The footpaths are currently wide enough in most areas of the town centre to accommodate the current levels of pedestrian activity, however, there are specific areas that would benefit from some widening and as the LAP states, this would create an opportunity for outdoor seating/eating.

Given the current car parking arrangement, perpendicular to the kerb and the constant reversing back into the carriageway, the provision of a demarcated cycle lane is unlikely to be of any great benefit to users.

The LAP states that 'the layout of the new town centre area provides for ease of pedestrian movements and while this area links up to the Market Square, the footfall between the main street and this area is low. In order to address this issue, this plan aims to create the right planning framework to improve the range of uses and retail offer in both areas so that they work together as single retailing area and to require a number of sites between the two areas to provide for new pedestrian linkages if development occurs.' The plan identifies two new linkages in this area – connecting the Main Street to the new Town Centre development.

Unlike many other Irish market towns, the market square displays limited retail and commercial activity. Ideally, land uses that create an active 'edge' to the Square should be encouraged. This would include retail and commercial uses that would generate pedestrian movement, footfall and activity. This then, in time, would create an environment where consideration could be given to removing some or all car parking in the area and creating an attractively landscaped pedestrian square.

The LAP provides development objectives for two new 'pedestrian accesses' between the Main Street and the new town centre – this is in addition to the existing street from Market Square to the new town centre. A word of caution is merited. Where there is too much permeability created within an urban block or streetscape, footfall tends to be dispersed with the result that none of the streets can generate enough activity to create a vibrant and lively thoroughfare with enough pedestrian activity to sustain businesses (except in very urban city centre locations and even in these areas they can struggle). One strong connection would be better than two, thereby allowing the Square at one end and a new street at the other end to develop.



Photo (above): Cycle parking on Main Street—this is the only bike parking facility in the town.

Another consideration here is the width of the plots; ideally a wider plot width would enable new units to be developed off each side of the new pedestrian route – but this condition is not evident. Fortunately, however, there are two under-developed and/or vacant sites at the St. Joseph's end and it would be beneficial to create a Site Development Brief for these sites.

An indicative Urban Design Scheme for the Square is outlined in Section 6 and if implemented, it might be a stimulus for landowners and/or developers to unlock the potential of their individual sites and the town centre.

5.4 Car Parking

The main car parking provision in the town centre is in the form of on-street car parking, but there is also surface car parking available at Market Square, the new town centre and close to Main Street beside the former Health Centre (less than 1 minute walk from Main Street). Supervalu provides surface car parking to the rear of shop (accessed from the Kilbride Road). There is also a multi-storey car park at the new town centre development. The other most substantial car parking area is at Aldi in the northern end of Main Street.

While on-street car parking on Main Street could be seen as a traffic hazard, it is also a form of traffic calming and its removal could be counter productive by increasing traffic speeds.

There could be improved signage indicating where car parking is available in the town, so as to increase awareness of alternative parking facilities in proximity. In general terms, the time a shopper is willing to walk from a car park to its destination tends to increase with the scale of the urban centre, thus there is a greater expectation within smaller towns and villages to be able to park outside the shop they are attending even though parking may be conveniently located not far away. Signs indicating walking time (i.e., Car Park – 2 Minutes from Main Street) could be considered to promote the lesser used facilities. As part of this study, there were no detailed car parking surveys undertaken (i.e. measuring car parking turnover per space available), however, anecdotally, it would appear that there is reasonable availability for the convenience shopper in the town. If this situation changes, then shop owners and business owners and their employees should consider using spaces at off street car parking facilities thereby freeing up on-street spaces for the public supporting those businesses.

