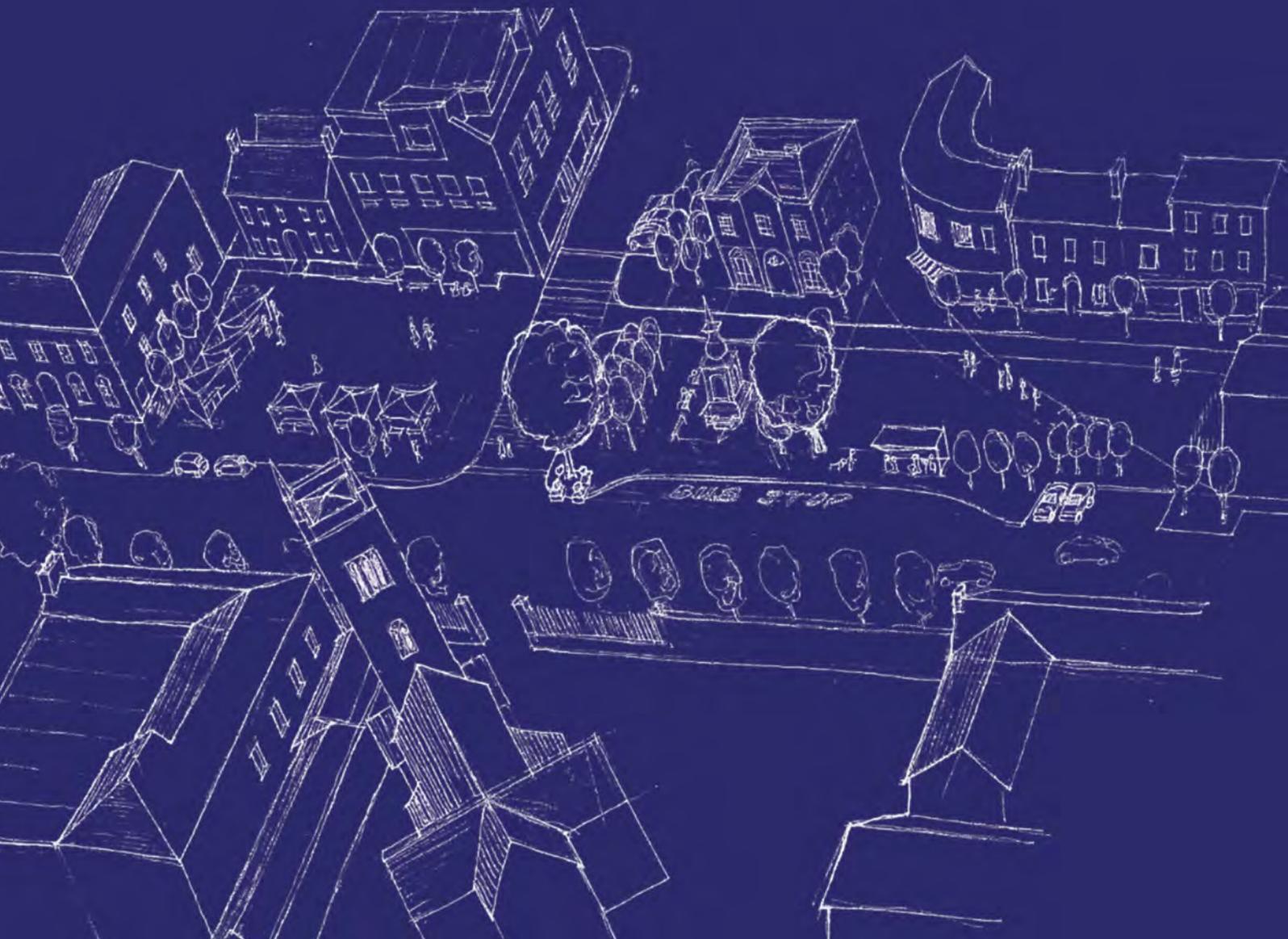


BLESSINGTON Town Health Check

REPORT | JANUARY 2020



2020



BLESSINGTON

Town Health Check

REPORT | PHASE 2 | JANUARY

2020

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Future Analytics Consulting has been appointed by Blessington District Forum and Wicklow County Council to undertake a Town Centre Health Check for Blessington. Consultation with local organisations, business associations and community members have been conducted as part of the process. The analysis of the data obtained from the research and stakeholder consultation process provided the foundations for the formulation of a series of recommendations for the settlement.



INTRODUCTION

Future Analytics Consulting has been appointed by Blessington District Forum and Wicklow County Council to undertake a Town Centre Health Check for Blessington. Consultation with local organisations, business associations and community members have been conducted as part of the process. The analysis of the data obtained from the research and stakeholder consultation process provided the foundations for the formulation of a series of recommendations for the settlement.

This report provides information on the performance of Blessington across a variety of indicators, as well as incorporating an assessment of strengths, constraints, opportunities and threats. The data will inform and support future community and socio-economic planning and development of the town by Wicklow County Council, key stakeholders and the local community, with a view to enhancing the prosperity and vitality of the town and improving the quality of life for the local community and those working in and visiting Blessington.

Achieving a healthy balance in the economic, societal and cultural functions performed by Blessington town centre is crucial to the success of the town and the quality of life available to the local

community. The appearance of the town, its public realm, the quality and range of services and amenities, and the general atmosphere on its streets have a direct impact on the economic performance of the town and the health and wellbeing of residents.

The objectives of this report are to:

- » **Provide a baseline** of the existing socioeconomic and environmental conditions in Blessington which can then be used for future comparisons
- » **Develop a series of indicators** through which the relative 'health' of Blessington as a place to live, a place to work and a place to visit can be assessed
- » **Highlight the results of the extensive consultation** that was undertaken during the course of the project, with key findings from this consultation detailed
- » **Outline a series of actions and recommendations** that can, if delivered upon, positively improve Blessington and its surrounds
- » **Support the preparation of a Blessington Local Area Plan** that will be commenced in the medium term as part of the development of a new County Development Plan for Wicklow

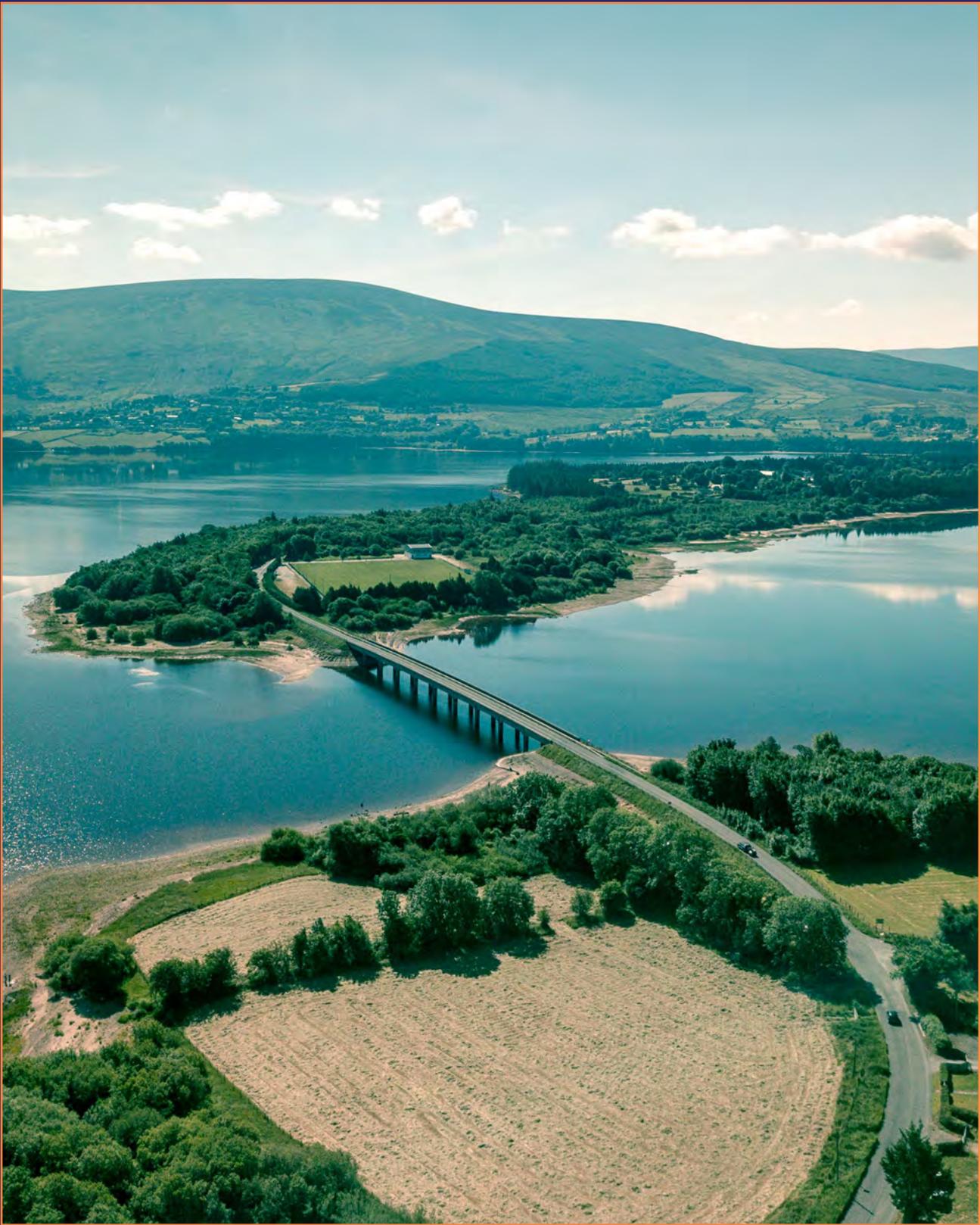
Achieving a **healthy balance** in the economic, societal and cultural functions performed by Blessington town centre is **crucial to the success** of the town and the **quality of life** available to the local community.



CHAPTER TWO

BLESSINGTON: THE CONTEXT

Blessington is located in the north-west of County Wicklow, among the undulating slopes of the Wicklow Mountains and directly adjacent to the Poulaphouca Reservoir, otherwise known as Blessington Lake. It straddles the border between Wicklow and Kildare and is located approximately 30km south of Dublin and 12km east of Naas. Its proximity to the nation's capital, primary population centre and economic driver offers both huge opportunities as well as significant challenges, all of which will be discussed throughout this report.



BLESSINGTON: THE CONTEXT

Blessington is located in the north-west of County Wicklow, among the undulating slopes of the Wicklow Mountains and directly adjacent to the Poulaphouca Reservoir, otherwise known as Blessington Lake. It straddles the border between Wicklow and Kildare and is located approximately 30km south of Dublin and 12km east of Naas. Its proximity to the nation's capital, primary population centre and economic driver offers both huge opportunities as well as significant challenges, all of which will be discussed throughout this report.

The town is an attractive, former market town that has, as with many Irish towns, developed in a linear fashion along its main transport route, which in this case is the national route N81. Evidence of human activity in the area exists from the Bronze Age, however it was arguably from the 15th Century onwards that the town we today know as Blessington came to resemble its current form. Archbishop Michael Boyle received a charter to establish the town of Blessington in 1667, with the construction and development of Blessington House and Estate beginning around this time.

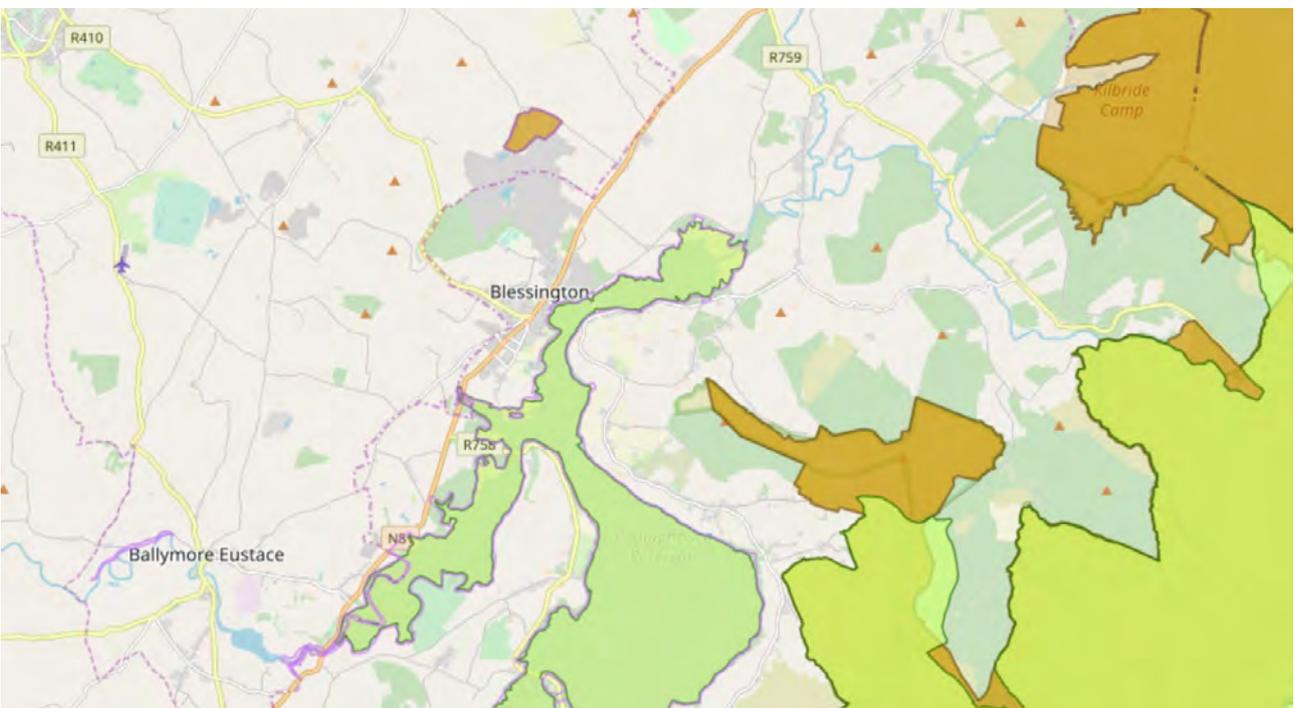
The Market Square is located at the heart of the town, with the Downshire Monument and impressive Market House (constructed between 1820 and 1840), now Credit Union, providing indications of its past use. Although the Market Square (the Square) is now dominated by vehicles, it still lends Blessington the characteristics of a traditional market town, something that is of significance in terms of exploiting and building upon the area's heritage.

Blessington has an enviable position of being located within a wider area of immense natural beauty, with several important and protected features nearby. As Figure 2 shows, Blessington is located alongside the Poulaphouca Reservoir Special Protected Area (SPA), which is also designated as a Natural Heritage Area (No. 000731). The Wicklow Mountains SPA and Special Area of Conservation (SAC) are also found further east of Blessington, while the Red Bog SAC lies to the northwest of the town centre.

Figure 1 Aerial View of Blessington with Settlement Boundary (Source CSO)



Figure 2 Blessington Designated Sites (Source: EPA)



Population

Figure 3 showcases the settlement boundary for Blessington (the purple line), as defined by the Central Statistics Office (CSO). Unless stated otherwise, all sociodemographic data contained in this report will relate to this area.

According to the most recent Census information, from the Census of 2016, the settlement of Blessington had a population of 5,520 persons. Overall, Blessington has a population with an average age of 31.7 years, which is below the State average of 36.8. This indicates that Blessington has a relatively young population, which is a positive sign for any town.

31.7

Average age

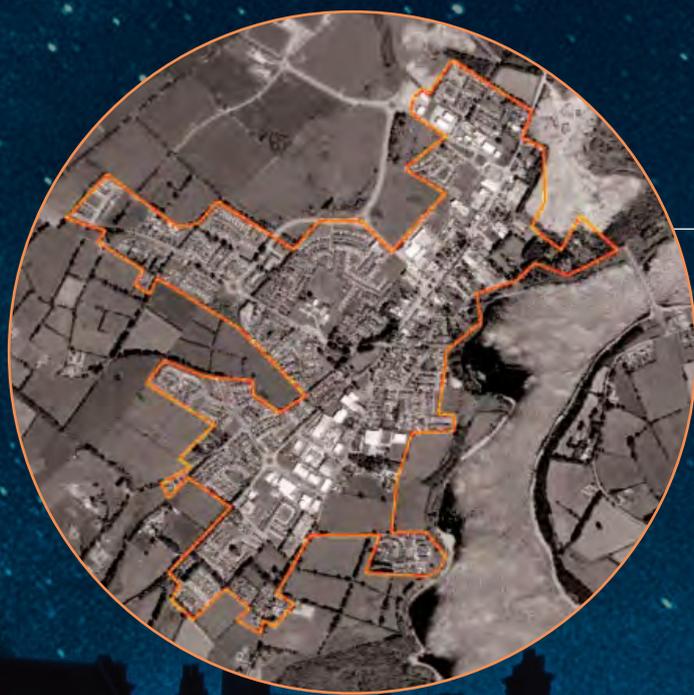


Figure 3:
*Blessington Settlement
Boundary (Source CSO)*

28.9%

aged 0-14 years

64%

aged 15-64 years

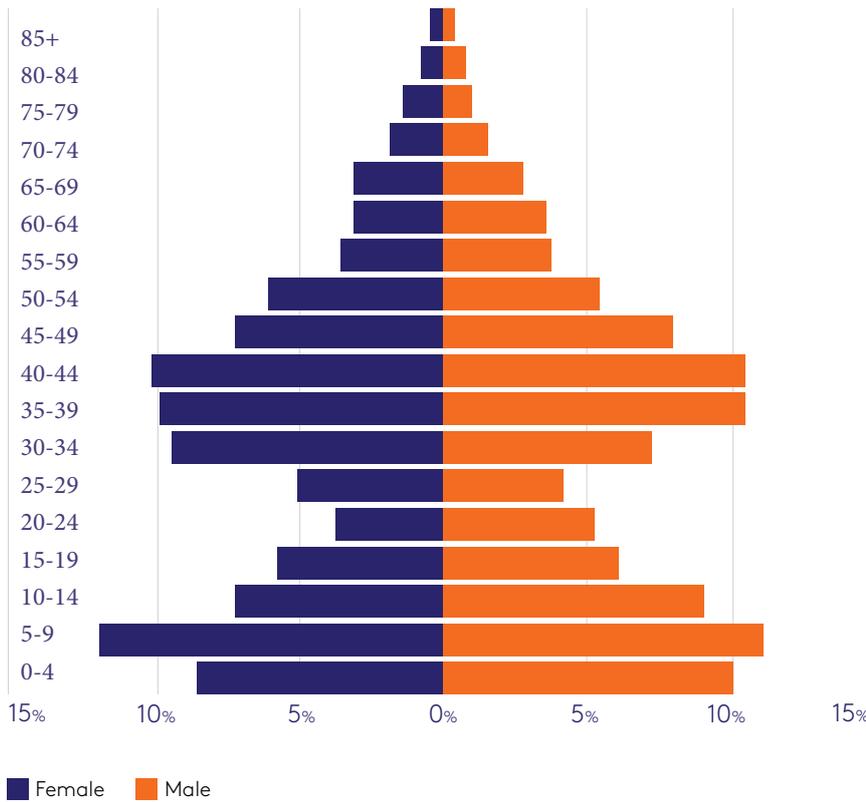
7%

aged 65+ years

In terms of broad age categories, there are approximately 1,598 persons aged 0 to 14, or 28.9% of the population. Around 3,533 persons, or 64% of the total, are aged between 15 and 64, which is considered the general working age. There are 389 persons recorded as 65 or older, which is 7% of Blessington's population. Again, this compares favourably with the State, where 21.1% are 0-14, 65.5% are 15-64 and 13.4% are above 65.

Figure 4 is a population pyramid which provides a breakdown of a larger range of age groups and gender. Persons aged 5 to 9 comprise the largest cohort of the population, accounting for 11.4% of the overall total, highlighting the significant underage population base that exists. Persons aged 40-44 and persons aged 35-39 form the next largest cohorts with 10.3% and 10.1% of the overall population respectively. Perhaps a slightly worrying statistic is the proportion of 'young adults' that make up Blessington's population base. 4.5% of the population is aged 20-24, which is 248 persons, while 4.6% of the population, or 254 persons, are aged 25-29. Considering these age cohorts will increasingly become more important to the local economy and will raise families, it is concerning that they form such a low proportion of Blessington's overall population.