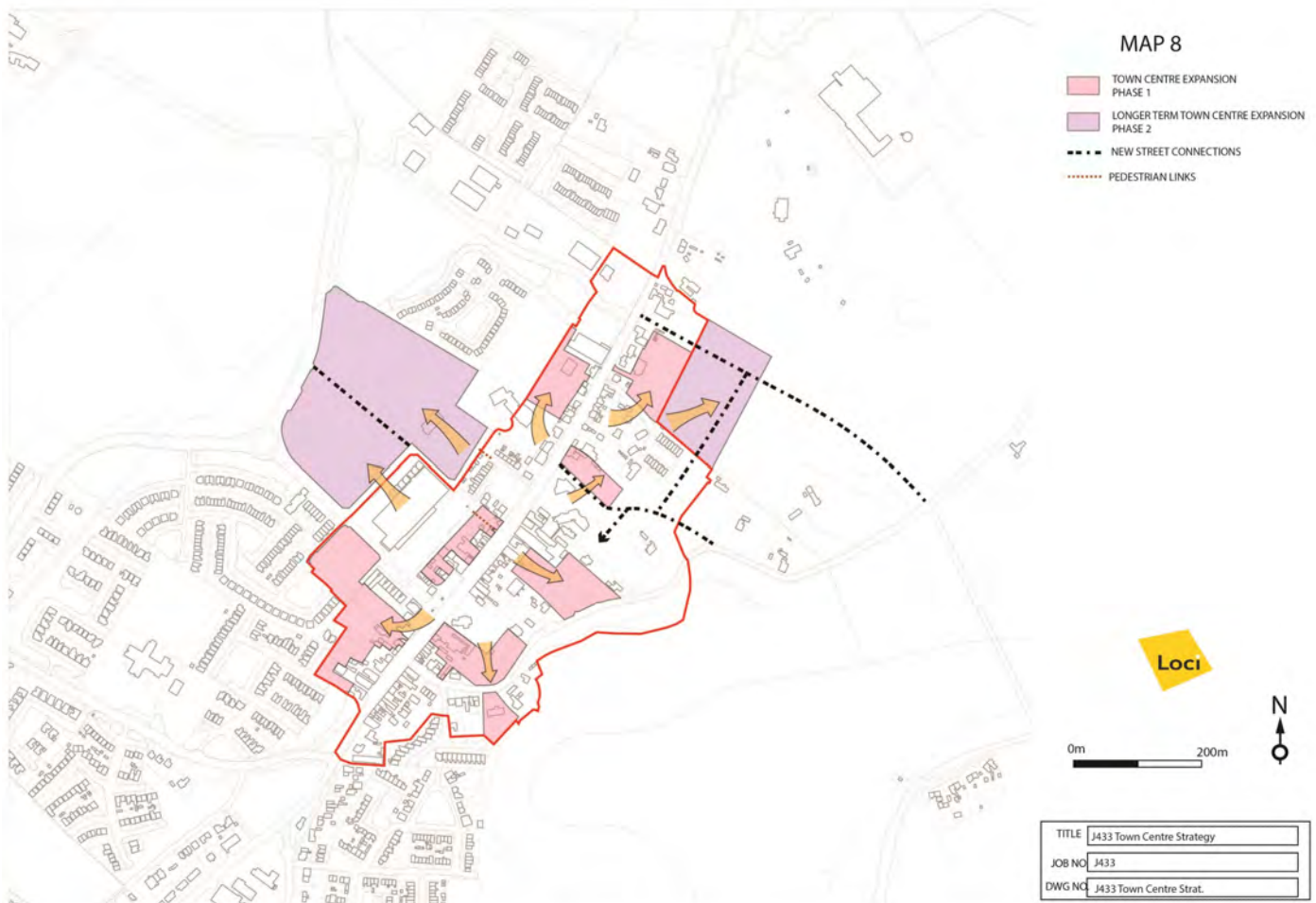
Chapter 6—Town Centre Strategy

Map 7 shows the ‘redevelopment opportunity sites’. Taken together there is significant redevelopment potential but the full potential is dependant on some plot amalgamation and/or joint ventures between landowners, based on a clear vision of the potential of the sites fitting into a larger redevelopment framework.

In order to unlock the full potential of these areas, there is a need to raise the profile of these predominantly ‘backland sites’ into vibrant business areas. This requires these sites to be as integrated and interconnected with the current town centre as possible and this in turn requires the creation of some new street connections, as proposed on Map 7.

Two distinct areas are highlighted, the first being those sites closest to the town centre – ideally these should be redeveloped as part of ‘Phase 1’. The LAP projects that Blessington will continue to grow and expand, potentially reaching to c. 7,000 persons over the next number of years. As the town and its environs develops the town centre will need space to expand, and there are a few important and strategically located sites that can allow for this to occur and these are identified as ‘Phase 2’ sites. These sites could be mixed use developments (including residential), however, if they were allowed to be developed wholly for residential in the short term, then it could lead to ‘leap-frogging’ of valuable commercial and retail development that is necessary to support and sustain a vibrant town centre.

Map 8: Town Centre Development Strategy



5.6 Drivers for Growth

Blessington has traditionally been a local service centre or town serving the West Wicklow area (in addition to a portion of east Kildare), however, over recent decades it has developed as a 'commuter town' to Dublin. While a gradual population growth will be a driver for growth, the town should consider what initiatives could be undertaken to diversify its economic base and attract investment and create a more vibrant town centres, utilising all vacant sites and buildings.

Most retail outlets in the town focus on convenience type shopping activity and the town is well served by medium to large scale supermarket and discount stores. There are less comparison goods shopping (in terms of retail square metres) and examples of such include a jewellers, a gift shop and Charles Camping. The town lacks speciality retail activity and high end comparison shops (like fashion boutiques) and given the proximity of Naas and Tallaght retail parks and their town centres/shopping centres, it will not compete for such activity at any great scale, though the Main Street could absorb more comparison shopping and this should be encouraged.

In order to differentiate itself as a retail destination, it could focus on providing a different shopping experience, combining leisure activity, activities for kids, eating out, entertainment and socialising. Opportunities across all these sectors should be enhanced in Blessington.

While the town is a commuter town, it does sustain a significant number of jobs, particularly in specific sectors such as quarrying and extraction, batching plants, etc. and it does have an industrial/business park at either end of the town and every effort should be made to promote the full utilisation and expansion of these areas.

The town should consider the development of an '**enterprise centre**' that could support start-ups, entrepreneurs and individual employees in stand-alone and/or shared working environments with high speed broadband and other support services (such as tele-conferencing facilities; meeting rooms; phone answering service, etc.). Globally and nationally, there has been a significant growth in '**co-working centres**', carefully designed to provide a good ambience and which can provide space for collaboration, networking and the development of ideas and creative enterprises (the creative economy). Given the rising costs of office space rents, many companies are embracing flexible working environments, and such a centre may also be attractive for established businesses who may be based in Dublin City (or elsewhere) and may be interested in renting spaces as a satellite office or a work-share space for their employees.

The town is rather unique in terms of its position as a **gateway to the Wicklow Mountains National Park** and should be promoted as part of a circuit from Dublin to Glendalough, returning through Blessington and thus bring passing trade into the town.

The town might also consider if it can develop a **niche activity** that enhances its appeal and draws people and visitors into it. In terms of

tourism and recreational potential, the town offers a range of activities on its doorstep, including hill walking, canoeing, kayaking, sailing, rowing, cycling, mountain biking, horse-riding, and a range of other country pursuits.

Key activities and attractions in the area, such as the variety of local heritage sites (including Ballyknockan), the attractions of Avon Ri, Russborough House (house tour, maze, playground, walks, craft village, blacksmiths, falconry centre, etc.), horse riding centres, the Gardens of June Blake and Huntingbrook, the Lake Drive, the local Golf Courses (especially Tulfarris), the local and long distance walking routes (such as St. Kevin's Way), should all be incorporated into a local/regional Tourism Brochure with Blessington at the heart and as a western 'gateway' to the Wicklow Uplands and National Park, including Glendalough. Being on the doorstep of Dublin, it offers the short stay visitor 'a good day out', while also offering plenty to do for the longer stay visitor.

At the present time, none of the local tourism features identified above (with the exception of the Glendalough National Park) have the scale or critical mass to truly impact or transform the local economy, however the proposed Greenway certainly has the potential to do so.

The development of the Greenway in Blessington a 45km route around the lakes is likely to be hugely successful if the examples from Mayo and Waterford are to be followed. This is likely to generate new demand for restaurants, cafes, bike hire/repair, accommodation and other tourism related activities.

5.7 The Blessington Greenway

The bid proposal for the Greenway (or E-Greenway as it is referred to given envisages a 45km length in an area of outstanding natural beauty along the shores of Blessington Lakes with the beautiful Wicklow Mountains as the backdrop and encompassing existing amenities such as Avon Ri, Tulfarris Hotel and Golf Resort, Russborough House and Ballyknockan Granite Heritage Village. Given its close proximity to Dublin City and Dublin Airport, in particular, the Blessington E-Greenway will quickly become a major international tourism attraction. It will also serve to meet the growing need among the local Irish community for access to the great outdoors as envisaged in programmes such as Healthy Ireland.