Figure 4:
Blessington Demographic Composition (Source CSO)

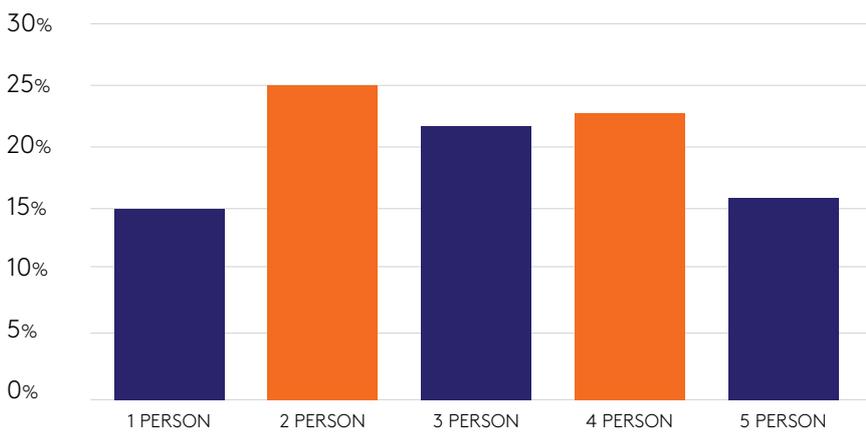


The population statistics also offer an indication of household composition. With such high proportions of young children and persons aged 35 to 44, you would expect to see a larger number of family units, and this is the case. 59.1% of households have children, with 47.1% containing pre-adolescent children. Furthermore, 62.9% of private households in Blessington are composed of couples (either married or cohabiting) with children. If we look at household types by size in more detail (Fig. 5), the largest proportion are 2-person households, with 24.7%, while 22.6% of households contain four persons.

Social housing accounts for approximately 9.1% of the total stock, with private rental accommodation comprising 20% of the total. The largest proportion of the housing stock is owner-occupied, 68.9%.

Vacancy in Blessington's residential sector is recorded at 6.3% of all dwellings, far below the State average of 12.3%.

Figure 5:
Blessington Household Composition



62.9%
OF PRIVATE HOUSEHOLDS IN BLESSINGTON ARE COMPOSED OF COUPLES

22.6%
OF HOUSEHOLDS CONTAIN FOUR PERSONS

65.9% or
3,635

PEOPLE REPORTED THAT THEY WERE IN 'VERY GOOD' HEALTH

25%

STATED THEY WERE IN 'GOOD' HEALTH

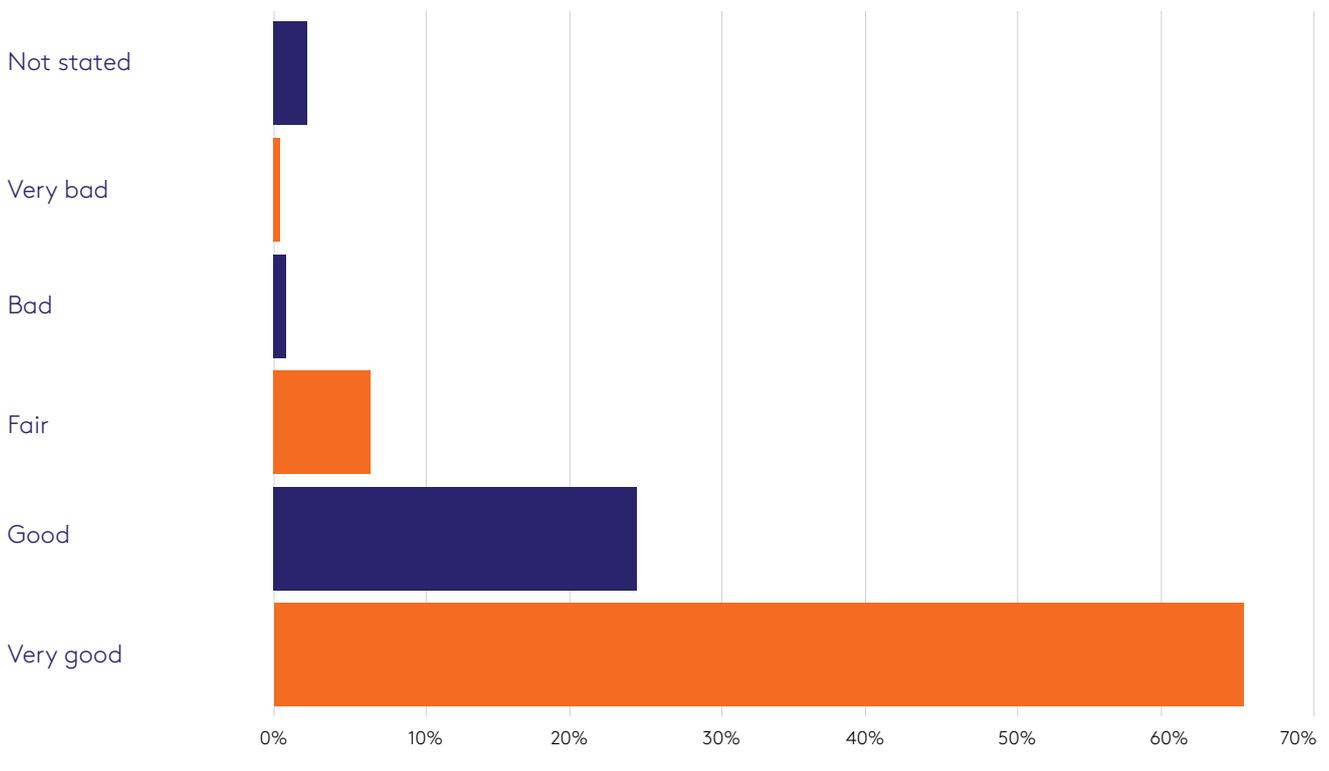
Health and Wellbeing (Deprivation)

Although it is challenging to accurately understand the health and wellbeing levels of a population, particularly without access to confidential data such as hospital and GP records, there are some measures through which a picture can be formed. For instance, the Census poses some questions to respondents that are relevant, one of which asks the respondent to gauge their 'general health'.

Figure 6 provides an overview of how Blessington's residents responded to this question. 90.9% of all respondents stated they were in 'very good or 'good' health. 65.9% reported that they were in 'very good' health, which is slightly better than how the nation as a whole listed their health, with a further 25% stating they were in 'good' health.

In terms of disability, there were 575 people who identified themselves as possessing a disability in Blessington, which amounts to a disability rate of 10.4%, below the State average of 13.5%.

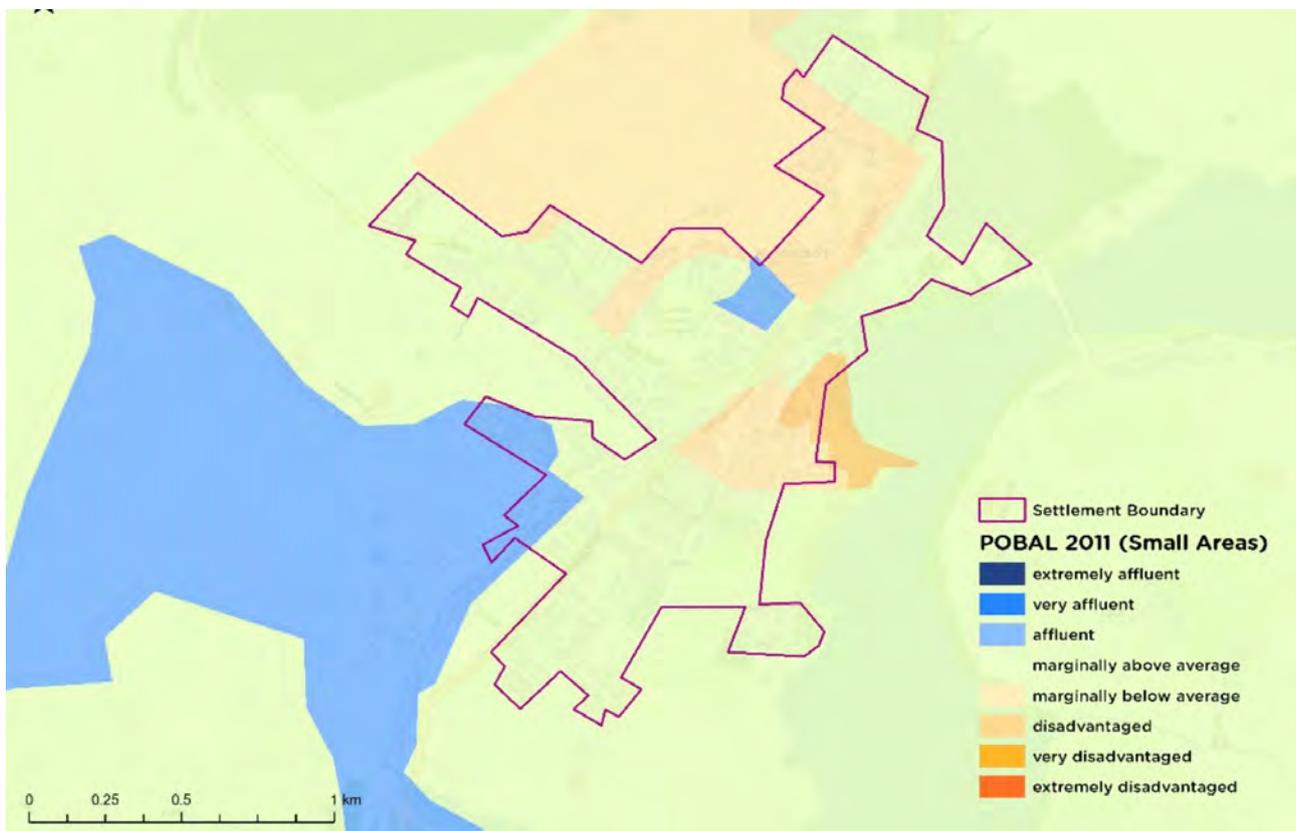
Figure 6:
Blessington Household Composition



The State agency POBAL produce a 'Deprivation Index' and 'deprivation maps' based on census information, updating with each new iteration of the census. These deprivation maps, while certainly not definitive in terms of what they represent, do offer an interesting overview of the relative levels of affluence and deprivation in communities.

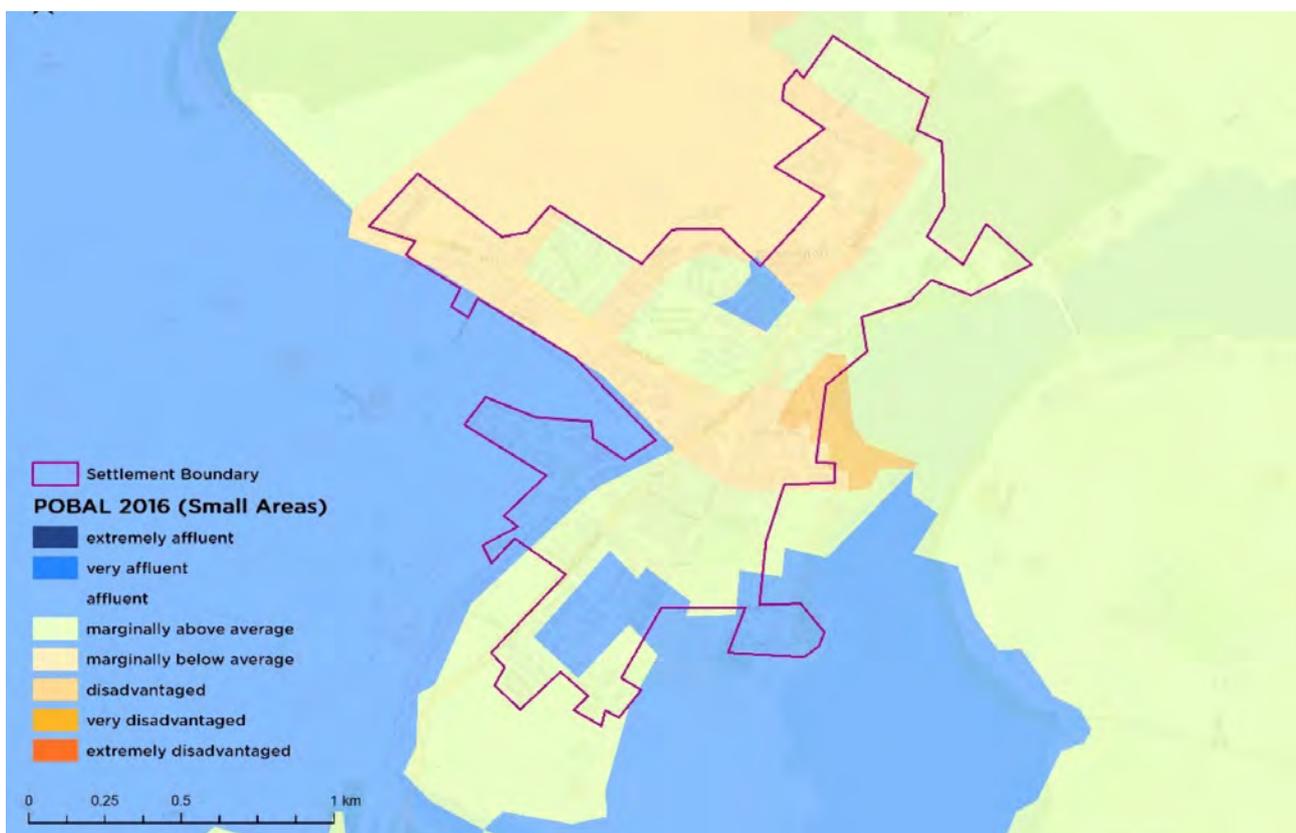
The methodology employs small area statistics (SAs) from the census to establish how "deprived" areas are. It looks at various information including education, employment, well-being and other related attributes to provide an overall score, relative to other SAs . A range of scores have been developed, with the lowest indicating an "extremely disadvantaged" area and the highest showing an "extremely affluent" area.

Figure 7 Blessington Deprivation Index (Pobal, 2011)



It should be noted that as the SAs represent areas with large numbers of people the scores are the average for everyone, meaning that not every household in a particular area necessarily falls under the designated category. Nonetheless, perhaps the most significant usage for the Deprivation Index is in comparing areas across time. Figures 7 and 8 show the deprivation designations for SAs in the Blessington area in 2011 and 2016. There appears to have been a growth in both “disadvantaged” and “affluent” areas, which is perhaps a reflection of wider society.

Figure 8 Blessington Deprivation Index (Pobal, 2016)



EDUCATION

Ireland's economy has dramatically changed in recent decades. As the country has developed and become less reliant on traditional employment roles in sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing, moving to more professional and high-tech industries, there has also been a dramatic change in formal education attainment. With more technical roles requiring different skill-sets, Irish people have had to respond by acquiring certificates and diplomas in a wider range of formal education courses. In this respect, the education attainment levels, and types of courses studied, can provide an interesting insight into the skills possessed by communities.

Figure 9 provides an overview of the educational attainment levels of Blessington's population over the age of 15. It shows the highest level of education completed by the respondent. The largest cohort are those who have completed 'upper secondary', which is equivalent of the Leaving Certificate, with 20% of respondents. 8.6% of people have completed a postgraduate level course. Overall, 28.8% of respondents have attained a 'Level 7' third level degree or certificate. This is similar to the State average of 28.5%.

Figure 10 shows the breakdown of fields of study, with the proportion of females and males from Blessington that have stated their area of study. It is interesting in that it highlights the gender disparity between certain study areas, such as 'engineering, manufacturing and construction' which 21.8% of males studied in, versus 1.7% of females. Combined, 'social sciences, business and law' had the highest number of the population listing this as their field of study, with 17.6% of the total, or 569 persons.

Figure 9. Blessington Educational Attainment (Source CSO)

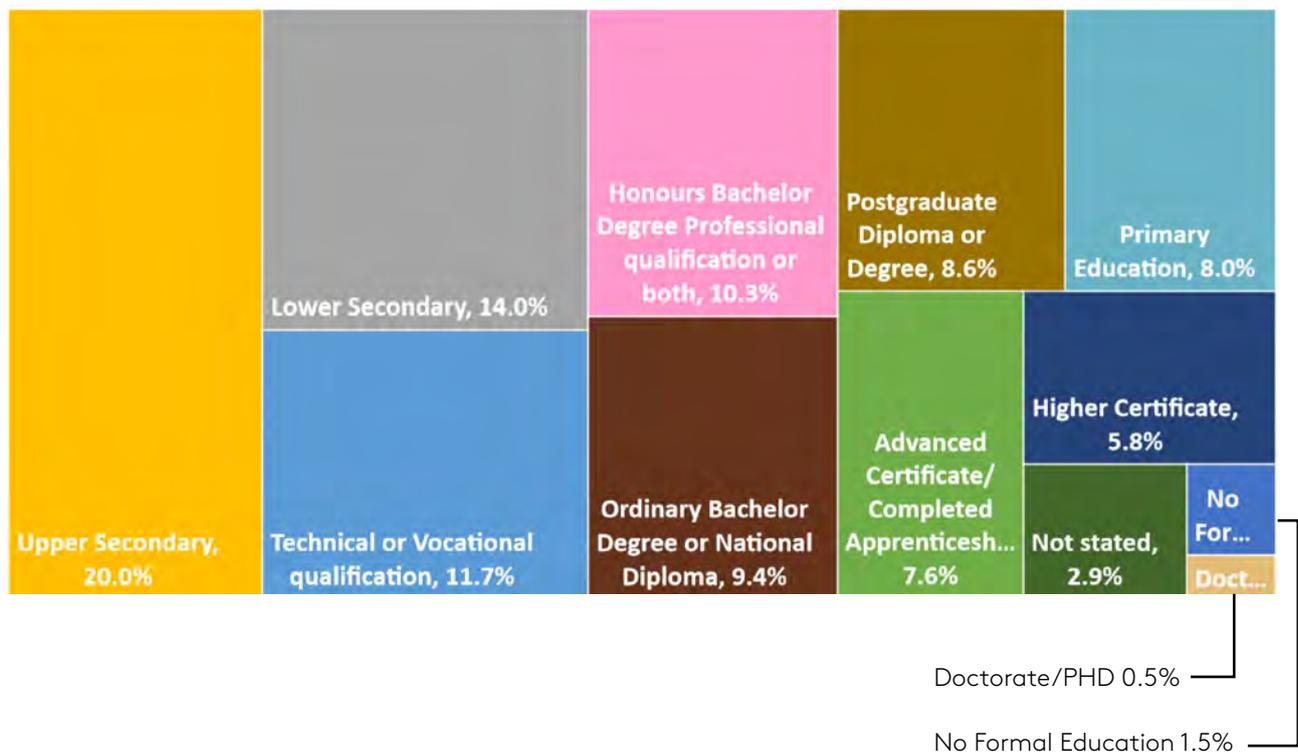
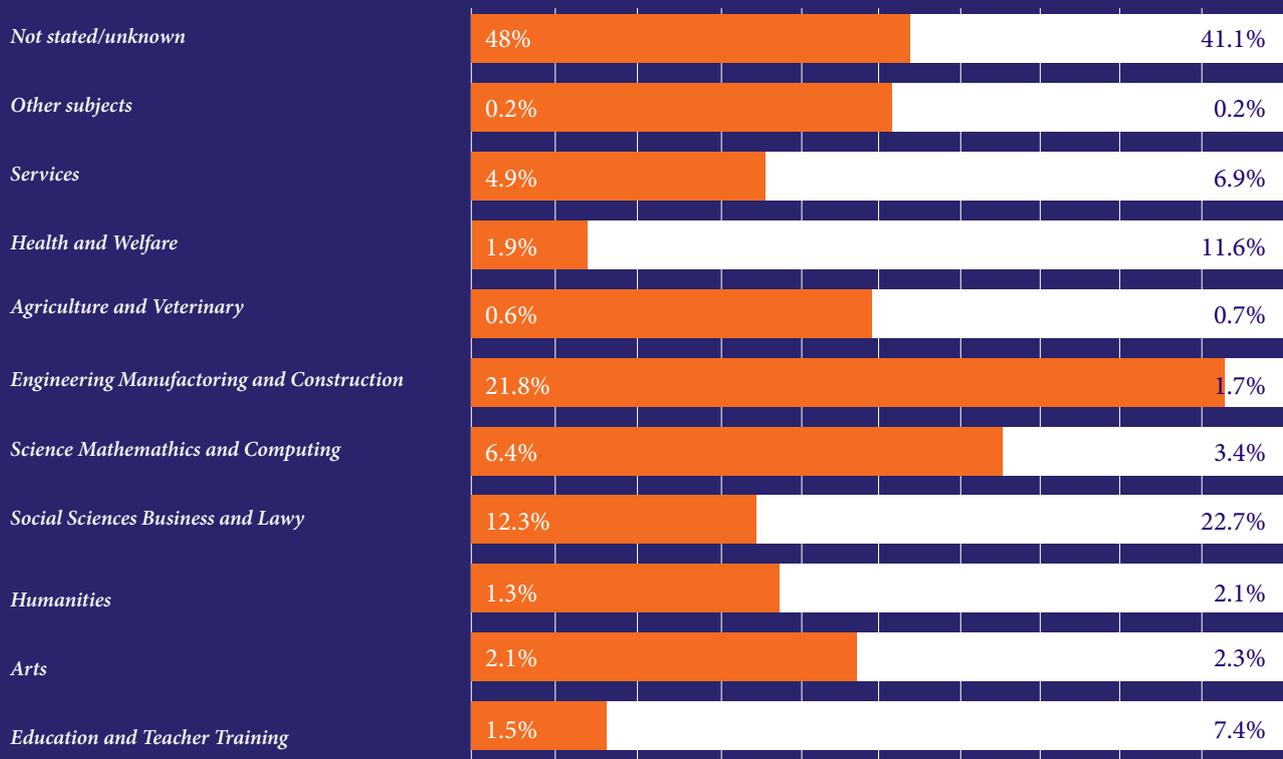


Table 1. Field of study (Source CSO)

Qualification	Total (Persons)	Total (%)
Education and teacher training	146	4.5%
Arts	72	2.2%
Humanities	55	1.7%
Social sciences Business and Law	569	17.6%
Science Mathematics and Computing	156	4.8%
Engineering Manufacturing and Construction	367	11.4%
Agriculture and Veterinary	21	0.7%
Health and Welfare	224	6.9%
Services	176	5.5%
Other subjects	6	0.2%
Not Stated (incl. unknown)	1,433	44.4%

Figure 10. Areas of study by gender (Source CSO)



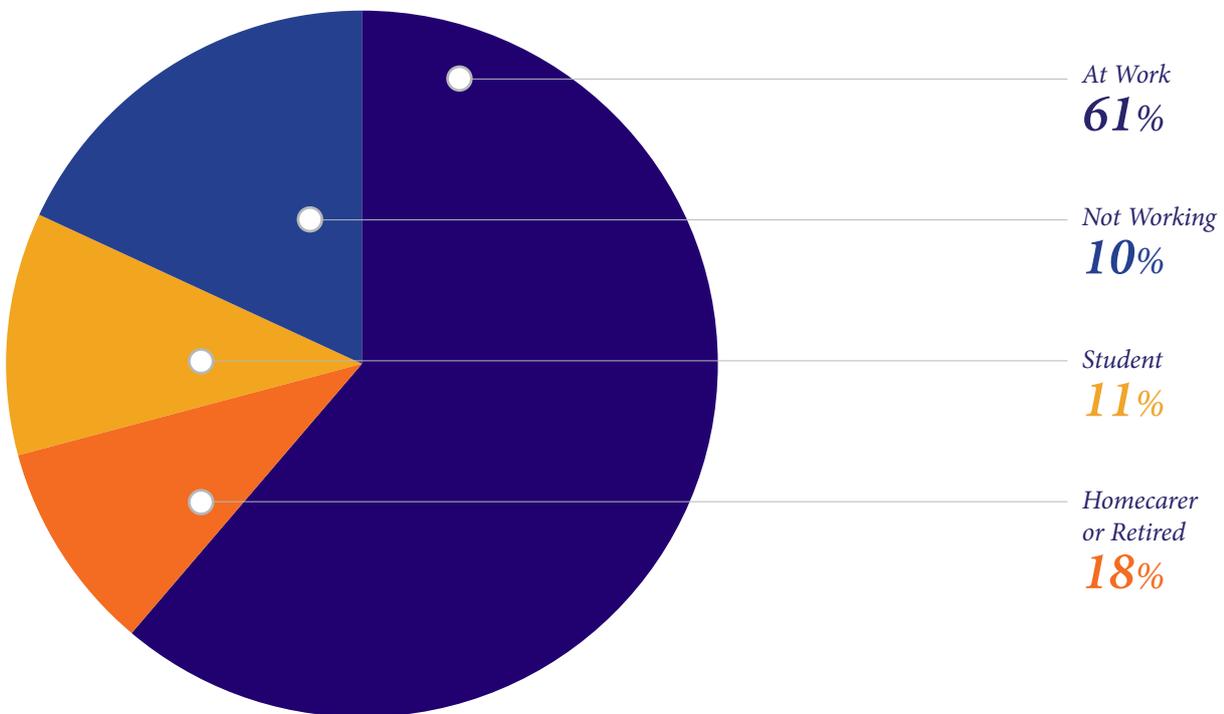
EMPLOYMENT

Employment is a core barometer of a healthy town, with high levels of unemployment indicating substantial challenges, while low levels show a relative health. Additionally, the type of employment, in terms of security and sectors is also a useful indicator for analysis. The Census of 2016 records Blessington as having a total of 2412 persons 'at work', which is 61.5% of the working population, as shown in Figure 11.

By grouping those looking for work with unemployed and those 'unable to work due to permanent sickness or disability', the proportion of unemployed persons is approximately 9.6% of the total population.

Students account for 10.7% of those aged 15 or over, or 420 persons. Retirees and persons who stated they look after the home or family account for 18.2% of the total. Compared to the State average, Blessington is performing well. At the State level there are 53.4% 'at work' while a further 12.1% are unemployed, as per the previously stated categorisation.

Figure 11: Proportion of Blessington Population at Work (Source CSO)



Industries of employment are also useful to understand, with the Census again providing this information. Figure 12 shows the proportion of persons at work in Blessington by broad industry type. ‘Commerce and trade’ accounts for the highest proportion, with 661 persons (27.4%) working in this industry, while ‘professional services’ is the second largest employer with 21.7% of the total. Interestingly, for a town that is steeped in a rural, agricultural heritage, the proportion of persons employed in the ‘agriculture, forestry and fishing’ sector is minimal, with 0.6% the recorded figure.

Aside from the broad industry of employment, the Census also provides statistics on occupation. Similarly, to the industry of employment, the occupation type is offered at a broader level and does not detail specific occupation types. In Blessington the ‘professional occupations’ record the highest proportion, with 14.7% of ‘persons at work or unemployed’ stating their occupation as such. Figure 13 provides a breakdown of occupation type in Blessington, by gender, with the percentage referring to the total number of either males or females with the respective occupation. ‘Administrative and secretarial occupations’ show a clear divide between genders, with 22.9% of females recording this as their occupation versus 4.6% of males.

Figure 12: Proportion of People at Work in Blessington by Industry Type (Source CSO)

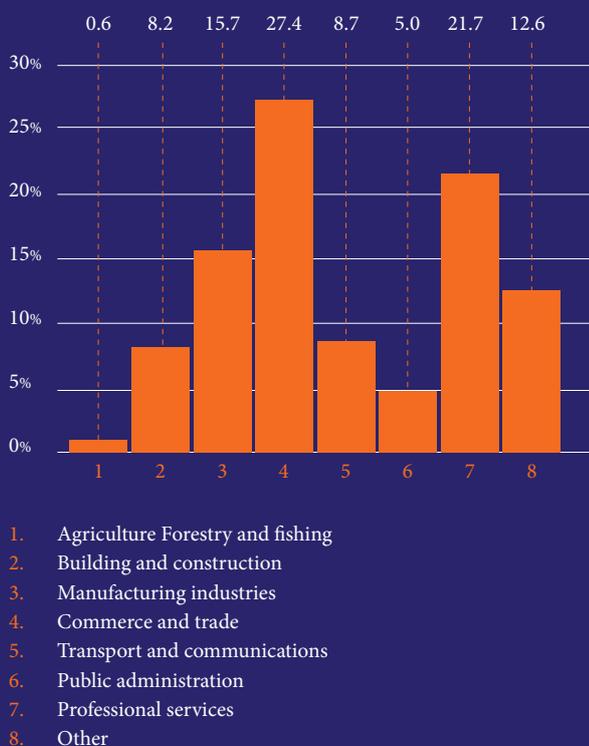
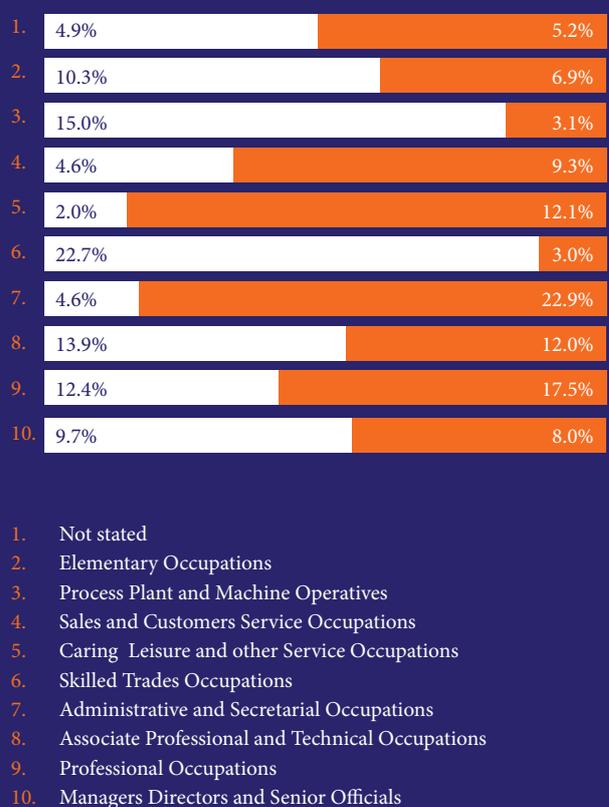


Figure 13: Occupation Type by Gender (Source CSO)



COMMUTING AND TRANSPORT

The Census also records the primary mode of transport used by people to travel to work, school or college, with the graphic below showing the main modes in Blessington. Unsurprisingly, the car dominates, with a significant proportion of the overall population, 64.9% choosing to drive or travel as a passenger in a car. Considering Blessington is a relatively compact, walkable town, it should come as no surprise that walking is the second most popular mode of transport, with 16.7% of the total. Buses, minivans and coaches are the third most popular mode of transport, with 7.9%, while cycling performs relatively poorly at 1.2% of the overall figure.

When we split the reasons for travel, with work as its own category and school/college as a separate one, we see some interesting differences. Table 2 provides a comparison of the main modes of transport used for travelling to work, versus school/college. The scale of dependence on the private car as the main mode of transport for travel to work is quite clear, with 71.7% of work commuters travelling this way. Considering the vast majority of school-goers are underage and unable to drive, it is no surprise this mode features less heavily for school commuters. However, the car still plays a role, with the majority (44.2%) of school-goers travelling as car passengers. On a more positive note, the proportion of those who walk to school or college is relatively large, with 32.9% doing so.

Walk



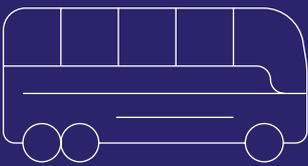
16.7%

Cycle



1.2%

By bus



7.9%

By car



64.9%

COMMUTING AND TRANSPORT

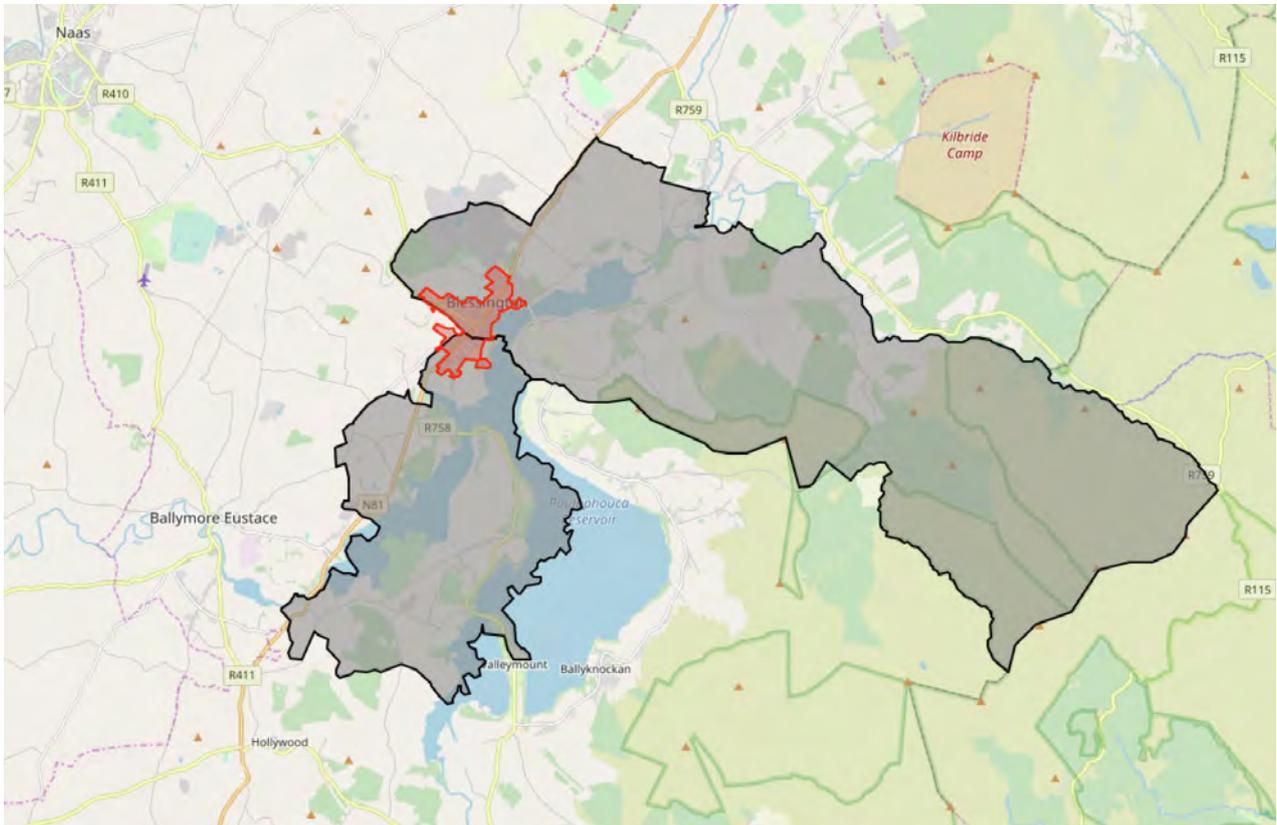
Table 2. Mode of transport for work versus school/college

Means of Travel	Work	Work %	School	School %
On foot/Walk	159	6.7%	489	32.9%
Bicycle	17	0.7%	28	1.9%
Bus or coach	96	4.0%	211	14.2%
Car driver	1,712	71.7%	62	4.2%
Car passenger	83	3.5%	657	44.2%

Travel times and time people leave for work, school or college are detailed in the census and can allow some assumptions to be made. For example, in Blessington the majority (28.8%) of the population aged 5 years and older are recorded as leaving home between 08:31 to 09:00am. This would indicate that these people do not have far to travel, if we take the standard 9am starting time as a given. Such an assumption is supported by the recorded journey times, where ‘under 15 minutes’ journey time had the highest proportion of 34.4%, while a further 17.6% have a journey time between 15 and 30 minutes. Overall, the average journey time for Blessington residents is 32.5 minutes, slightly higher than the State average of 27.4 minutes.

As part of the research undertaken for this ‘Health Check’ a more detailed analysis of commuting in the Blessington area was performed. This dataset utilises electoral divisions (EDs) as the unit of analysis, with the Blessington and Burgage EDs selected. Figure 14 shows the two EDs that were used, shaded grey, with the red shaded area indicating the Blessington settlement.

Figure 14. The Electoral Divisions used for analysis of commuting



Figures 15 and 16 show the EDs from which people commute to the two chosen EDs (Blessington and Burgage). As you would expect, the highest number of commuters travelling to Blessington for work and/or school are themselves located in the EDs that cover Blessington. The EDs that are immediately adjacent to both Blessington and Burgage have the highest number of commuters travelling to these areas, although there are examples of commuters as far as north as Skerries and as far south as Arklow that travel to the area. Naas records a relatively significant number of commuters who travel to Blessington for work or/and school, highlighting the interlinked nature of the settlements.

Figure 15 Commuters to Blessington ED (Source POWSCAR)

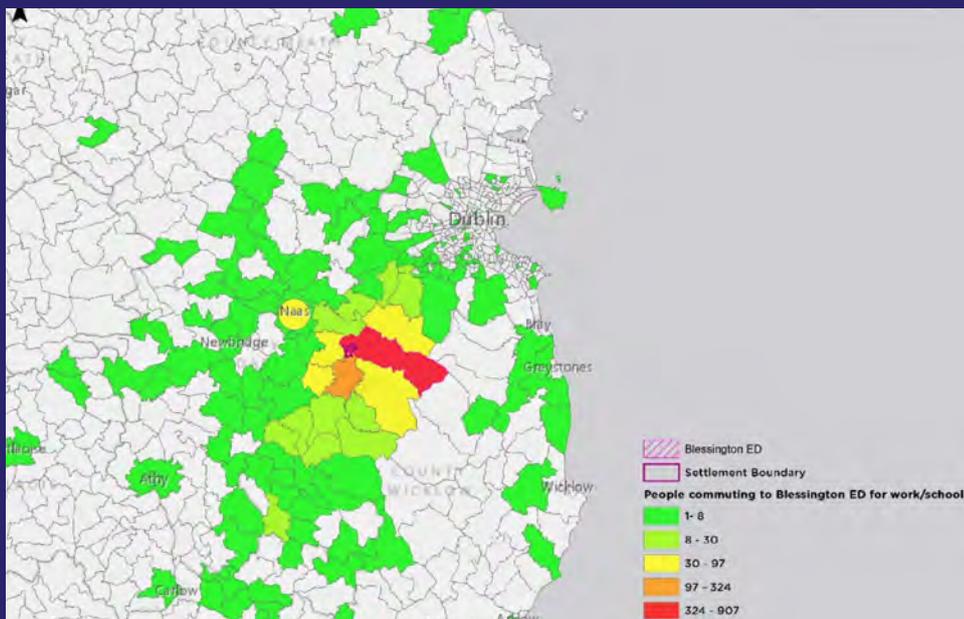
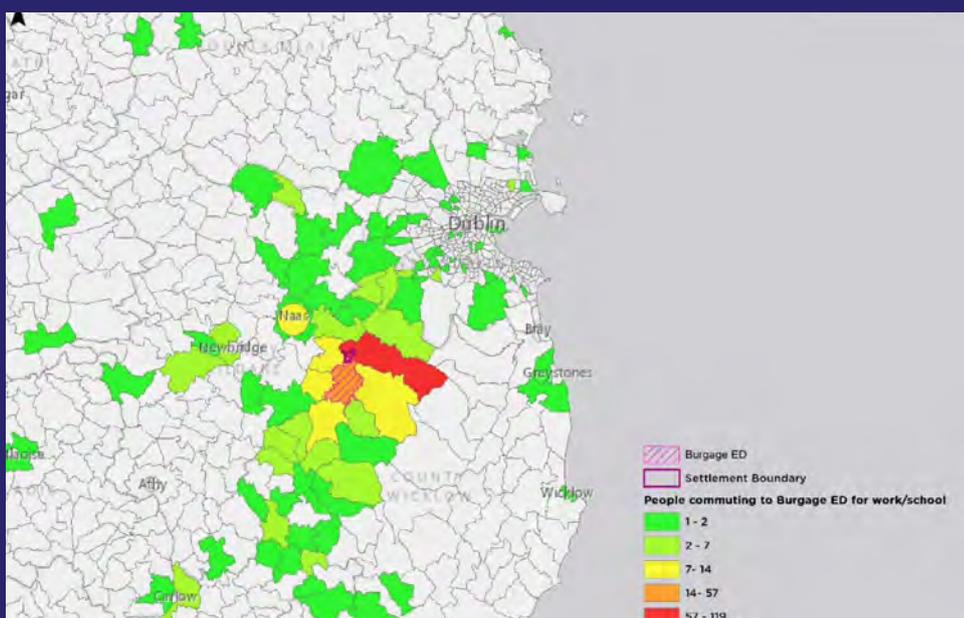


Figure 16 Commuters to Burgage ED (Source POWSCAR)



Figures 17 and 18 again deal with the Blessington and Burgage EDs respectively, however on this occasion they show where their residents are commuting to for work or school, in other words, outward commuters. Once again, the locations where there are the highest number of residents commuting to are those within or directly adjacent to both Blessington EDs. This would be expected, indicating there is a relatively strong resident-worker population in Blessington. The significant links with Naas are also obvious in these visualisations, with the Naas ED proving to be a major destination for resident commuters. Interestingly, Tallaght is a key destination for commuters from the Blessington area, more so than other parts of Dublin.