The Blessington E-Greenway is to become a flagship for the Wicklow Outdoors brand, at the very centre Ireland's Ancient East.

The Blessington Greenway is specifically being proposed as Ireland's first E-Greenway, by Wicklow County Council in partnership with the landowners ESB. This ambitious proposal has the following objectives:

- o Develop a network of E-Bike rentals in partnership with local businesses around the Blessington E-Greenway.
- o Develop a network of charging points at key locations for e-bikes and e-cars
- o Run a pilot e-bike rental project between Blessington E-Greenway and Glendalough with the objective of extending the e-bike rental and charging locations around the County.



Photos (above): A sample of photos from the Waterford Greenway, which has been very successful in generating new businesses such as bike hire/ maintenance, in addition to renewing and reviving older businesses, such as the pub (below) which now acts as a café, shop and hosts bike hire.



- o Package and brand cycling routes connecting to the Wicklow Way with the objective to increase dwelling time and generate over-night stays.

- o Study the opportunity for an e-boat shuttle service (e-water taxis) between Valkeymount, Ballyknockan, Lacken villages and Blessington to bring visitors back to their chosen location.

The details on the design of the greenway will be critical and will need to be carefully designed to ensure that the uniqueness of the shoreline, riparian corridor and woodland corridor is protected and enhanced.

5.8 Branding and Marketing

Consideration could be given to branding Blessington and marketing it on its unique and authentic characteristics and letting businesses reinforce the branding through their own enterprises.

An Cruthu, the local West Wicklow Arts Group, are exploring the use of a vacant building as a temporary art gallery on the lead up to Christmas 2018. It is noted that towns like Dunlavin temporarily re-use many vacant and disused buildings during its Arts Festival each June, while towns like Graigenamanagh in Kilkenny have a book festival (again using vacant and under-used premises in the town) and have tried to brand themselves as the Town of Books (following the example of Hay on Wye in Wales – which now functions year-round). Towns like Kinsale and Westport – both gateways to scenic areas like Blessington – developed reputations for high end restaurants. Blessington should consider these examples and see if it can market itself and develop a particular niche economy, but this will ultimately be based on local entrepreneurs and local business initiatives but perhaps they could be promoted by the Council and other agencies.

There have been some suggestions of branding Blessington as 'Healthy Blessington.' With the development of the Greenway, it should be able to embrace the concept of 'Green Blessington', and promote the greenway, but also best practice in terms of sustainable development and energy efficiency, in addition to a healthy environment and general health and well-being. Freiburg, in Germany, has developed as a "Green City" and is a useful model. One website describes it as an urban centre that 'excels in the areas of transportation, energy, waste management, and land conservation, and has created a green economy that perpetuates even more environmental progress'.

The 'Green Blessington' theme could be easily aligned to the Wicklow Outdoors theme/brand. Blessington has numerous amenities to promote (as highlighted in Section 1 above), including the woodlands, golf courses, cycle routes, the lake, etc. and the disused quarry and gravel pits could even be developed as recreational amenities/adventure parks in their own right, facilitating the growing interest in mountain biking and cross-country trails – but obviously creating specific trails for the purpose. Earthworks could also create zorbing runs or corridors (perhaps including games such as zorb football).

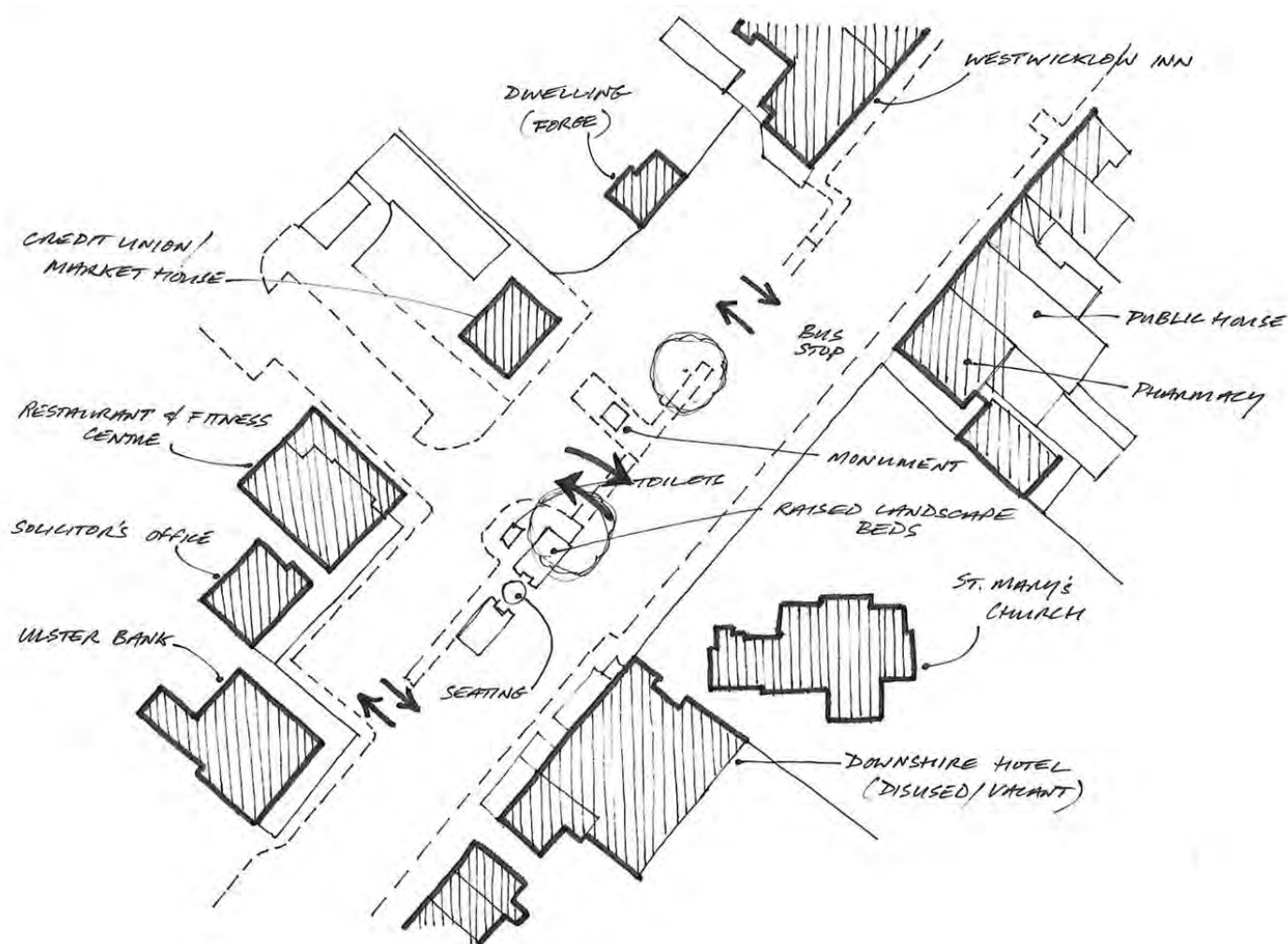
Chapter 7—Urban Design Proposals and Environmental Improvements