Figure 17. Outward Commuters from Blessington ED (Source POWSCAR)

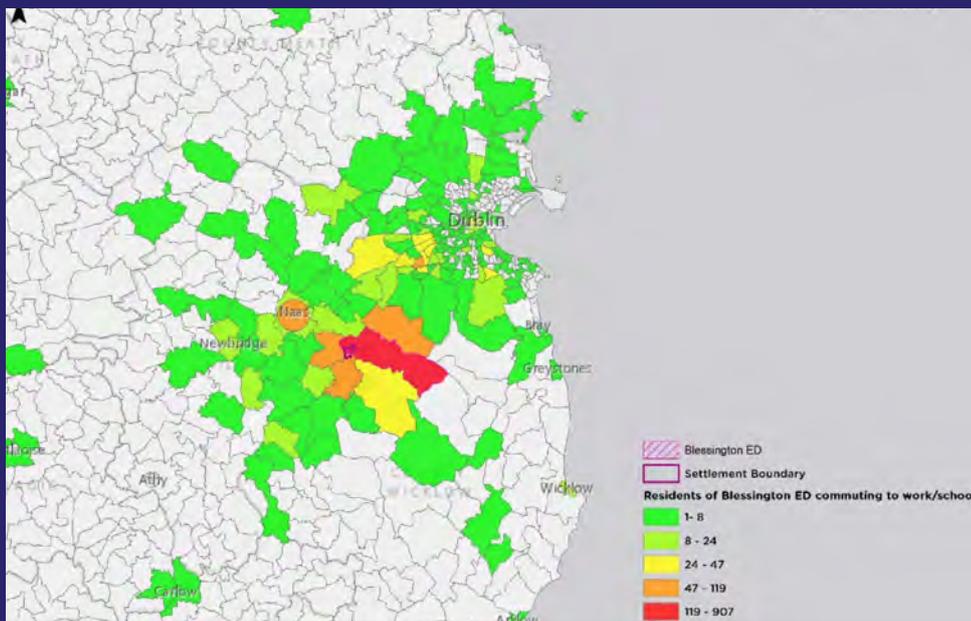
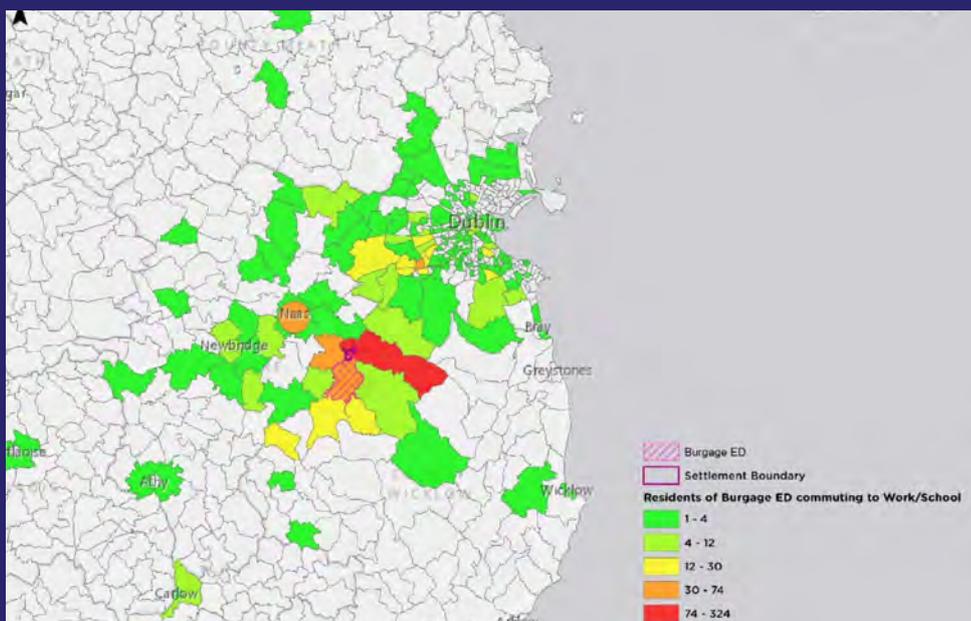


Figure 18 Outward Commuters from Burgage ED (Source POWSCAR)





THE BLESSINGTON GREENWAY

In 2019 it was announced that €5 million in funding from the Government’s ‘National and Regional Greenway Fund’ has been allocated to Wicklow County Council for the development of the Blessington Greenway. This is a significant allocation that will see the delivery of a project that has the potential to completely transform Blessington and the surrounding area. It is the result of years of effort and lobbying from the Blessington District Forum, who had the foresight to see how transformative such a project could be.

The Blessington Greenway will consist of 43 kilometres of a looped cycling and walking path that starts and ends in Blessington, traversing the shoreline of the Poulaphouca Reservoir and incorporating the villages of Ballyknockan, Vallemount and Lacken. Along the route, cyclists will have the opportunity to experience the stunning scenery, woodlands and other attractions this part of Wicklow has to offer. The huge success of other Greenway projects, such as in Mayo and Waterford, have shown that there is an appetite for such facilities, with locals and tourists flocking in large numbers to both.

“Along the route, cyclists will have the opportunity to **experience the stunning scenery**, woodlands and other attractions this part of Wicklow has to offer.”

The Blessington Greenway will have an added advantage over other Irish routes in that it will be the first looped Greenway. This will enable easier uptake as people can start and end in the one location. Furthermore, Blessington's proximity to Dublin ensures the project has a large population base to immediately appeal to. While the area is already a major hub for cyclists, this project will provide world-class infrastructure that is open to users of all levels.

The Blessington Greenway has an additional unique selling point in that it will be Ireland's first 'E-Greenway'. As the route encircles the Poulaphouca Reservoir, which generates electricity sustainably, it seemed appropriate to incorporate sustainable energy into the project. As a result, the Greenway will contain E-Bikes and charging points throughout the route, linking in with Wicklow County Council's countywide plans for e-cycling. Therefore, not only will the Greenway provide a cycling route of exceptional beauty, it will also contribute towards the promotion of sustainable transport, which in turn will put Blessington on the map as one of Ireland's foremost sustainable destinations. With the growing awareness of the need to live more sustainably, this is a major boost for the town and wider area.

Based on visitor numbers to both the Mayo and Waterford Greenways, it is estimated that the Blessington Greenway could attract upwards of 300,000 visitors per year. Such an influx of visitors to the area will provide a significant economic boost and could truly transform Blessington and the lake area. It is important, therefore, that the town is prepared for such an increase in tourists. Preparation for the growth in tourism must occur in a multitude of ways: from public realm and infrastructure improvements that will enable safe mobility; to the diversification of cafes, restaurants, retailers and accommodation providers who can cater to the needs of visitors.

This Health Check will provide several recommendations and observations on how Blessington can develop and evolve in a sustainable manner that serves both the existing community and the significant number of future visitors the Greenway will attract.

CHAPTER THREE

RELEVANT POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

This section provides an overview of the relevant policies and plans that influence, either directly or indirectly, the actions and recommendations that are found later in the report. It briefly introduces the core statutory policies that will guide the future development of Blessington. A more detailed review of the strategies and policy documents can be found in the appendix to this report.



3.0

RELEVANT POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

This section provides an overview of the relevant policies and plans that influence, either directly or indirectly, the actions and recommendations that are found later in the report. It briefly introduces the core statutory policies that will guide the future development of Blessington. A more detailed review of the strategies and policy documents can be found in the appendix to this report.

STATUTORY PLANS

At a national level the National Planning Framework (NPF) is Ireland's main strategic planning document that aims to steer the direction of the country's future growth and development. The NPF informs all other planning and economic development documents that are prepared at regional and county levels. It is worth noting the most relevant 'national strategic outcomes' of the NPF, which in effect, are the core underlying principles that guide it.



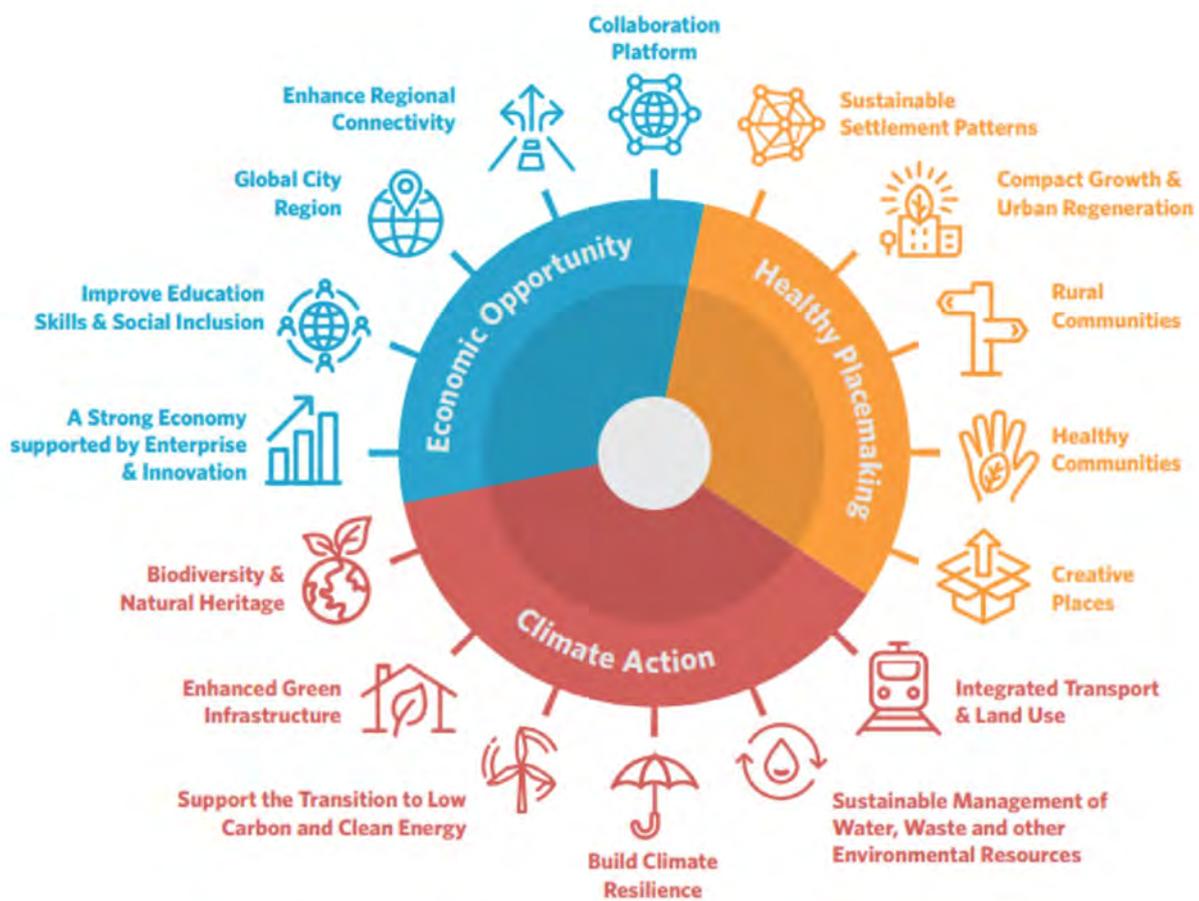
Figure 19. National Strategic Outcomes (Source NPF)



- **Compact Growth** – This is a call for a more “streamlined and coordinated approach” to the development of lands within and around our urban settlements. Sustainable growth will require effort to minimise the levels of urban sprawl that take place. This means greater emphasis on developing backlands, brownfields and other underused or vacant sites and buildings within our cities, towns and villages.
- **Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities** – Although Blessington is a short distance from Dublin, it does display many characteristics of a typical rural Irish town. It is an objective of the NPF to ensure that all rural communities are provided the opportunities to improve their economies, accessibility, broadband and environment, in order to make them an attractive place to live for future generations.
- **Sustainable Mobility** – The NPF establishes the need to transition away from the use of private vehicles powered by combustion engines to more sustainable modes of transport. The damage to our environment that has been caused by private vehicles is now quite evident, therefore the NPF places an emphasis on utilising less carbon-intensive modes where possible, but also promoting the use of active modes such as cycling and walking.
- **Enhanced Amenity and Heritage** – Investment in quality public realm of cities, towns and villages will be prioritised, which includes public spaces, parks and streets, as well as recreational infrastructure. Amenities in rural areas, such as national and forest parks, activity-based tourism and trails such as greenways, blueways and peatways are also included.

At a regional level, Ireland has three Assemblies that form the layer of government which sits between national and local. These newly formed Assemblies have recently produced **Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES)** for their respective regions, which translate the guidance and aims of the NPF to a regional level. The **Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly (EMRA)** cover the wider Dublin region, including Wicklow. There are 16 Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSO) which are closely aligned with the strategic outcomes set out in the NPF.

Figure 20. Regional Strategic Outcomes (EMRA RSES)



While the RSOs are key to the RSES, it is primarily understood as a document that promotes the following three principles:

- **Healthy placemaking** to promote quality of life through the creation of healthy and attractive places;
- **Climate action** efforts that seek to enhance climate resilience and accelerate transition to a low carbon society;
- **Economic opportunity** for the region, where the right conditions for sustainable economic growth and quality jobs are met, ensuring a good living standard for all.

Wicklow’s most recent **County Development Plan (CDP)** covers the period 2016 to 2022. It is the primary planning document that guides the growth and development of County Wicklow. Blessington is considered a “Moderate Growth Town” in the hierarchy of settlements outlined in the CDP. Settlement hierarchies are used to determine population targets, housing strategies and retail policies at a County level. The population growth target and housing stock target up to 2028 for Blessington are as follows:

	2011	2022	2025	2028
Population Targets	4,780	6,540	7,020	7,500
Target Housing Stock	1,865	2,519	-	3,168

‘Community Development’ is a core component of the CDP, with an entire chapter dedicated to it. In this chapter it is stated that the CDP will:

- Facilitate the delivery of community infrastructure through reserving land for community infrastructure, manage the expansion of residential development in line with infrastructure, and require the delivery of community infrastructure as part of development proposals
- Facilitate improved physical access to community infrastructure and services through coordinating easily accessible public transport, improved cycling or walking infrastructure, ensure all new facilities are universally accessible and enhancing community infrastructure.
- Facilitate the maintenance, restoration and upgrading of cultural and natural heritage of communities, environmental upgrading and general actions to enhance the environmental, amenity and physical attributes of communities.

Table 3 highlights the type of community infrastructure that should be available in settlements of a particular size. It is worth considering that Blessington has a target population of over 7,000 for the near future, therefore community infrastructure delivery should match this population ambition.

Table 3 Community infrastructure required for settlement level

LEVEL 2 SETTLEMENT POPULATION 7,000 TO 15,000	LEVEL 3 SETTLEMENT POPULATION 2,000 TO 7,000
Multi-purpose Community Resource Centre Sport & Recreation Centre Swimming Pool/Leisure Centre Youth Resource Centre Local Multi-Purpose Community Space Outdoor Water Sports Facilities Neighbourhood and Local Parks Outdoor Multi-Use Games Areas Playground(s) Playing Pitches Alternative/Minority Sports Facilities Open Space/Urban Woodlands/Nature Areas Library	Community/Parish Hall Multi-purpose Community Space/Meeting Rooms Local/Town Park (s) and Open Spaces/Nature Areas Outdoor Multi-Use Games Area – Synthetic/ Hardcourt Playgrounds Playing Pitches Library

Blessington Town Centre is an architectural conservation area (ACA) which means it is afforded a level of protection that other town centres may not possess. Blessington’s designation as an ACA means that efforts must be made to preserve the character of the townscape, which takes into account the building lines and heights.

The CDP also offers the following statements and descriptions of planned or intended future scenarios impacting Blessington which are noteworthy:

- The intention to realign the N81 to the west of the town is reiterated. It is stated that there is a need to “reserve free from development all lands located in the current route corridor for the N81 realignment” and that the “development of this route or the planned inner relief road, would contribute significantly to the enhancement of the overall quality of the town centre”.
- The recreational value of the Poulaphouca Reservoir and surrounding area is acknowledged when stated that “opportunity exists to capitalize on the tourism potential associated with the Blessington Greenway walk from the town of Blessington to Russborough House”.
- Blessington’s location on the border between Kildare and Wicklow is noted with collaboration and consultation between both local authorities during the preparation and development of any strategies or plans cited as essential. Furthermore, it is stated that opportunities exist to “foster economic links” with the towns of Newbridge, Naas and Kilcullen, where their access to the M9 could be exploited.



The **Blessington Local Area Plan 2013-2019** is the most recent Local Area Plan (LAP) prepared for the town, with a new LAP currently under review as part of the new Development Plan process. This Health will form part of Blessington Town Forum's submission to the Development Plan, with the hope that it will inform the preparation of the new LAP. The LAP addresses a multitude of planning matters, including population targets and housing, taking its steer from the 2010 CDP. The quantum of zoned land is also discussed, with proposed residential zonings providing proposed densities for housing per hectare.

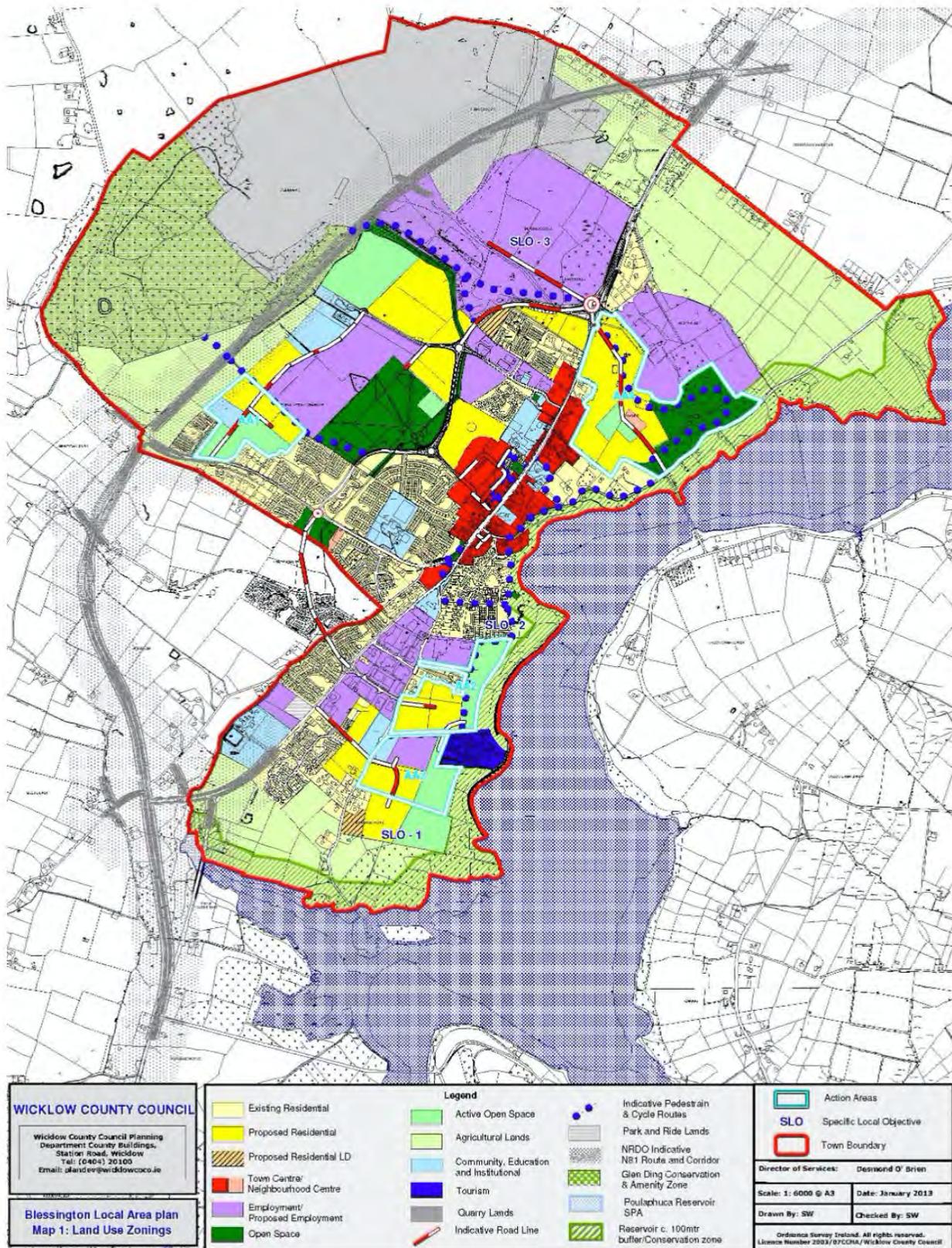
A strategy for the Town Centre is developed and includes measures to enhance retail, as both are heavily interlinked. A series of goals for the commercial core of Blessington are outlined:

1. Addressing vehicular/pedestrian circulation and car parking;
2. Ensuring high quality surroundings and addressing dereliction/vacant sites;
3. Protecting the buildings, features and places of heritage value;
4. 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.