This section highlights some specific urban design proposals and environmental improvements in terms of physical works that could improve the physical appearance of the town. Previous studies have shown that such attention to design matters can bring a big dividend in terms of the increasing footfall and attracting businesses and improving the local economy.

The Square:

Sketch 1 shows the configuration of the Square as it currently is laid out. The most vibrant squares and plazas have active frontages, that is retail and commercial uses that generate high footfalls and enliven the space. In general, the Market Square in Blessington lacks vibrancy. The more active uses include the West Wicklow Inn (which has outdoor seating adjoining the square) on the north end and McGreal's Pharmacy on the opposite side of the street. Other prominent uses include the Church (St. Mary's) and vacant Downshire Hotel on the east side of the square and the Credit Union, a restaurant, a solicitor's office and a residential dwelling on the west side of the square and the Ulster Bank to the south side. The solicitor's office, the Ulster Bank and the Lemon Tree Restaurant (with gym beneath at basement level) have railings and a building set-back and/or steps to basement level that prevents activity actually fronting the square).

While there are some attractive heritage features in the Square (refer to Heritage Section above), overall, car parking dominates and detracts from the area and there are three separate points of ingress and egress meaning that vehicular circulation areas are also prominent. The only seating area is immediately adjoining the N81 – a busy route.



Suggestions for improving Market Square:

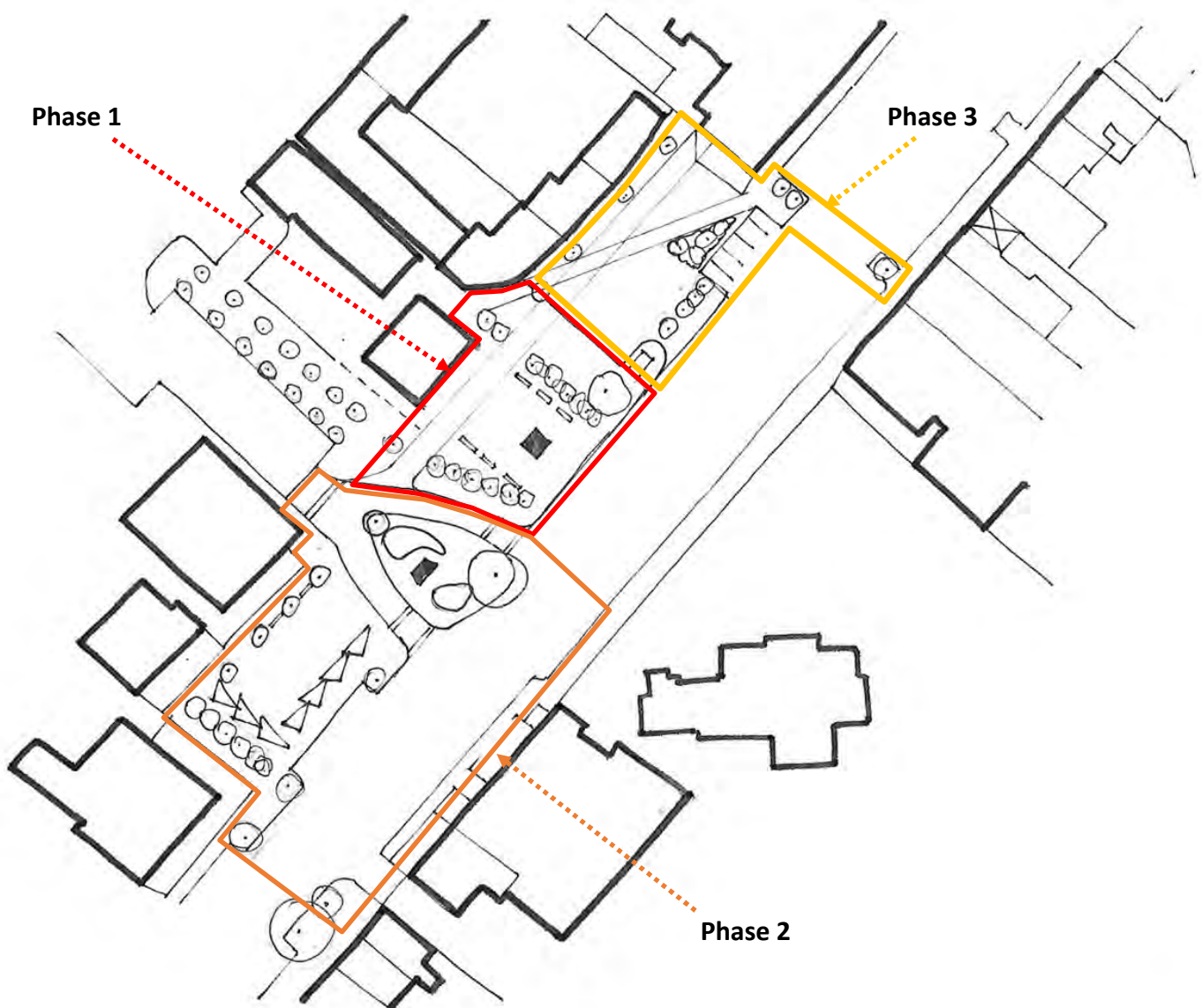
- Encourage appropriate infill development with retail or active commercial uses that will generate high and frequent pedestrian footfall at the two sites either side of the Forge building.
- Reduce the ingress and egress to either one single point of entry/exit or with one means of ingress and a separate means of egress (both options are illustrated in plan form below—this page and following page). If there is a single point of access, then the current toilets, which are prominently located in the centre of the Square should be relocated behind the sycamore tree near the bus stop.
- Reduce car parking in the Square alongside a phased programme of redesign and re-landscaping (including new granite paving).