It is acknowledged that Main Street and Market Square are currently dominated by traffic, with very little space afforded to pedestrians, cycle lanes and potential outdoor seating areas. On-street parking and the traffic generated from what is a national road, means this environment is not suitable for either free-flowing vehicular movement, or indeed pedestrians. The following points are identified as important actions that should be addressed to tackle town centre challenges:

- Complete the inner relief road to remove through traffic and heavy vehicles
- Widen footpaths and provide cycle lanes alongside on both sides of Main Street between Dempsey's Lane and the Catholic Church, which will also result in the narrowing of the carriageway
- Provide spaces for outdoor seating and eating on the street to improve vibrancy
- Enhance the pedestrian linkages between the Main Street and new town development to consolidate them as a single retail area
- Develop a parking management strategy that reduces the number of cars parked for full days on Main Street (often commuters who then travel to Dublin via bus)
- Encourage and deliver upon the reuse and redevelopment of infill and brownfield sites in the town centre.

Figure 21 Land Use Zoning Map (Blessington LAP)



CHAPTER FOUR

HEALTH CHECK

ASSESSMENT

The Blessington Health Check has been structured as a two-phase project, with this report representing the culmination of Phase 2 of this process. Phase 1 focused on the physical characteristics of the town and its surroundings, it also offered some strategies and proposals for the future redevelopment of Blessington.



4.0

HEALTH CHECK ASSESSMENT

The Blessington Health Check has been structured as a two-phase project, with this report representing the culmination of Phase 2 of this process. **Phase 1** focused on the physical characteristics of the town and its surroundings, it also offered some strategies and proposals for the future redevelopment of Blessington.

This section of the report will build upon the material in Phase 1 and provide a further assessment of the physical characteristics of Blessington. In many ways, this is the core element of a Health Check, particularly those originally envisaged by bodies such as the Heritage Council.

In order to provide a coherent structure to the health check, a series of 'health check indicators' have been developed. These indicators cover all of the attributes and components of a healthy town and have been developed with reference to best-practice guidelines and frameworks, and through the professional experience of independent qualified town planners from Future Analytics Consulting.

Figure 22 gives an overview of the five core components that will be assessed as part of the health check exercise: Community; Accessibility; Urban Realm; Natural Environment; and, Economy.



“These indicators cover all of the attributes and components of a healthy town and have been developed with reference to best-practice guidelines and frameworks, and through the professional experience of independent qualified town planners from Future Analytics Consulting.”

Figure 22 Health Check Themes for Blessington





ACCESSIBILITY, MOBILITY AND TRANSPORT

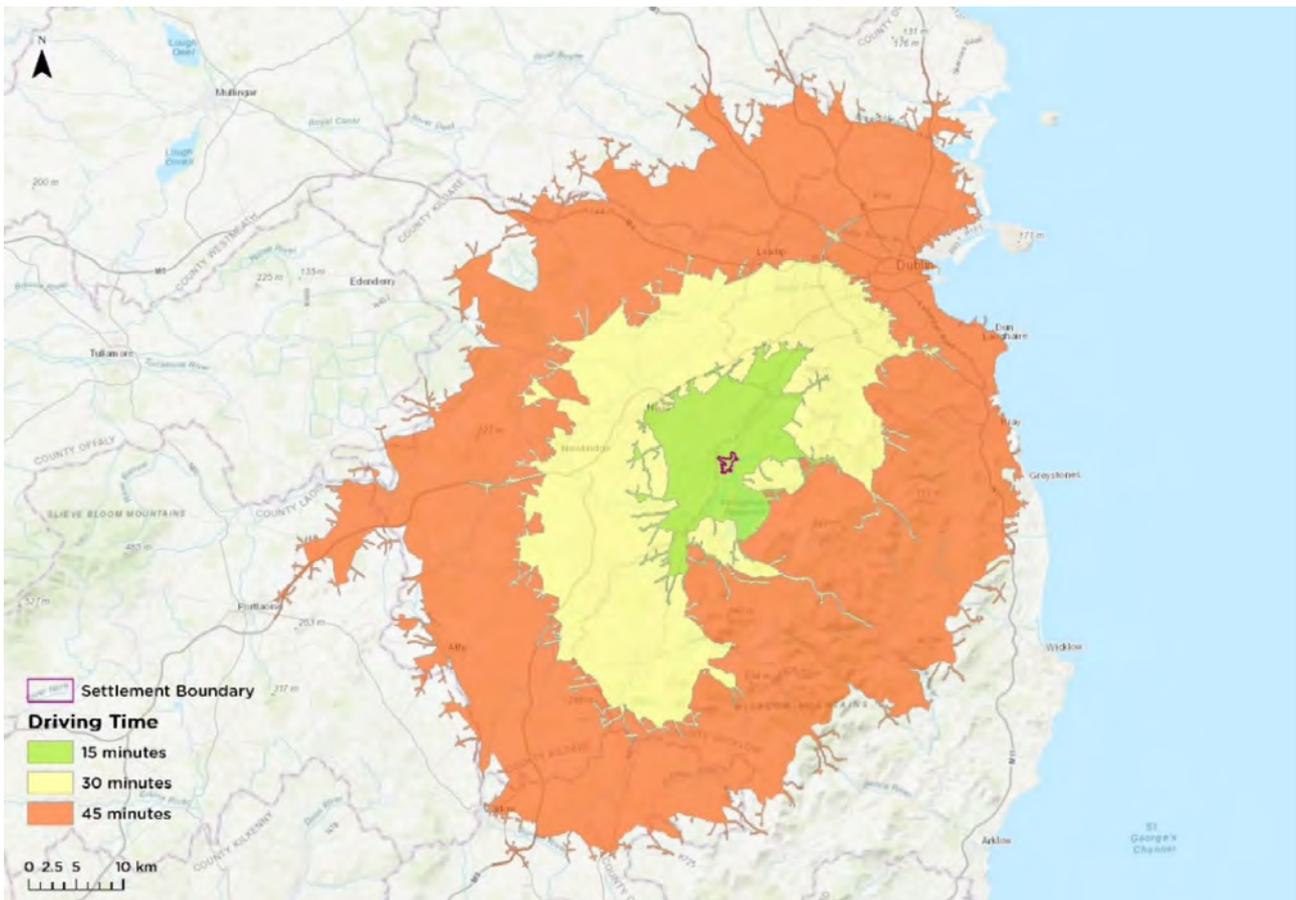
This section has been informed by a recently undertaken [Accessibility Audit](#), commissioned by the Blessington and District Forum and published in September of 2019. This audit was performed by the Universal Access consultancy and focuses on the main route through the town.

TRANSPORT AND CONNECTIVITY

Blessington has developed in a linear fashion, straddling the N81 national route which links the town with Tallaght to the north and Baltinglass to the south. As a national route, the carriageway is quite wide and its width does not reduce significantly as it passes through Blessington town centre, creating a wide avenue for traffic, and providing Blessington with a sense of openness, uncharacteristic of many Irish towns and villages, which often retain a medieval, enclosed core. As the only national route in West Wicklow, it is a key artery for many commuters and other road users, linking the area to Dublin. This creates significant challenges for Blessington. As a functioning town centre, the traffic generated in Blessington must compete with substantial through traffic that flows along this route. The results are significant congestion issues which are having an increasingly negative impact.

Connectivity is key, with larger settlements offering additional employment and education opportunities. Both Naas and Tallaght are important locations for residents of Blessington, in terms of employment, education and leisure, therefore the connectivity to each location is important. Although both are under 20km from Blessington, their proximity is often not reflected in the travel times. Congestion within and around Blessington at peak times cause significant delays. Figure 34 is a 'drivetime map' that visualises the locations to which a person could drive in a set time from Blessington. The image shows 'ideal' times, which do not account for the levels of congestion experienced in reality. However, what this map does show is the potential to increase Blessington's connectivity, provided significant traffic management improvements take place.

Figure 23 Drive-time Analysis Map



Blessington is served by the Dublin Bus Route 65, which connects the town with Tallaght and continues to Dublin City Centre. There are fifteen services listed by Dublin Bus as operating from Blessington daily, while the route connects to the LUAS Red Line at Tallaght. Bus stops are located along the N81 and Main Street, with stops within and at either end of Blessington (Burgage Industrial Estate, Blessington Further Education Centre, Market Square, Community Centre). As there is no quality bus corridor, or bus priority lane along the N81, the service must share space with private vehicles. This ensures that the route is subject to the same congestion and delays that cars regularly experience. In addition, there are a significant number of bus stops, with approximately fifty identified between Blessington and Tallaght. As a result, the bus does not offer a frequent, reliable or efficient option as a mode of travel for residents in Blessington. Even though it remains essential for many, this is in spite of the service, rather than due to it.

“As there is **no quality bus corridor, or bus priority lane** along the N81, the service must share space with private vehicles.”

Figure 24 Bus Stop at Market Square



PARKING

In the ‘Accessibility Audit’ undertaken for Blessington, the consultants noted that there is “ample parking throughout the town” . Indeed, upon initial view when first visiting Blessington, one could be forgiven for mistaking the town for a car park. On-street car-parking is provided the entire length of Main Street, on both sides. The spaces provided on the street are, for the most part, perpendicular to the path in order to increase the capacity of the street for parked cars.

The Market Square effectively acts as a central car park, connecting with further car parking spaces along the route to the New Town development. Each of the large retailers (Aldi, Dunnes and Super Valu) provide their own store car parking beside their developments, in the case of Super Valu the parking spaces are behind the store. These store car parks appear to provide ample space for customers, even during busy periods.

Parking is free throughout the town and there are no time-limits imposed on users. It would seem that a significant proportion of the on-street parking spaces are used by people working in nearby stores, and by commuters to Dublin who either car-share or take the bus. As a result, parking in Blessington appears to be struggling to meet demand, although this is not necessarily the case. Misuse of parking spaces, a lack of appropriate parking measures and a poorly designed urban environment have resulted in Blessington developing as a location that prioritises parking, and cars, above all else.

Figure 25 On-street Parking is found throughout, including Market Square



Figure 26 Supermarket parking facilities are provided by all three major retailers



PARKING SURVEY

A parking space survey was carried out between the hours of 9am and 4pm on November 11th, 2019. This survey was undertaken in order to establish the quantum of parking spaces within the town centre. Six 'parking zones' were identified (Fig. 27) as focus areas that would provide a reasonable coverage of the town centre. Originally, the intention of this survey was to also determine an average number of available spaces, but due to the time-limited nature of the study and project scope it would not be possible to provide accurate figures.

Various factors, such as inclement weather, public holidays the time of day and unexpected events can influence the results of parking surveys. Therefore, it is always appropriate to undertake a more longitudinal study that occurs on different days, at different times and in different conditions. Such a study would provide a more accurate picture of the average number of available spaces. It is suggested that a longitudinal study of parking spaces is undertaken in Blessington. This health check survey can act as the initial piece of work for such a study. Table 4 provides an overview of the survey locations and approximate number of spaces identified.

Figure 27 Locations of the Parking Survey



Table 4. Parking Survey locations and spaces

No.	Area	Total Parking Spaces
1	Dempseys/Main St.	24 spaces
2	Lemon Tree/Square	16 spaces
3	New Town/Dunnes	35 spaces
4	Credit Union/Square	28 spaces
5	Mcgreals/Main St.	25 spaces
6	West Wicklow/Main St.	22 spaces

WALKING AND CYCLING

As previous sections have suggested, Blessington is a town that is dominated by, and caters to the private vehicle. This is partly due to the unavoidable fact that a national route passes directly through the town centre. However, even with the N81, the town centre could be designed in such a way that pedestrians are prioritised and protected.

One of the first things that a person will notice when walking through Blessington, is the lack of safe pedestrian crossing points. The distance between the Oak Drive junction and the Naas Road junction is approximately 850 metres and this stretch of road effectively constitutes Blessington's Town Centre. Along the entire length there are only two signalled pedestrian crossing points, one at Murphy's Pub and the other at the Garda Station. A third pedestrian crossing point is provided to the front of St. Josephs estate, but this is not signalled. There is a distance of around 250 metres between the two signalled crossing points. There is an inadequate provision of pedestrian crossing points which creates an environment that is unfriendly to pedestrians, further encouraging people to drive.

Furthermore, the existing conditions are not conducive to universal accessibility for all residents. This point was made in the Accessibility Audit, which argues that areas such as Market Square are inaccessible for wheelchair users, or people with mobility aids unless they use the carriageway itself. In other words, an improved pedestrian environment that facilitates greater access for all is required.

Figure 28 Focal points such as the Market Square prioritise car parking over pedestrian movement



Blessington is set to become a major destination for recreational cyclists over the coming years, thanks to the recent confirmation of funding for a looped greenway around the lake. This new greenway will, it is envisaged, attract substantial numbers of tourists looking to enjoy the amenity, as was the case with greenway developments in Mayo and Waterford. Blessington is already a hotspot for cyclists who use the lakeside roads in large numbers, however the greenway is set to attract a new type of user, the leisure cyclist and families. If Blessington is to successfully cater for an increase in the numbers of cyclists then it must have adequate cycling infrastructure.

Analysis of the streetscape and town environs would indicate that, at present, Blessington does not possess the appropriate level of infrastructure. There are no segregated cycle lanes on the routes leading into Blessington, or along Main Street. The few segregated paths that were found exist on the outskirts of the town near newer residential developments, but even these paths are not connected to a wider network, making them redundant. In terms of bicycle parking, there is limited parking available throughout the town. In general, cycling appears to have been given little, if any, consideration in design of the streetscape.

Figure 29 Cycling infrastructure appears as an afterthought, rather than an integral design





COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

SERVICES

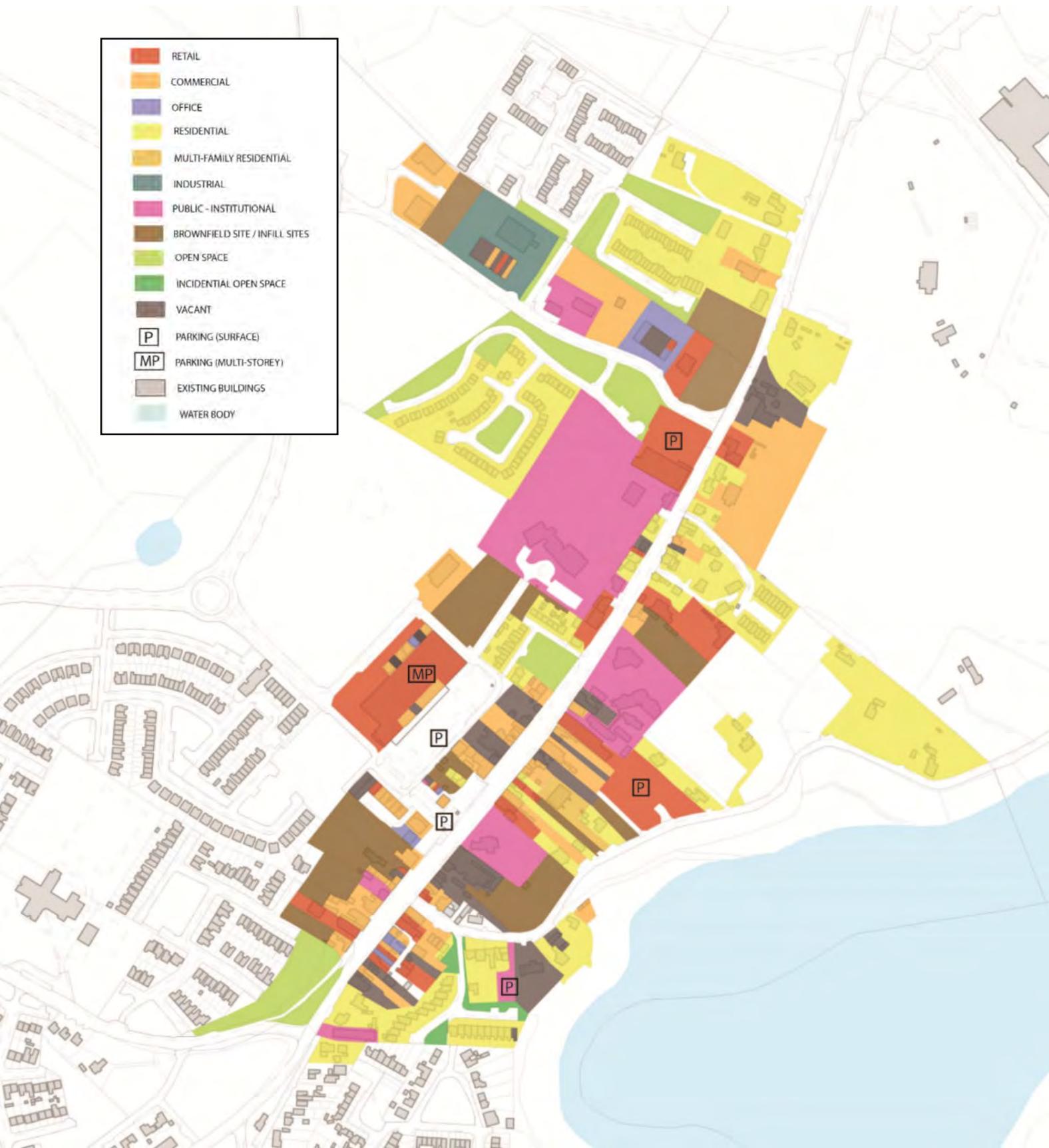
Phase 1 of the Health Check provides an excellent map (Fig 30) of the land use in Blessington. This map provides an indication of the locations of various services for the community in Blessington. Convenience retail is well provided for in Blessington, with an Aldi, Dunnes and Super Valu occupying different locations across the town. The comparison retail offering is less extensive, with smaller, independent units dotted along Main Street, or in the New Town development which is also home to the most sizeable comparison offering in the form of Dunnes Stores. In terms of health, the town possesses a primary care centre, several pharmacies, general practice, dental surgery and other wellbeing facilities.

Blessington possesses a wide range of educational facilities, with six individual schools operating under different ethos and catering for a range of age-groups. There are five primary schools in Blessington, which are: Blessington Educate Together National School; St. Marys National Senior School; St Mary's National Junior School; Gaelscoil na Lochanna; and, Blessington Number One School. At secondary school level, the Blessington Community College is a mixed school that serves the Blessington catchment. In addition, the Blessington Further Education and Training Centre provides adult-education and life-long learning for those who have left school.

Additionally, wider community services such as a Men's Shed, Community Centre, Town Hall (St. Josephs) and theatre can be found in Blessington. Each of these facilities offer residents essential services that are often overlooked but are integral to healthy communities.

Food offerings in Blessington come in the form of two gastropubs, several cafes and a range of fast-food units. It has been noted in Phase 1 that while there are two or more pubs offering evening meals, there is otherwise a dearth of standalone restaurants open during the evenings. With the exception of fast food, there is a limited selection of alternative options for people to choose from in the evenings.

Figure 30 Land Use in Blessington, from Phase 1 Report



RECREATION

Given its rural location, and proximity to enviable natural assets, Blessington should possess a good range of recreational services for its population. The lake is a major asset to the town, however, use of the lake waters for swimming and other recreational activities is limited due to safety concerns.

A greenway walking route has been developed, beginning at the Avon and following the edge of the lake through woodlands and eventually to the road adjacent to Russborough House. This is an excellent amenity that could be vastly enhanced if the links from the route to the town and from the route to Russborough were improved, creating a more accessible and seamless connection. The Avon is also the location of an outdoor adventure centre, although this is a private facility requiring paid access.

North of the town, alongside the Blessington Number 1 School are the Blessington GAA Club's facilities. The facilities appear to be relatively modern, with four playing pitches, one of which possesses floodlighting, and a clubhouse on-site. The location of the GAA club is not ideal, although perhaps excusable if the requirement for a large area was a deciding factor.

It exists at the end of a new access road that extends from Oak Drive, surrounded by vacant brownfield and greenfield sites, with the sole exception of the school. It is approximately 1.5km from the town centre and this distance, in conjunction with the barren, isolated nature of the area, makes for an unpleasant walk to the club (Fig 33). This is another example of how land use planning and design in Blessington have facilitated private vehicle use at the expense of active modes such as walking and cycling. It should be noted that Blessington also possesses a football club, Blessington AFC, however their facilities are even more remote, located on an access road north of the Philipstown Quarry.



Figure 31 Blessington GAA Facilities



Figure 32 Road leading to Blessington GAA and Blessington No1 School

Adjacent to the Aldi car park and Oak Drive there are recreational amenities available to the public. A playground, outdoor fitness equipment and a skatepark are all located alongside one another. While the equipment provided appears to be of a good standard, the surrounding landscaping and streetscape is underwhelming, and the area requires a more attractive urban realm design.

Such amenities should, ideally, be located close to residential areas and accessible to as many people by foot as possible. In this instance, the amenities are situated at the entrance to what is effectively a commercial/industrial park. The houses that are situated in Oak Drive are the only residential units beside the playground, limiting the amount of ‘passive surveillance’ that can occur. While the provision of these amenities is certainly a positive, the relative ‘remoteness’ of their location reduces their attractiveness to a wider population.



Figure 34 Facilities in playground appear in good condition, however the site of the playground could be enhanced



Figure 33 Modern exercise equipment



Figure 35 Skate-park facilities located alongside playground



URBAN REALM

CREATING PLACES FOR PEOPLE

The urban realm (or public realm) refers to the ‘spaces between buildings’, the streets, squares, parks and plazas that comprise a settlement. In the section on accessibility, mobility and transport there is some additional detail that relates to the condition of the public realm, in terms of those elements. At a more general level, the public realm in Blessington has huge potential, with several existing components offering an alternative to the existing layout, if capitalised on. Presently, the influence of traffic and car parking disrupts the potential for a more pleasant and attractive public realm.

First and foremost, the Market Square with the Blessington Monument and Credit Union House has the potential to be transformed into a public plaza that caters for pedestrians and could offer a focal point for visitors to enjoy and events to be held. Its current use as a central car park leaves little room for pedestrians. Indeed, in the Accessibility Audit undertaken by Universal Accessibility, this point is reinforced with it being noted that the Square is currently unsuitable for the elderly, mobility-impaired, and people with sensory challenges, such as autism. This is partly due to the tarmac surfacing and limited footpaths which together facilitate cars above all other road users.

In addition to its unsatisfactory use as a carpark, there exists a two-way traffic system into the square, with two lanes providing access and egress to the New Town development. The Square also has three access points on either side of the Monument and beside the Ulster Bank. This creates a rather chaotic environment for pedestrians, while also compounding the issues of traffic congestion on Main Street.

The New Town development offers a more positive example of how the public realm can provide an attractive space to visit. While not perfect, the path surfacing and design (Fig 36) that connects the Square to Dunnes is preferable to much of the surfacing elsewhere in Blessington, particularly on Main Street and in the Square.

There are attempts at creating a more pleasant public realm, such as the seating area located in the Square. However, this is ineffective in its aims as the location of the seating, ‘sandwiched’ between the busy Main Street/N81 and car-parking spaces, is uninviting and would not appeal to people seeking an attractive location to rest.

Figure 36 Public realm by new town development is an example of a more considered design



Figure 38 Example of poorly placed service poles



The old Naas Road (Dempseys Lane), which has been converted into a pedestrian path, is a better example of attractive public realm. This is in part due to its segregation from traffic, making it one of the few footpaths in Blessington that is not bounded by a busy road. However, this creates its own challenges too, as the route is shielded from the views of road users and has no buildings that overlook it, which could lead to safety concerns in terms of anti-social behaviour.

As the key thoroughfare in Blessington, Main Street should be the ‘jewel in the crown’ of the town. It is a broad, tree-lined street with two lanes of traffic and on-street parking on either side. As discussed in the accessibility section, the current layout of Main Street facilitates car dominance which detracts from the public realm. However, the mature trees lining the route are key to ‘soften’ the impact of vehicles and should not be removed for this reason alone.

Unfortunately, the paths along Main Street are in various conditions, with some needing maintenance. In places, the paths are littered with obstructions, such as electricity poles, which are not conducive to ease of movement (Fig 38). Indeed, the electricity poles are problematic for several reasons; they create unnecessary obstructions to pedestrians, they detract from the visual appearance of the streetscape, and they have resulted in the ‘crowning’ of the mature trees.

Figure 37 Dempsey’s Lane provides a pleasant pathway for people, segregated from the N81



HERITAGE AND CHARACTER

Phase 1 of the Health Check provides an excellent summary of the built heritage and intrinsic character of Blessington. In summary, the town possesses all the characteristics of a ‘landlord town’, one that was originally developed around a large landowner’s estate house. Indeed, Blessington’s origins are traced back to Michael Boyle, who developed a demesne and hunting grounds for deer in the area. The Blessington Monument, which sits in Market Square, offers an indication of Blessington’s history as a landlord town. An inscription on the monument reads:

“The Water supplied at the cost of a kind and generous Landlord for the benefit of his Attached and Loyal Tenants”.

Figure 39 The Blessington Monument



Figure 40 The Credit Union building and Monument provide an architectural flair to the Square



Figure 41 The former Downshire Hotel building is an important landmark



The wide Main Street and central square are common in towns of this type, with the central location afforded to the Church of Ireland building an indication of the nature of Blessington's origins. Market Square provides the town with a focal point and buildings such as the Credit Union, St Mary's Church, the Ulster Bank building and the former Downshire Hotel, all of which are located around the Square, possess a rich architectural heritage value. Unfortunately, due to the current use of Market Square as a carpark, the attractiveness and value of the surrounding buildings is lost.

Blessington Town Centre is an architectural conservation area (ACA) which means it is afforded a level of protection that other town centres may not possess. Indeed, it is a core heritage strategy of the CDP to *“ensure the protection of the architectural heritage of Wicklow through the identification of Protected Structures, the designation of Architectural Conservation Areas,*

the safeguarding of designed landscapes and historic gardens, and the recognition of structures and elements that contribute positively to the vernacular and industrial heritage of the County”. Blessington's designation as an ACA means that efforts must be made to preserve the character of the townscape, which takes into account the building lines and heights.

Beyond the town itself, there are a rich history and heritage to be enjoyed. The hugely impressive Russborough House and Gardens is located just south of Blessington and is an excellent example of Palladian style architecture. Villages such as Lacken, Baltyboys, Vallemount and Ballyknockan each have their own individual characteristics and interesting heritage. Together, all of this contributes to a rich history for the Blessington area, however, there is arguably more to be done in terms of promotion of the area's history.

Figure 42 St Marys Church towers over the Square and offers an excellent focal point in the town





Figure 43 Former Downshire Hotel still remains vacant



Figure 44 Vacant site that links the Square with the new town area has significant regeneration potential



Figure 45 Partially developed vacant site near Oak Drive

VACANCY AND DERELICTION

Vacancy in Blessington, according to the Geodirectory data, does not appear to be at a level that is of concern. In fact, Blessington records a commercial vacancy rate of 4%, which means only 4% of its total recorded commercial units are vacant. The national average is 13.2%, while County Wicklow's is 12.2%. Furthermore, residential vacancy is stated as 6.3%, according to the Census of 2016, which compares favourably to the State average of 12.3%. The vacant units in Blessington are not, for the most part, obvious and this implies they are not, yet, detracting from the surrounding environment in any meaningful way. However, it is important to find uses for vacant buildings, particularly those that are in key locations, such as along Main Street, before they become an eyesore.

Although the vacancy statistics would appear to suggest a thriving town with a strong commercial environment and high uptake of residential properties, there are still some notable issues in terms of vacancy and dereliction. Land use patterns in Blessington have created several spaces that now detract from the built environment. There are significant opportunities for redevelopment of infill, brownfield and greenfield sites, which if done appropriately would positively enhance the urban environment and lead to a more compact settlement.

Perhaps the most obvious case of vacancy in Blessington is the former Downshire Hotel, located opposite Market Square. This building has significant heritage value and



Figure 46 Large greenfield site

its regeneration and reuse would have a positive impact on the town centre. The building has laid idle for a number of years, but there has been a recent planning application (Ref No: 19940) made to Wicklow County Council for the development of a nursing home at this location. It is important to find a use for such a significant building.

There are several infill and brownfield sites in prominent locations that undermine the perception of vibrancy. None more so than the infill site situated adjacent to the Credit Union building on Market Square. This plot runs from the Square to the access road at the New Town development, providing views through. There is considerable potential for the redevelopment of this vacant site due to its central location. Undoubtedly this site should be the priority for any future regeneration.

Other vacant plots can be found throughout Blessington which again offer major opportunities for development that would benefit the town as a whole. One such site can be found adjacent to Oak Drive and the Inner Relief Road, where there have been some preliminary works undertaken, as the lampposts and moss-covered road would indicate. This site is one of several 'backlands' sites that can be found behind the existing buildings either side of Main Street. They are indicative of poor land-use planning and failed sequential development. As Blessington has seen its population grow, development has, for the most part, continued in a linear fashion, instead of on sites, such as these, where a more compact and contained pattern could emerge.



NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Blessington is synonymous with the Poulaphouca Reservoir that is situated to the immediate east of the town centre, so much so the reservoir is now commonly known as the Blessington Lakes. While technically not ‘natural’ the lakes do afford Blessington a setting of unparalleled natural beauty, as well as a major asset to be exploited in a sustainable manner.

The combination of the lakes and extensive Wicklow mountains, both of which are on Blessington’s doorstep, create a natural environment that is almost without comparison in Ireland. Curiously, however, Blessington has yet to fully embrace the lake as an amenity and resource, with views to the lake not exploited to the extent they could be. For example, when on Main Street one could be forgiven for forgetting that such a natural resource exists beyond the building line. Of course, there are steps being taken to capitalise on the lakeside location of the town, with the planned looped Greenway offering a recreational amenity of international quality.

Beyond the lakes, Blessington has several woodland habitats that are themselves worthy of protection and, if done so in a responsible manner, could offer quality woodland walking routes, as some already do. Glending Wood is one example, located northwest of the town centre. The existing Greenway, which runs from the Avon to Russborough already has some wooded walks as part of it, showcasing the potential opportunities.

In terms of the town centre itself, there are some elements of the natural environment that need consideration. The mature trees that line Main Street provide a sense of enclosure and alleviate, to an extent, the perception that this is an environment dominated by vehicles. The condition of the trees varies, with several showing signs of major damage due to ‘crowning’ that would have taken place in order to prevent disruption to the electricity lines. Presently, the trees throughout the town centre appear to be considered necessary, but underappreciated additions to the environment. With improved landscaping and public realm improvements, these mature trees could act as centrepieces to a vibrant, natural streetscape.



Figure 47 Overhead cabling has led to tree crowning



Figure 48 Barriers placed around tree



Figure 49 Watercourse of stream running adjacent to newer residential developments

In Phase 1 of the Health Check it is also noted that a stream system exists to the west of the town. This stream provides a natural system that absorbs storm water run off and other heavy rain events. Flooding has been known to occur, with development encroaching on this natural system. Further development could impact the stream's ability to absorb storm waters and consideration should be given to enhance the stream's ability to act as a natural mitigation measure.

There are several open green spaces, and empty sites throughout the town. These locations could be improved visually with the inclusion of wildflowers and other plants. Idle sites could be temporarily transformed by such an initiative, while other notable sites such as Dempsey's Lane and St Joseph's Green could also see major improvements with planting schemes. It should be noted that there are several welcome efforts being made to improve the natural environment, in particular the excellent design of the existing greenway route and smaller, but no less important initiatives such as the "bee hotel" located in the grounds of Super Valu.



ECONOMY

The land use map taken from the Phase 1 report and reproduced in section 4.2 partially shows the diversity of uses in the town. The commercial core of Blessington extends from Oak Drive to Dempsey's Lane, and includes the New Town development area. There is significant activity in the Burgage Industrial Park and in the area by Oak Drive where the Council offices are located. However, Blessington's retail core does remain within the town centre.

COMMERCIAL PROPERTY AUDIT

Figures 50 and 51 show the locations of registered commercial properties as recorded in the Geodirectory database. Geodirectory records commercial properties by NACE code, however for the purpose of this exercise the properties have been grouped according to the general activity undertaken. What is clear from both maps is that there is a concentration of activity along a stretch of Main Street between the beginning of Dempsey's Lane and St Joseph's Green. Exceptions to this include the new town development, the Burgage Industrial park and the Oak Drive area. Table 5 provides a breakdown of the number of commercial units, based on their activity type, along with the proportion of the overall registered commercial properties that the respective activities amount to.

Figure 50 Commercial addresses (Source Geodirectory)

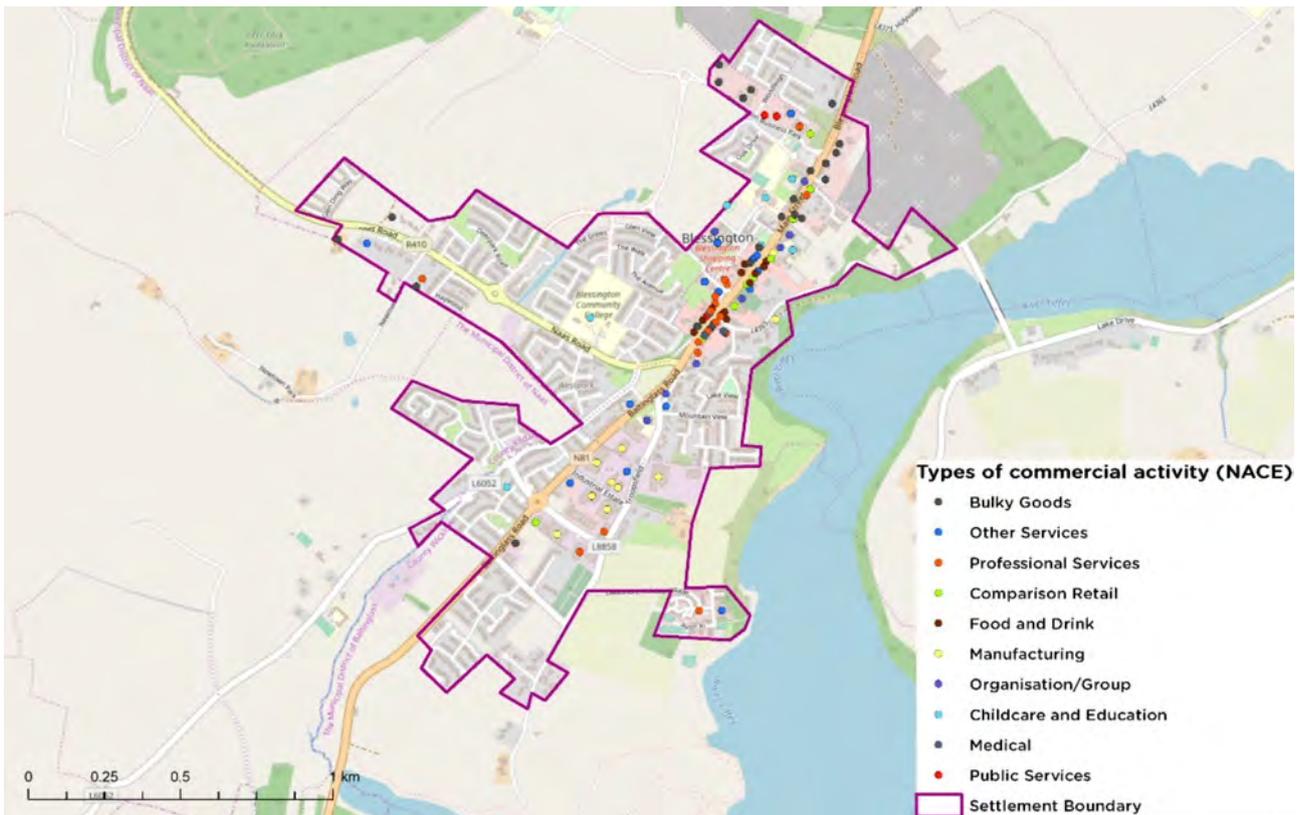


Figure 51 Registered Commercial Addresses in Town Centre (Geodirectory)



Table 5. Quantum of Registered Commercial Units per Broad Category of Operation

Commercial Activity Type	No. of Registered Units	% of Total
Bulky Goods (Hardware, Machinery, etc.)	27	16%
Childcare and Education	9	5%
Comparison Retail (Chemist, clothing, books, etc.)	18	10%
Convenience Retail (Grocery, Butchers, etc.)	10	6%
Food and Drink	19	11%
Manufacturing	13	7%
Medical	4	2%
Organisation/Group (Religious, other)	10	6%
Other Services (Hairdressers, Betting, Veterinary, Fitness, etc.)	30	17%
Professional Services (Accounting, Consultants, Legal, Insurance, etc.)	29	17%
Public Services	5	3%

While it would initially appear that Blessington has a sufficient range of all activity types, there is a noticeable lack of particular types of comparison stores. Boutique clothing stores and similar independent stores are lacking; however, this may be due to the inevitable draw that major retailing locations such as Tallaght, Dublin City and Naas have over consumers in Blessington. The proximity of these locations would have an impact on the viability of specialised retailers in Blessington. The lack of comparison stores is also acknowledged in the Phase 1 report, which states the following:

“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.” - (Health Check Phase 1, pg 39)

BLESSINGTON PEDESTRIAN COUNT

As part of the health check a pedestrian count was performed as a means of establishing the average footfall and the main areas of activity. The survey methodology is derived from several best-practice guidelines, including the National Bicycle and Pedestrian Documentation Project from the US, where several guides on how to undertake such surveys are provided. Future Analytics Consulting would like to acknowledge the work of Transition Year students from the Community College in undertaking this survey.

Six locations were selected throughout the main retail areas of Blessington with a surveyor placed at each of these locations. For a continuous fifteen-minute period each hour the surveyor counts the number of pedestrians that pass their designated location, in either direction. At the end of the day an average of the hourly counts is created to provide an approximate average footfall number for each of the locations. Table 6 provides the name of each location, along with the average footfall numbers, while Figure 53 also gives a visual indication of locations.

Footfall patterns were relatively similar across each of the selected locations. Only the northernmost count location, by the Boxing Club, showed a relatively different average footfall. However, this is perhaps understandable considering it is beyond the core retail area, with Aldi acting as the main attractor and few residential areas in the immediate vicinity. Overall, footfall in Blessington appears to be consistent, if not particularly busy. The estimated total footfall for a 12-hour period is 7,464, however, a larger sample size collected at different times throughout the year is suggested in order to gain a more accurate estimate.

Figure 53 Locations and averages for footfall counts



Table 5. Footfall Counts at each location

Location	Average Per Hour (p/h)	Estimated 12-hour Footfall
Dempsey's Lane	93 per hour	1,116
Opposite Ulster Bank	100 per hour	1,200
New Town Plaza (Dunnes)	123 per hour	1,476
West Wicklow House	127 per hour	1,524
Super Valu	116 per hour	1,392
Blessington Boxing Club (Aldi)	63 per hour	756
Totals	104 per hour	7,464

CHAPTER FIVE

CONSULTATION & ENGAGEMENT

As part of the Blessington Health Check, Future Analytics Consulting undertook various engagement exercises which sought to gather the range of views and opinions that key stakeholders and the public held in relation to Blessington.