The Market Square Urban Design Proposal—Consider 3 Phases for the Redevelopment of the Square.

Phase 1: The Market House—Mini Plaza: in the area between the Monument and the Market House/Credit Union.

Phase 2: Farmers Market/Seasonal Market: Between the Ulster Bank and Four Ball Tree.

Phase 3: Follows Infill Development and the creation of active frontages between the Credit Union and the West Wicklow Inn.

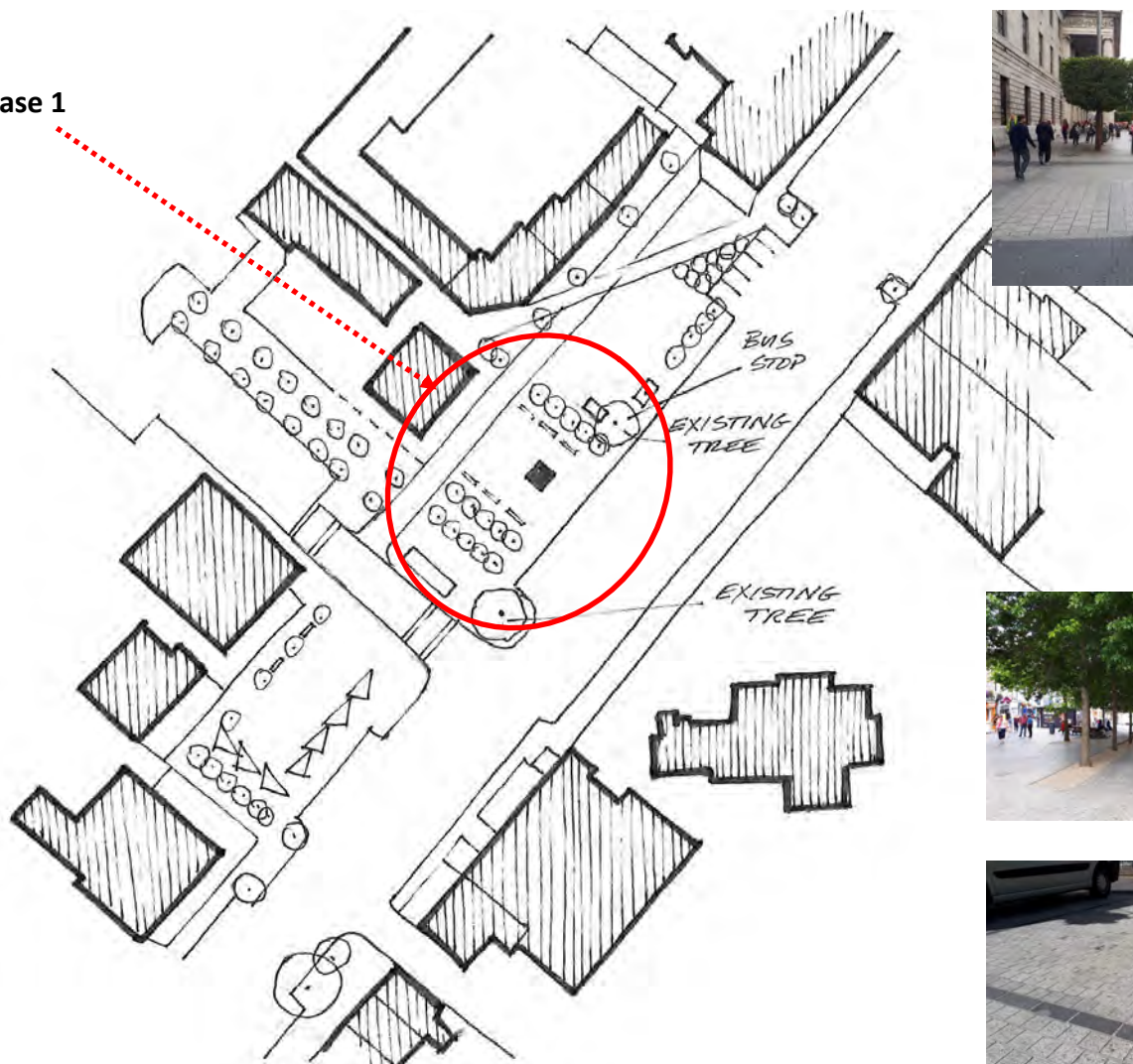


The Market Square Urban Design Proposal

Phase 1: The Market House—Mini Plaza: in the area between the Monument and the Market House/Credit Union.

It is proposed that the first phase should be the area in front of the Market House (Credit Union) to include the Monument and the Sycamore tree – running from the front of the Market House to the current edge of the N81. A double row of street benches could be inserted between the building and the monument as per Sketch 2. This ‘environmental improvement’ and landscaping works will see the loss of 7 car parking spaces from the Square. Depending on the success of this work, consideration could be given to the development of Phase 2. Bike stands could be considered in the vicinity of the sycamore tree and close to the current bus stop.

Phase 1

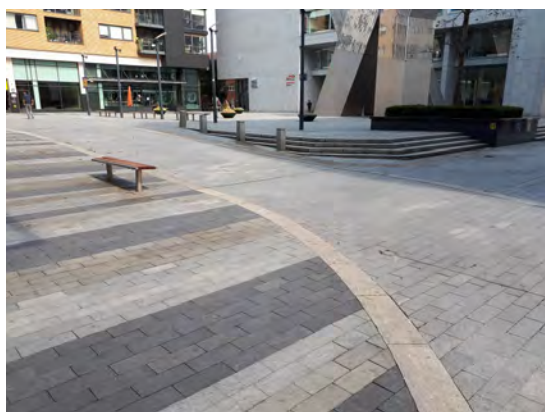


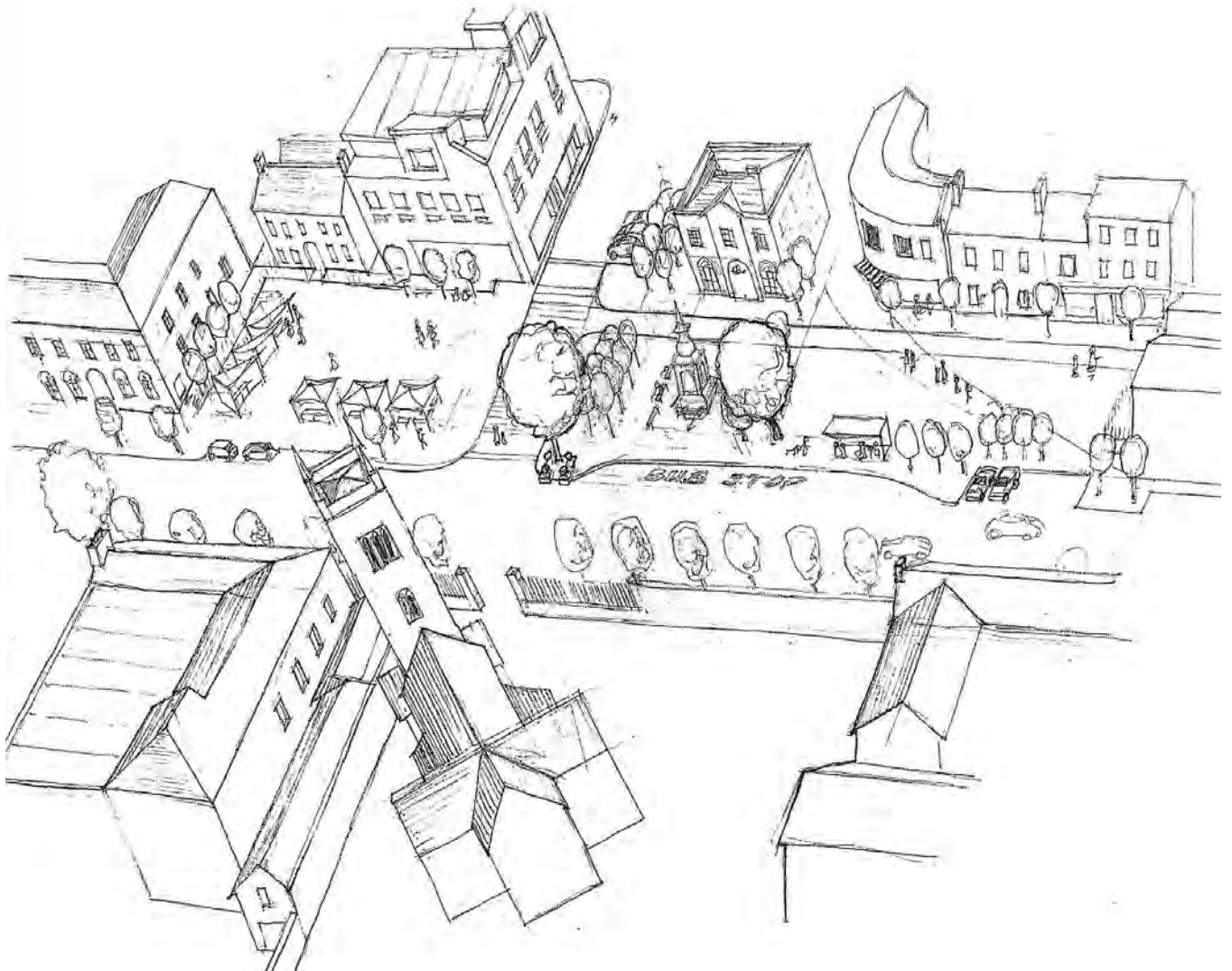
Photos: These photos (this page and opposite) give an example or sample of the sort of materials and character that could be achieved at the Market Square, Phase 1 -

Photo (top of opposite page): Bike Stands and Tourist Information Board—the square should have clear and neat signage directing people to the Tourist Office (to rear of Market House).

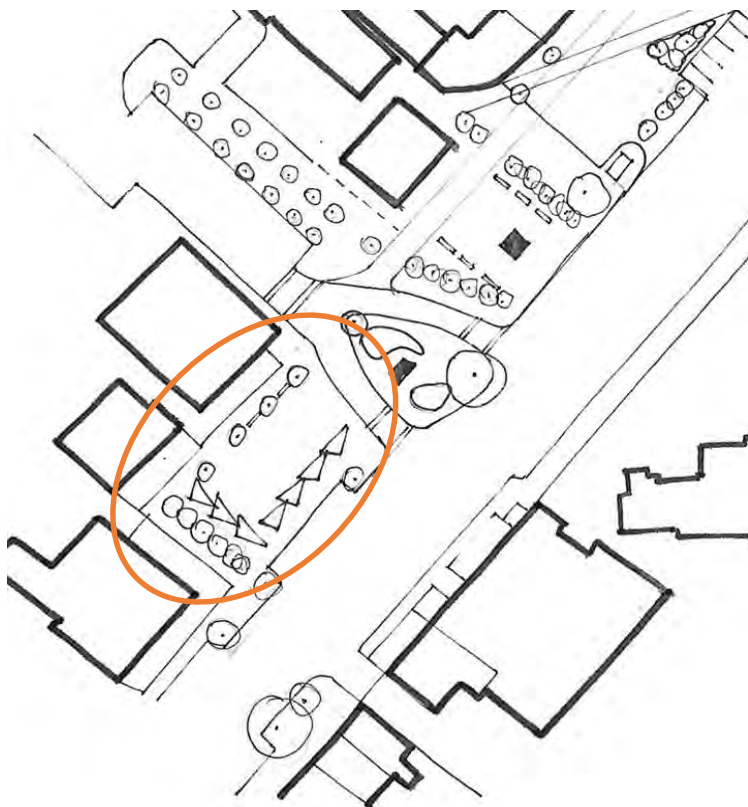
Photo (photos to right) - Example of hard paving in a ‘shared space’ - restrictive car access could be provided to the existing residence on the Square, for example.

Photos (bottom right and centre of opposite page) - Example of simple quality seating—using granite (a local vernacular material).





Phase 2 would focus on the southern end of the Square which lacks any vibrancy. It is suggested that this area would be defined by a row of Lime Trees (ideally pollarded) close to the current footpath and that the space be used for a high end Farmer's Market and/or specific seasonal markets (i.e., Christmas Market, Arts Festival, book fair, etc.). It is suggested that careful consideration be given to the design of the market stalls with an eye-catching and distinctive look, which users could be licensed to use (perhaps in return for a modest fee) – refer to photos below. Alternatively, a design structure that facilitates the easy erection of a temporary canopy structure should be considered. Some displaced car parking (12 spaces) from this area could be reinstated formally as on street car parking (with increased capacity following the reduction of entrance points). The space could also be used for people to congregate and celebrate following special community events.