5.0

CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT

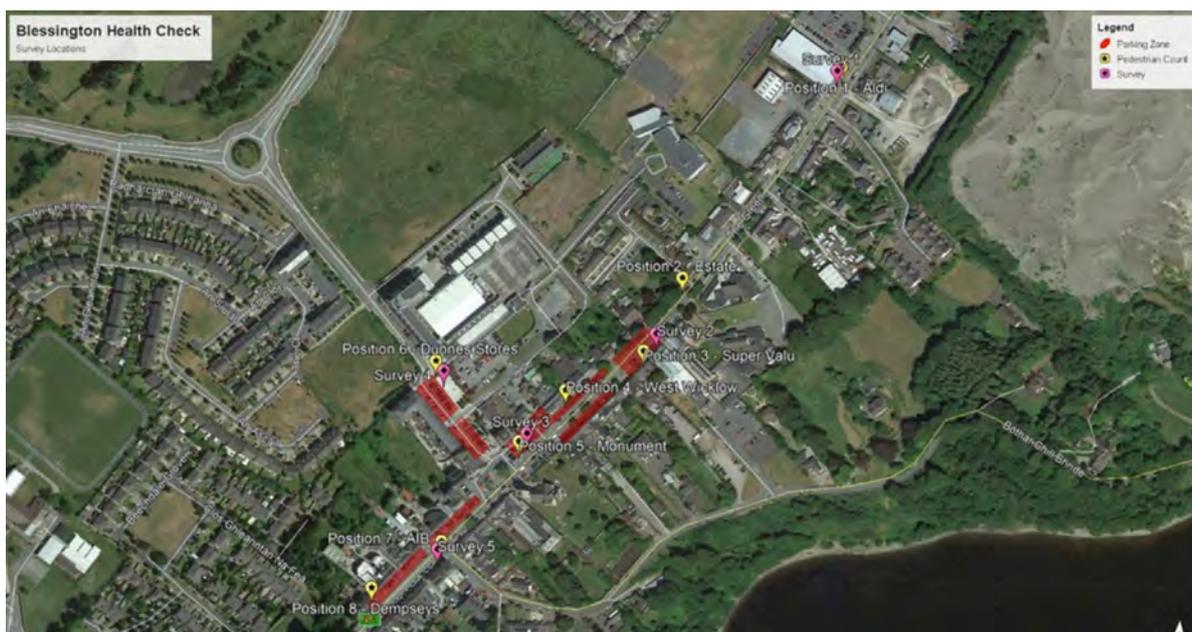
As part of the Blessington Health Check, Future Analytics Consulting undertook various engagement exercises which sought to gather the range of views and opinions that key stakeholders and the public held in relation to Blessington.

Two online surveys, a public survey and a business survey, were prepared and circulated through various means by representatives of the Town Team and Local Authority. Transition Year students from the Community College were involved on the project and assisted in street surveys to get the views of pedestrians and shoppers. A workshop with the Transition Year class was also facilitated by the Community College, allowing the thoughts of a key cohort of the population to be collected.

Additionally, an open public consultation event was held in the Avon on the 12th of November, which gave residents of Blessington an opportunity to provide their input to the process.

This section will provide a summary overview for each of these stages of consultation, including the results of the online public and business surveys.

Figure 54 Locations for shopper surveys, parking surveys and footfall counts





ONLINE SURVEY

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was created using the SurveyMonkey online programme and shared with the project team, including members of the Blessington Town Team. A link to the online survey was circulated online through the social media pages of the Council and Town Team, as well as in local newsletters.

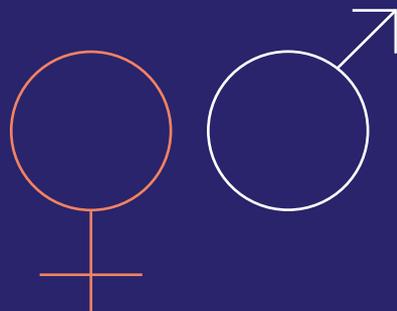
The development of an online survey was deemed essential as it offers an opportunity to reach a wider number of citizens, particularly when compared to more traditional methods. The same questions used in the online survey were used for the Shopper Surveys. A copy of the survey is included in the appendix to this report.

The online survey was launched on the week of Monday 21st October and remained open for a six-week period until Monday 2nd December. A total of 139 responses were received, which includes the shopper surveys undertaken on Monday 11th November by the TY students. With Blessington's population recorded as 5,520 in 2016, an approximate response rate of 2.5% can be estimated.

RESPONSES

65%

Female

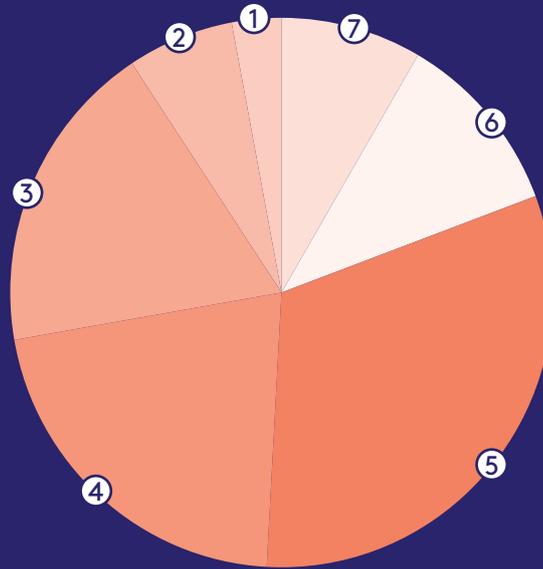


Of the 139 respondents, the vast majority were female, accounting for over 65% of all responses.

35% Male

What age range are you?

- 1. 75+ 3%
- 2. 65-74 6%
- 3. 55-64 18%
- 4. 45-54 22%
- 5. 35-44 32%
- 6. 25-34 11%
- 7. 15-24 8%



Almost half of all respondents lived in Blessington, or within 1 kilometre of the town centre, while a further 24% lived under 3 kilometres of the town centre.

47%

24%



1km

3km

For almost half of the survey respondents, 46%, the main reason for visiting Blessington that day (or on their most recent visit) is for grocery shopping. 'Work' and 'school' accounted for 17% and 12% of responses respectively.

46%

Grocery Shopping

Figure 55 Other main reasons for visiting Blessington



Interestingly, there was strong support for local business identified as one of the key reasons for shopping in Blessington, with **31% of respondents choosing to shop in Blessington in order to “support local business”**.

56%
Supermarkets

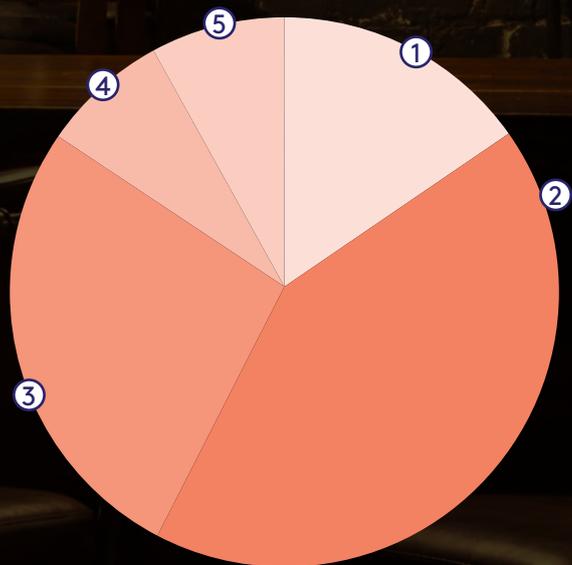
56% listed the supermarket as the business the most recently visited. Café/restaurant was the next highest with 12% of the total.

12%
Cafes

Question 13 asked people to state the type of business or particular store they would like to see most in Blessington. People felt there was a need for more restaurants, with several commenting that there is a lack of variety for food in evenings.

Boutique and more mass-market clothing retailers also received several mentions and proved to be the second most popular business type, with ‘swimming pool’ third.

- 1. **Swimming Pool** 16%
- 2. **Restaurants** 41%
- 3. **Clothes/Retail** 27%
- 4. **Hotel/Hostel** 8%
- 5. **Cinema** 8%



Of the 139 respondents to the survey, 94 (68%) stated that they drove a car to Blessington that day, or it is the mode they use most often. 25% of respondents claimed to walk more often than not, with 3% cycling. Only 2% of respondents noted that they take the bus as their regular mode of transport.

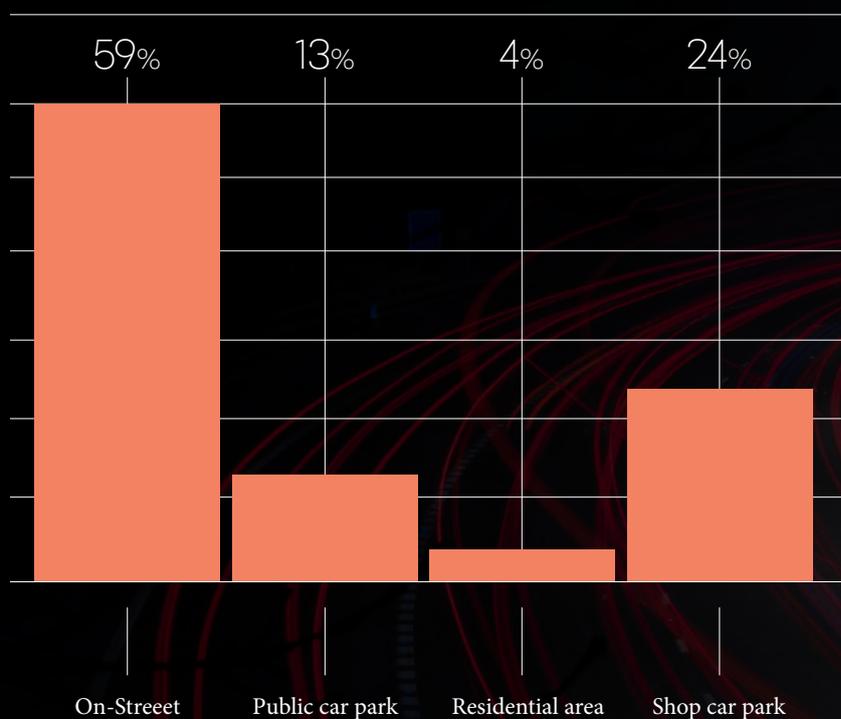
68%
Drive

25%
Walk

It is worth noting that of the 94 people who state that the car is their most common mode of transport when visiting Blessington, almost 59% of these people live in, or within 3 kilometres of, the town centre. This highlights the dependency people have on private vehicles, but also shows that there is **significant potential to reduce car usage if the pedestrian conditions are improved.**

Drivers were asked where they parked that day, or where they generally park, with the majority (59%) stating on-street parking.

DRIVER PARKING LOCATIONS



Respondents were asked to rate various aspects of the town from ‘very bad’ to ‘very good’, including issues such as traffic flow, parking, public transport and cycling space provision.

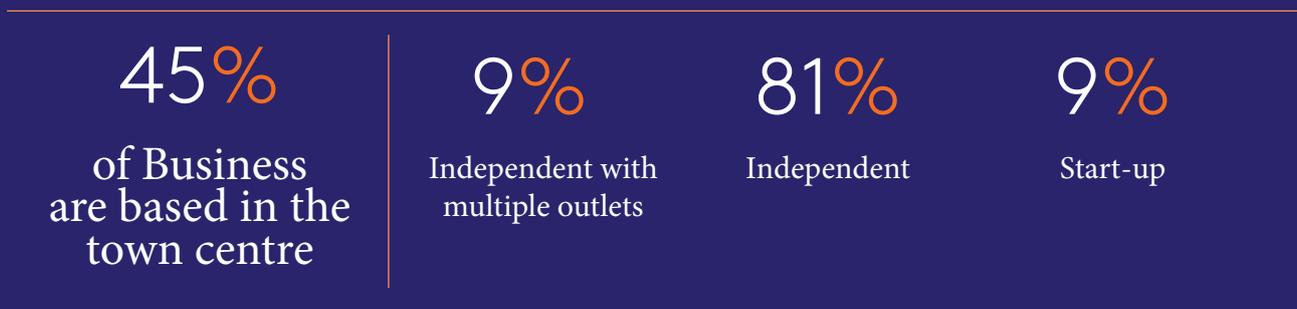
	Very Bad	Bad	Okay	Good	Very Good
Ease of movement around/throughout the town	6.48%	15.74%	42.59%	25.93%	9.26%
Traffic flow in the town centre	27.43%	33.63%	28.32%	7.08%	3.54%
Parking	12.73%	24.55%	35.45%	22.73%	4.55%
Attractiveness of the town	0.93%	6.54%	37.38%	42.99%	12.15%
Quality of the footpaths and roads	5.83%	10.68%	46.60%	33.98%	2.91%
Cleanliness	1.83%	6.42%	26.61%	53.21%	11.93%
Quality of the parks and greenspaces	10.99%	34.07%	31.87%	16.48%	6.59%
Areas to sit and relax	16.67%	41.11%	34.44%	6.67%	1.11%
Public transport provision	33.94%	37.61%	20.18%	5.50%	2.75%
Bicycle parking facilities	18.52%	37.96%	34.26%	5.56%	3.70%
Pedestrian crossing points	13.19%	35.16%	37.36%	12.09%	2.20%
Range/quality of cafes and restaurants	5.66%	20.75%	34.91%	27.36%	11.32%
Range/quality of grocery stores	0.94%	5.66%	28.30%	40.57%	24.53%
Range/quality of other retail	10.28%	22.43%	44.86%	18.69%	3.74%
Standard of service in shops	0.00%	0.00%	26.19%	58.33%	15.48%
Vibrancy of the town centre during the day	0.00%	4.67%	44.86%	40.19%	10.28%
Vibrancy of the town centre at night	3.85%	31.73%	42.31%	19.23%	2.88%
Range of events and/or activities	2.70%	22.97%	52.70%	17.57%	4.05%
Feeling of safety/security during the day	0.00%	0.00%	18.84%	42.03%	39.13%
Feeling of safety/security at night	2.86%	12.86%	41.43%	27.14%	15.71%

BUSINESS SURVEY

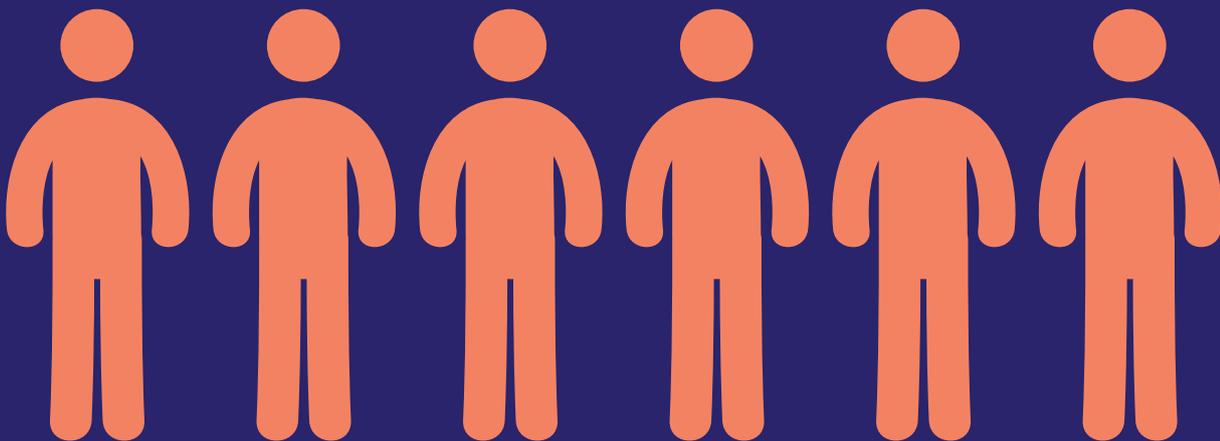
Part of the Blessington Health Check also required a focus on the business and retail environment. Commercial activity and town centres are inextricably linked, this has always been the case. Indeed, Blessington itself owes its foundations to commercial activity, with the Market Square offering a focal point for such activities for many decades.

Without an adequate provision of retail and commercial activity, town centres lose their vibrancy and sense of vitality. While a quality public realm can be an end in itself; without businesses and retailers town centres will lose their core function and this will have negative impacts over time. Hence the need to understand how Blessington currently functions as a retail and business environment.

The locations of these businesses are also indicative of the commercial environment in the area. A majority of respondents, 45%, are based in the town centre, with a further 27% located on the edge of the town centre. The remaining 27% stated their business is located "outside of the town".



Approximately 55% of businesses stated their main reason for establishing a presence in Blessington is because it is their 'hometown', while a further 18% said it provided them 'access to target markets'.



Average of 6 people employed by businesses



9%
Okay



55%
Well



36%
Very Well

There are positive signs of the health of businesses in Blessington, with 36% of respondents stating that their business is currently performing 'very well', while a further 55% stated 'well'.

60%

of businesses, when asked, said they would consider alternative/ additional opening hours if there was a demand for such.

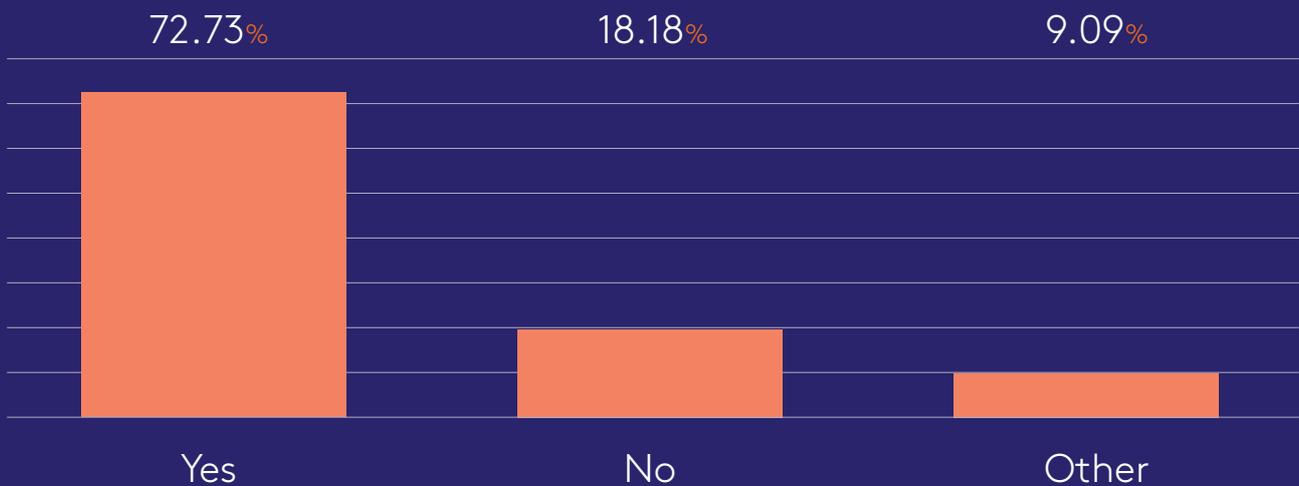
90%

Of Businesses that responded to the survey stated that they already have a website, or an online presence!

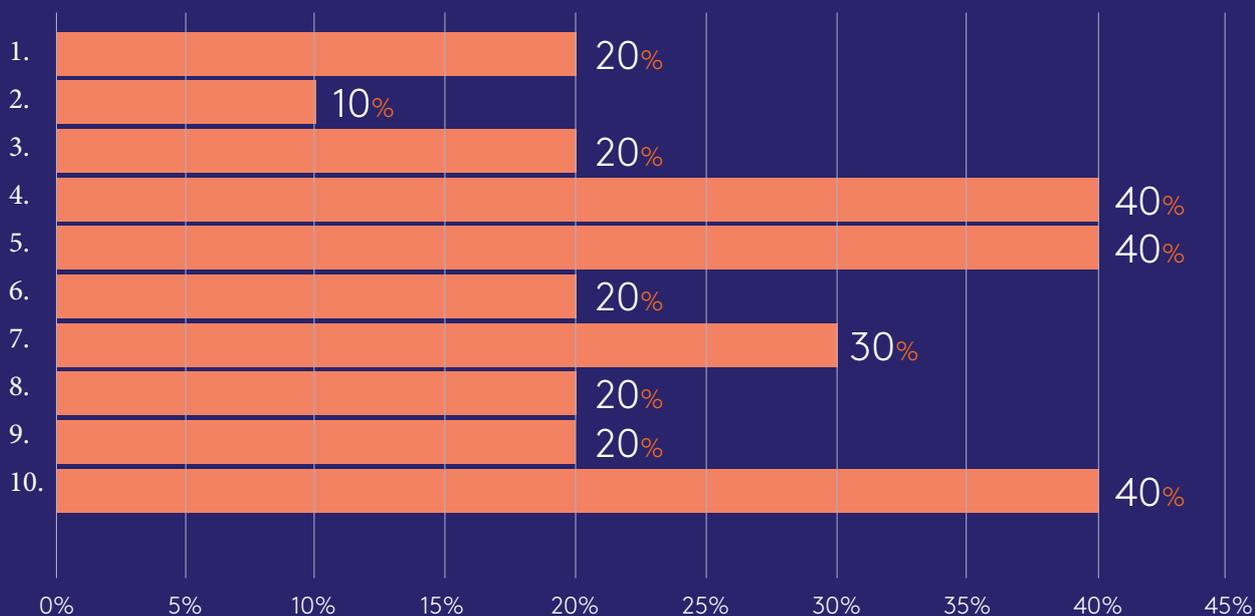
73%

of Businesses have private, off-street parking

Would the prioritisation of pedestrians in the town centre, through traffic-calming and other similar measure, be something your businesses would welcome?