Phase 2

Photos (this page): Access to the New Town Shopping Centre is proposed via a 'shared space' - a hard landscaped route that facilitates car access and pedestrian movement.

Examples of market stalls—the green stalls are foldable (and compact when folded), moveable and neat.



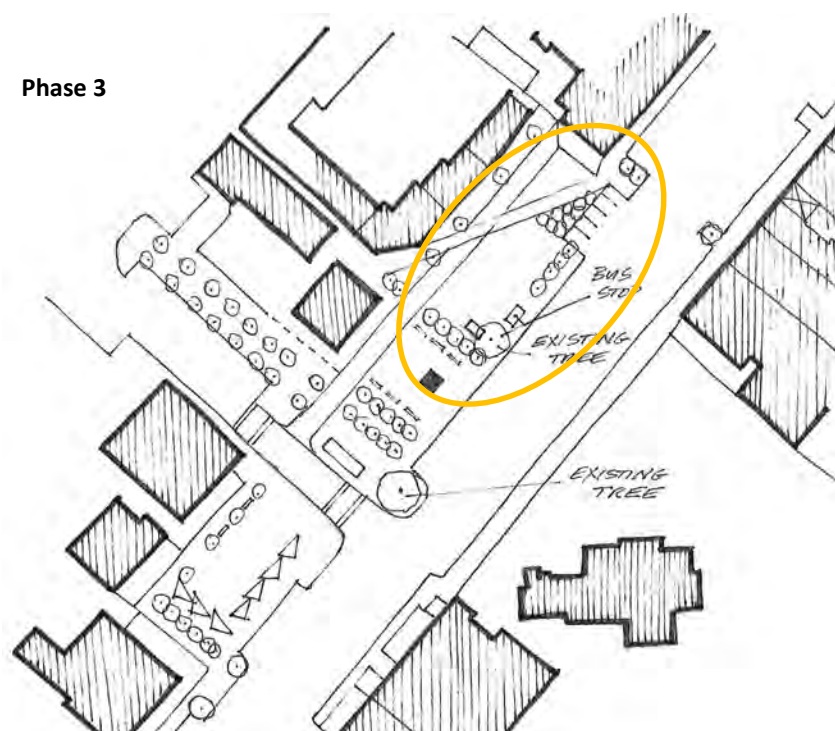
Phase 3: This area would encompass the remainder of the Square – at the northern end and it would make sense that this does not proceed until the infill sites either side of the Forge dwelling are developed (so as to reduce the impact of heavy vehicles during construction periods). This area is sloped more significantly so there is a gradient which will need a particularly sensitive design approach, which might encompass a raised landscape bed and/or a tree cluster. Consideration could also be given to a few small items of play equipment, without dominating the space, but which could be used to draw and entice people to use the space (see photo of life size chess board below).

The carriageway within the Square should ideally be designed as a shared surface area, along a part or whole of the area, with the carriageway delineated through via choice of materials such as a granite cobblestone and/or bollards (a 'shared space'). The design concept sketches indicate the net loss of 15 spaces in this area, but a few others could be reinstated depending on final design solution).

A more coherent street lighting plan will be required for all three phases – with a more unified approach.

Signage in the area should be reduced to a minimum – particularly the proliferation of sandwich boards and internal . Also, there are commercial signs for the new town centre in addition to brown tourist signs – these should be reviewed in the context of the new vehicular entrance/exit.

Damaged tree guards and bollards en-route to the new town centre development should be replaced and/or repaired and re-



Photos show—active frontage to square; figurative sculpture (reflecting Market Square history); pollarded lime trees and interactive features (street chess).



instated.

The signage on the first floor of the windows over the Lemon Tree is unsightly. Shop keepers generally should be encouraged to adopt a more reserved scale and minimise overpowering window signage.

St. Joseph's Green – A New/Revamped Town Park?

St. Joseph's Green is the only green space in the town centre. Although it serves the residents of St. Joseph's the park holds a central position in the town centre and is a very underutilised amenity. One suggestion is to remove the rubble stone wall and open up the aspect and view into the park, raise up the ground level inside the park some 20 metres or so, so that it is at grade with the public footpath adjoining the road (see sketch on opposite page) This would create an embankment in the centre of the park that could be landscaped along a part or the whole of it. The area could be developed with a series of pathways with seating and the possible provision of a 'dog park' – an enclosed area where local residents could take their dog off the lead. These have been popular where introduced elsewhere.

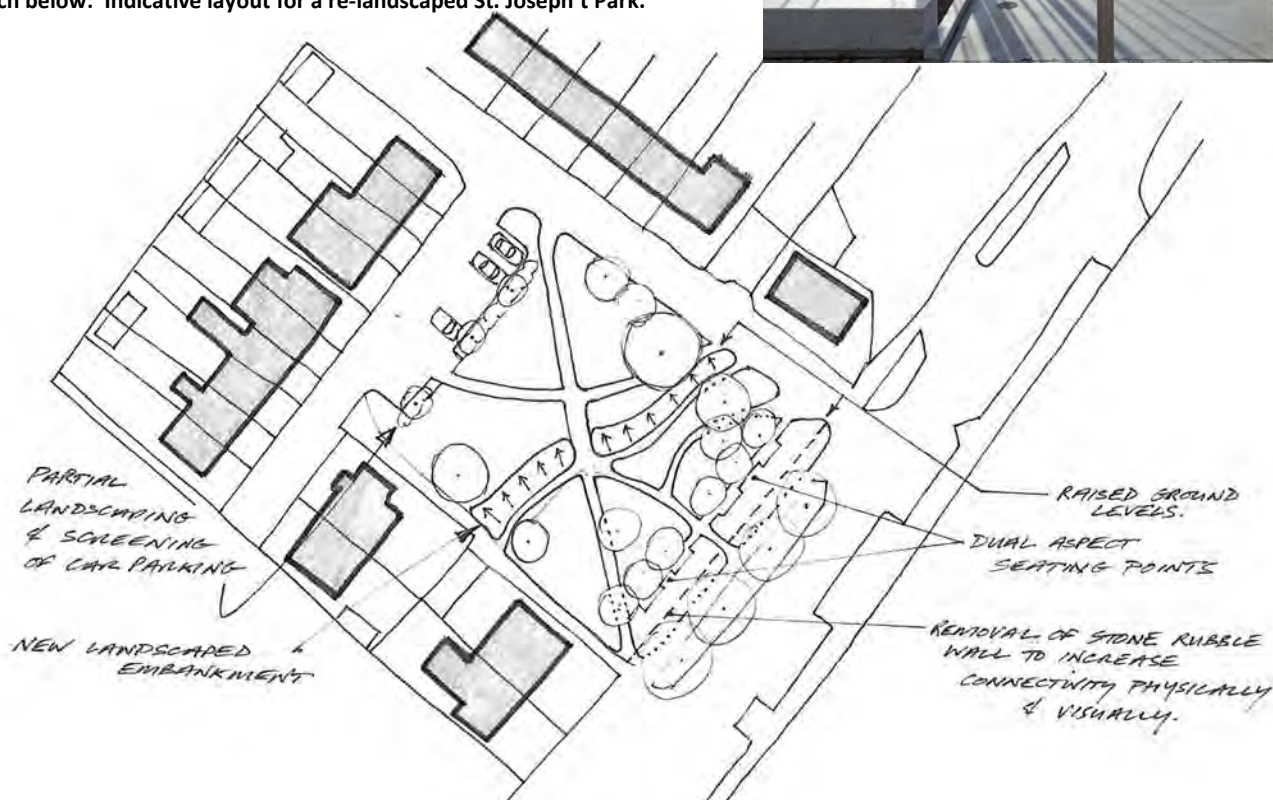


Photo to Left: Existing view of St. Joseph's Park from the street/N81.

Photo below: Indicative signage to accentuate the parks' entrance—something similar could be considered/commissioned.



Sketch below: Indicative layout for a re-landscaped St. Joseph's Park.



St. Joseph's Park: Cross Section suggesting fill required to bring upper part of park at grade with footpath and public road.



The area between Playground and Oak Drive Estate

This area has been landscaped and planted with a significant amount of shrubs and trees, but unfortunately the area lacks the informality of natural landscaping nor the structure and form of more formal landscaping (photos to right). Specifically, there are a lot of weeds in the undergrowth and this has become difficult and challenging to control and maintain. It is suggested that a new landscape plan be developed with the experience of a landscape architect and that a more simplified approach be taken along the lines of what is shown on photo below.



Photos Above: Landscaping in front of Oak Drive—as is.

Photo to Right: Indicative new landscaping solution, that is easier to maintain.



Skateboard Park Interface with the Ring-Road

The skateboard is a great addition to the town but the design interface with the road is poor—its functional with an almost industrial feel but not aesthetically pleasing. A structural element such as in the photo bottom right could provide casual and informal seating while allowing the planting of tall flowering plants that would soften the harshness of the plastic coated weld mesh fencing.

Bottle Banks

The Bottle Bank area is unsightly. The number of recycle receptors is quite significant and possibly could be reduced if the providers were encouraged or mandated to collect the contents on a more frequent basis. In order to improve the visual aspect, some form of enclosure is encouraged, to screen the receptors. One suggestion is for an partially enclosed walled area. If this had a smooth rendered finish it could be a 'canvas' for a commissioned street art or community art project perhaps engaging young artists (perhaps following a competition engaging the local community school and/or the Youth Reach programme in the Kildare Wicklow Educational and Training Board).

Fencing from J. Kelly Roundabout to Glenview Roundabout

The timber in this chain link fencing is deteriorating and the fence has started to collapse. Ideally it would be good to replace this fencing with a black metal rail fencing matching the opposite roadside. If this is too costly then it is suggested planting a single (or double) row of Beech Tree saplings along the length. These saplings are cheap, can quickly adapt to ground conditions and can grow relatively quickly and could be planted as part of a community initiative or via the Community Employment Scheme participants.

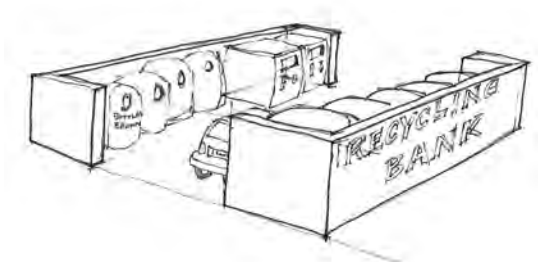


Photo Top: Fencing in front of Skateboard Park.

Photo Above: Indicative design treatment that could be considered to front of Skateboard park.

Photo Below: Bottleneck at New Town Centre.

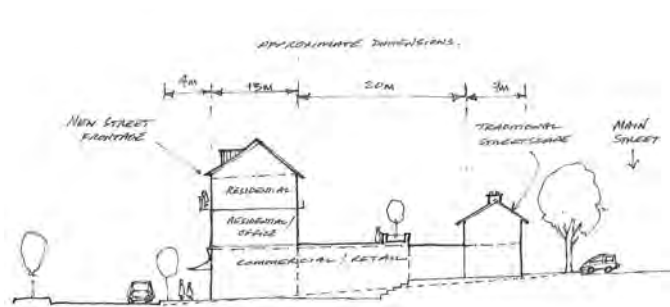
Photo Bottom: Possible Design Treatment for Bottle Bank with wall/screening introduced along perimeter with opportunitie for 'street art'.





Design and Public Realm Treatment in the Vicinity of Roundabouts

Each of the roundabouts along the ring-road/town by-pass and N81 provide an opportunity for motorists to slow down and observe the town. The environs of the roundabouts create the ‘first impressions’ of Blessington Town and therefore both the roundabouts and the space around them demand a higher than average attention in terms of design quality and building orientation and layout. Ideally, all buildings constructed in the vicinity of these roundabouts and key junctions should be orientated towards the street or road way—with key entrances, windows and façade design. Car parking should not dominated and should ideally be located to the rear or side of buildings where feasible. The building to the right is an example of an appropriate façade treatment/design.



Proposed New Street Frontage onto New Town Centre Surface Car Park.

The backlands of the west side of Main Street which ‘back’ onto the New Town Centre surface car park should be redeveloped to form a new street frontage to overlook this space and provide more ‘natural surveillance’ and provide a sense of enclosure there. Guidance on the use and dimensions are provided on the sketch to left.



Developed with the help of Blessington Tidy Towns, Blessington & District Forum, Wicklow County Council and the Department of Rural & Community Development.