Which of the following, if any, do you feel are a threat to your business in the medium term?



- | | |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| 1. Other | 6. Town Centre unattractive to customers |
| 2. No threats to business | 7. Lack of customers |
| 3. Loss of business to online retailers | 8. Competition from other businesses |
| 4. Cost of employing staff | 9. Premises size/suitability |
| 5. Town centre inaccessible to customers | 10. Cost of overheads |

Rating elements of Blessington

	Very Bad	Bad	Okay	Good	Very Good
Pedestrian footfall	0.00%	20.00%	60.00%	10.00%	10.00%
Provision of car parking	54.55%	9.09%	27.27%	9.09%	0.00%
Traffic congestion	27.27%	36.36%	36.36%	0.00%	0.00%
Attractiveness of the town	0.00%	9.09%	63.64%	18.18%	9.09%
Cleanliness of the town	0.00%	9.09%	27.27%	36.36%	27.27%
Public transport provision	27.27%	45.45%	18.18%	9.09%	0.00%
Bicycle parking facilities	45.45%	45.45%	0.00%	9.09%	0.00%
Quality of public areas	27.27%	18.18%	36.36%	18.18%	0.00%
Range/quality cafes/restaurants	9.09%	18.18%	45.45%	27.27%	0.00%
Range/quality of grocery stores	0.00%	0.00%	36.36%	45.45%	18.18%
Range/quality of other retail	54.55%	45.45%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Vibrancy of town during the day	0.00%	0.00%	72.73%	18.18%	9.09%
Vibrancy of town at night	18.18%	45.45%	18.18%	18.18%	0.00%
Blessington as a 'place to do business'	0.00%	9.09%	63.64%	9.09%	18.18%

PUBLIC CONSULTATION EVENT

As previously stated, a public consultation event was hosted in The Avon on the evening of November 12th, between 7:30 and 9:30 pm. Invitations to the event were circulated via various means, including Wicklow County Council's website, a local parish newsletter and through a range of social media accounts.

The public consultation event was structured in a manner similar to many consultation events that Future Analytics have coordinated previously. It involved an initial introduction to the company, the clients and the project itself, outlining the need for a health check and its significance. Following on from this introduction, those in attendance were split into groups of roughly equal size to allow for the undertaking of a consultation exercise.

A SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis is a commonly used method for consultation events involving a range of stakeholders and a large crowd. The SWOT analysis helps to build a picture of what is valued and appreciated by members of the community in Blessington, what is unsatisfactory and needs changing, what external threats exist or may arise, and the future opportunities. Each group is asked to outline what they consider to be the strengths of Blessington, its weaknesses, the various opportunities that exist and the threats facing the area. After each list is made a discussion takes place to find the commonalities and differences.

In order to ensure that the opinions of Blessington's younger population were heard, the TY students from the Community College were asked to give their input. A visit was made to the Community College on Friday 8th of November where a similar consultation event was held.

The SWOT analysis provides a basis for a vision for the future that stakeholders believe to be both desirable and achievable. Below the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats identified in both consultation events are outlined.



Figure 56 Poster promoting the Public Consultation event

STRENGTHS

- Dublin Bus route
- Natural landscape (Proximity to mountains and natural environment offers Blessington something other towns don't have)
- Location (close to Dublin)
- Compact/no urban sprawl (walking distance)
- Strong community/community focus
- Environment (lake and mountains)
- Russborough House
- Young community/population
- Local amenities
- Community groups (Incl. Men's Shed and Tidy Towns)
- Fusion of urban and rural
- Greenway (existing and future)
- Historical importance/local history and heritage
- Vibrant town
- Standard/range of education facilities
- Good at sport
- Primary care centre
- Skate park
- Village feeling
- Main Street (as an asset in itself and what it contains in terms of retail/business)
- Good shopping
- St Mary's Church
- Theatre and Halls
- Panoramic views/location
- Growing multi-cultural aspect
- Local council office

WEAKNESSES

- No signposting for parking (no orientation)
- Town a bit dowdy (Main street)
- Too many trucks
- Traffic (Congestion and controls)
- Infrequent/poor public transport options (No route to Naas)
- Lack of accommodation (nothing in town centre)
- N81 plans shelved/Relief road unfinished
- Infrequent bus service
- County boundaries of Kildare and Wicklow (development levies)
- Lack of access to heritage space – Glending Woods
- Volunteer fatigue (not enough community groups)
- Lack of a public park
- Lack of facilities for teenagers
- Poor Garda presence
- Under-pedestrianised town space
- No swimming pool or leisure centre
- Poor promotion of town
- Unfinished town centre/disjointed development
- No main venue/attraction
- Lack of school capacity
- Parking in the town square and main streets
- Lack of integration between old and new residential development
- Drug use
- Not enough bins
- Variety of employment opportunities (lack of)
- Poor public bathrooms
- No tourism transportation
- No E-charging points
- Inadequate street lighting
- Dirt and debris on road from quarry/trucks
- ESB cropping of the trees
- No ground for rugby club
- Anti-social behaviour
- No mental health service
- Lack of accessibility for elderly
- Not enough disabled parking
- Poor representation/cooperation on Wicklow Council

OPPORTUNITIES

- Linkages between the town and lake
- Rowing club
- Community garden
- 'Coding Dojo'
- Hostel/Camping/Guesthouses
- Signage (parking, consolidation and a general style for town)
- Cycling could be massively promoted
- Civic space
- Artists space/workshops in vacant buildings
- Glending Woods access – Ecological route
- Swimming in the lake
- Overhead wires could be put underground
- More traffic lights
- Speed bumps in the estates
- Greenway
- Main Street public realm improvements
- Broadband (throughout town centre)
- Remote working/External business
- Allotments
- Mental health services
- Age-friendly/Accessible town
- Tourism development/promotion (Russborough, famous residents of the area)
- Heritage Town status
- CCTV
- Open the views to the lake and mountains
- Pedestrianize town square
- Public park
- Downshire lands for public ownership
- Swimming pool/Multi-use facility
- Council and community collaboration/cooperation
- E-charging points
- Recycling bins
- More shelter on streets for inclement weather
- Proper planned development (Opportunity with large sites)
- Interpretive centre (Dame Ninette de Valois)
- Inclusive festivals and Farmers Markets

THREATS

- Crime and drugs
- Services/Infrastructure investment (lack of)
- Unbalanced/fragmented development/planning and poor monitoring of it
- Commuter/dormitory town (becoming a feeder town for Dublin)
- Antisocial behaviour
- Road safety
- Climate change
- Congestion
- Housing built without the proper supporting infrastructure
- N81 upgrade could bring excessive noise and other pollution
- Kildare boundary (and future developments being contested between councils)
- Lack of youth services
- Environmental threats/pollution (Dumping, refuse, flooding)
- Subsidence (lake, Millbank)
- Lack of infrastructure capable of supporting Greenway
- Insufficient school capacity
- Government policies (investment priorities, enterprise)
- Parking
- House prices
- Lack of Gardaí
- Excessive demand for housing from Dublin

HOW PEOPLE TRAVEL

A significant proportion of shoppers in Blessington live within the town centre, or under 3 kilometres from the centre. In fact, 71% of all respondents to the shopper survey fall into this category. Yet, a substantial number of these people still choose to drive into Blessington to shop or go about their usual activities. 68% of persons who responded to the public survey stated that the car is their most common mode of transport, with 59% of these people living under 3km from the town centre.

Furthermore, 115 of the 139 respondents (83%) stated that they visit Blessington on a daily basis, primarily to work, attend school or to go shopping. Of this total, over 77% of them live under 3 kilometres from the town centre, with over 52% of daily visitors living under a kilometre. Of these daily visitors, there is again a large majority of car users, with nearly 65% of people citing the car as their main mode of transport.

Consider that traffic congestion and flows are deemed to be a major issue in Blessington, with 60% of people rating traffic flow as bad or very bad in the public survey and 60% of businesses rating congestion as bad or very bad. Yet, even though people identify traffic as a significant problem, most still choose to drive into Blessington, including a majority who live within walking distance and visit the town on a daily basis.

The future ramifications of people's decision to drive instead of walk, is that Blessington will continue to suffer from issues of traffic congestion, one of the main problems people cite with the town. In order to change the behaviour of people, particularly those who live in close proximity to the town centre, it will be necessary to improve the walkability and pedestrian environment of Blessington.

The recent announcement of funding for the Blessington Looped Greenway, which will see a segregated bicycle and walking path run along the entirety of the lake, has been recognised as a significant opportunity for the town, by its residents. Indeed, it is one of the key opportunities identified. However, if this opportunity is to be seized, then there will be a need to vastly improve the cycling infrastructure in the area. Almost 90% of businesses believe bicycle parking facilities are either bad or very bad, and these are the same people who could benefit most from the Looped Greenway.



REASONS TO VISIT

It is no surprise that the main reasons people have for visiting the town centre relate to school and work. Children will naturally attend schools in their area, while people will usually choose to live near where they can find employment. Beyond this, there are fewer pragmatic reasons for people choosing to visit particular locations. For example, people will visit a town in order to go shopping, and while this often relates to convenience, people also choose locations based on the range of retailers and quality of choices. A large proportion of visitors to Blessington do so for their grocery shopping, which is not surprising when you consider that the range and quality of retailers operating in this space is rated positively by almost 65% of survey respondents. These findings would imply that due to Blessington's excellent provision of grocery retailers (Aldi, Super Valu, Dunnes Stores, etc.), people choose to visit the town over other locations. Therefore, if the range and quality of other services and retail offerings were raised to a similar level, more people would choose to visit Blessington for these reasons.

For example, when asked for what other reasons they visit Blessington, the most selected response was for cafes/restaurants, with non-grocery shopping also scoring well. Yet, at the same time, people were asked what type of business or store they would like to see in Blessington and an overwhelming majority of people called for better food offerings. In particular, it was repeatedly stated that there is a lack of options for places to eat in the evenings.

This lack of variety of cafes and restaurants in the evening time is reflected in the ratings of Blessington's night-time "vibrancy". While over half of people claimed that day-time vibrancy in the town centre was good, or very good, only 22% said the same for the night-time, with 35% claiming it to be bad or very bad.

When asked to rate the same aspects, business owners were even less complimentary, with 63% rating the night-time vibrancy as bad or very bad.

Essentially, the findings of the consultation would suggest that there is a need to improve the range of services and retailers on offer to people. In terms of retail, although Blessington will never be able to compete with larger settlements such as Dublin City, Tallaght or Naas, it could improve on its range of independent, boutique retailers. The survey results indicate that there would be backing for these independent retailers as over 31% of people already choose to shop in Blessington in order to 'support local business,' proving there is an appetite for 'the local'.

Outside of retail, there is a clearly identifiable need for other services and amenities to be improved. In particular, calls for a local cinema, swimming pool and leisure centre are all made by a large number of people. Such businesses, if provided, would offer people further reason to visit Blessington town centre, which would have a positive spill over to other retailers.

Finally, the importance of amenities that do not have a profit driven motive is acknowledged. While people do visit towns to shop and access services, they also seek out locations to relax and spend their leisure time. In this regard, quality recreational and public spaces are important. Unfortunately, many residents believe that Blessington's parks and greenspaces are of a poor quality, as are its spaces to 'sit and relax'. Therefore, improving these amenities should be high on the agenda for any future regeneration developments in the town.

CHAPTER SIX

VISION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following sections will attempt to summarise the main findings from the health check and consultation, offering a series of recommendations for improving Blessington, with a rationale as to why this is necessary and worthwhile.



6.0

VISION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following sections will attempt to summarise the main findings from the health check and consultation, offering a series of recommendations for improving Blessington, with a rationale as to why this is necessary and worthwhile.

A Framework for Town Centre Renewal 2017 emphasises that the development of actions is key to achieving and implementing healthy, vibrant town centres:

“Actions and initiatives are needed to ensure the viability of a town centre including delivery of improvement projects, regular cleaning and maintenance and co-ordinated town centre management initiatives to promote the continued improvement of the centre.” (2017, Pg 14)

A VISION FOR BLESSINGTON

A vision exercise was undertaken during the public consultation event, in addition to the SWOT exercise outlined previously. The aim of the vision exercise was to get people thinking about how they want to see Blessington, and how they want Blessington to be perceived by others.

This simple exercise involved asking people to state one word, or words, they associate with Blessington and the list is outlined below.

- Self-sufficient
- Resilient
- To be a village (Character)
- Thriving
- Community spirit
- Vibrant
- Pride of place
- Local enterprise supported
- Green
- Sustainable
- Unity
- Accessible
- Inclusive
- Alive
- Transparent
- Honest
- Not a commuter town
- Beautiful
- Good quality support (supporting council)

Considering the above, a vision for Blessington could read as follows:

“Blessington aims to be a thriving, self-sufficient town accessible to all, but one that retains its unique rural village characteristics. It will seek to be a resilient, sustainable location, where local enterprise is supported, and a strong community spirit remains.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

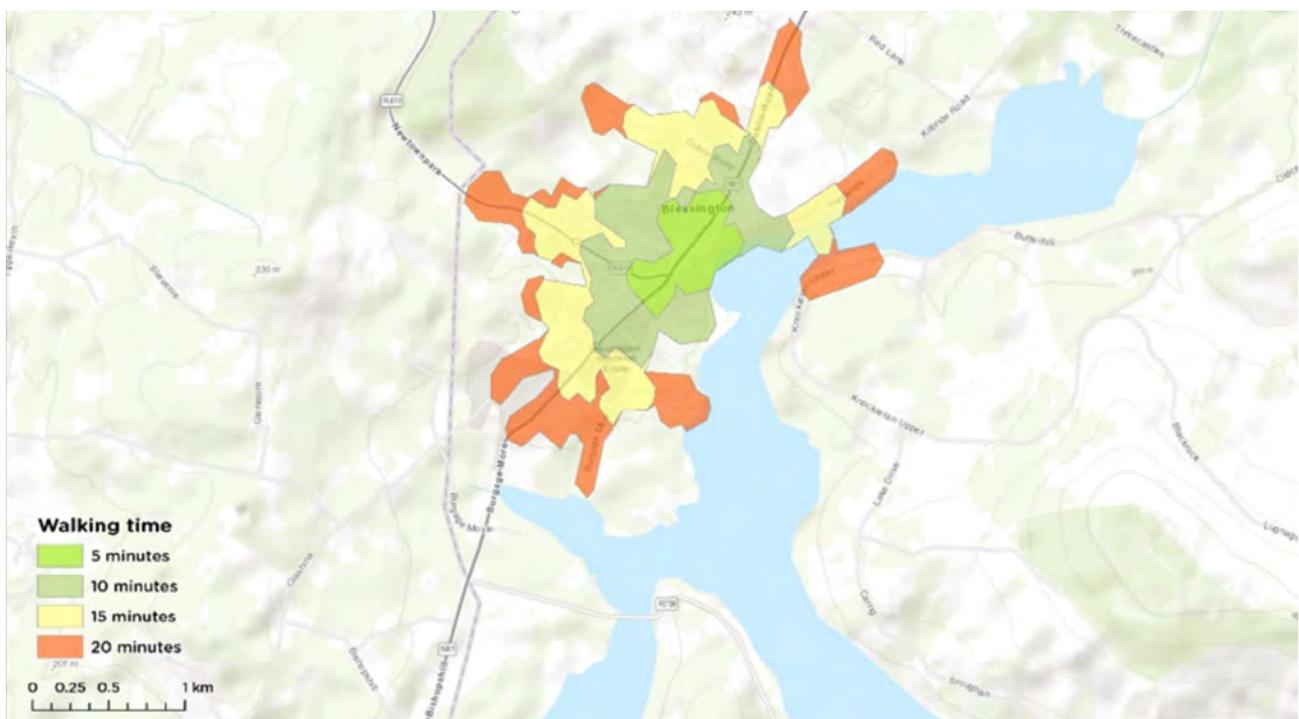
IMPROVING ACCESS, MOBILITY AND TRANSPORT

PRIORITISE PEDESTRIANS

In the literature review carried out for this report, there is a common theme shared amongst most of the guidelines and reports studied. The common theme is that our villages, towns and cities, all of our urban environments, should be designed in a manner that protects and appeals to the most vulnerable ‘road-users’. In the ‘Design Manual for Urban Streets’ (DMURS) an ideal hierarchy of road users is showcased, with pedestrians the priority, followed by cyclists, then public transport and finally the private vehicle. This hierarchy is accepted by planners, urban designers and architects the world over as the most appropriate way to design our urban areas as it emphasises the need to ensure the most vulnerable users, the pedestrians, are considered first and foremost.

Streets should be safe and pleasant spaces where vulnerable road users, such as the elderly or mobility-impaired, can visit freely and without feeling intimidated. First and foremost, this means ensuring that paths and surfaces are even, sufficiently wide and free from obstructions or trip hazards, such as service poles or poorly maintained gutters. The network of pedestrian spaces should extend throughout the town, ensuring there are no locations inaccessible to pedestrians. Key locations and focal points, such as the Market Square, should prioritise pedestrians above all other road users. Instead of an uneven tarmac surface, the Market Square could be redesigned to offer an attractive, safe locations for people to congregate.

Figure 58 A ‘Walkability’ map for Blessington, showing distances travelled in specified time periods



Blessington is an inherently walkable town. Its relatively compact size means that a pedestrian could cover its entire length in approximately 20 minutes, from one end to the other. The renowned urban designer Jan Gehl considers 500 metres to be an acceptable walking distance for people. If an environment is conducive to walking, meaning it feels safe and has interesting features, then people are usually happy to walk these distances with ease. A 'walk time' analysis for Blessington highlights the "walkability" of the town, with the entire settlement reachable in under 20 minutes (Fig. 59).

If the pedestrian environment was improved in Blessington, then its walkability would also improve, which in turn would increase the town's accessibility. In addition to interventions such as resurfacing, path widening and more pedestrian crossing points, increasing the 'permeability' of the town would prove hugely beneficial. There are several examples of unnecessary cul-de-sacs and restrictive street layouts in Blessington. For example, in St Joseph's Green walls prevent local residents from direct access to two key attractors, Dunnes Stores and the Tramway Theatre. The removal of these barriers would create a more permeable environment, reducing the necessity to drive. Other examples, and opportunities, can be found throughout Blessington where a more permeable streetscape could be easily created.

Figure 59 If the wall was removed residents of St Joseph's Green could quickly walk to Dunnes and other retailers



TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT

If town centres are to once again become hubs of activity, and accessible locations for everyone, not just private vehicle users, then there is an urgent need to reconsider how they function. While there is inevitably opposition to change, particularly in locations people have a longstanding connection with, there is a growing awareness among the general population that the dominance of private vehicles is both harmful and unnecessary. As the survey conducted for this health check also indicated, a majority of Blessington's residents believe that traffic congestion in the town is problematic. This would suggest that the time is right to take steps to improve how Blessington functions.

The prioritisation of pedestrians and traffic management measures go hand-in-hand. Therefore, it is suggested that both occur simultaneously. Residents of Blessington have an awareness that their streets are clogged with cars. Unfortunately, because the N81 runs directly through the town, there will always be a significant amount of through traffic. The proposed Inner Relief Road should be seen as a major, short-term priority project that would have significantly positive impacts on traffic in Blessington. It is a key recommendation of this report to advance delivery of the Inner Relief Road, however, until such a time as this occurs other traffic management measures are required.

The concept of universal accessibility is becoming an ever more important feature of planning and design. It emphasises the need to create places that cater for everyone, not just the few. An improved pedestrian environment, where cars are restricted and vulnerable users prioritised, would be far more accessible for far more people. Developing the Main Square and town centre as a 'shared space' would not only contribute towards enhancing universal accessibility but would also limit the dominance of private vehicles. This would involve extensive repaving of the Square and Main Street, removing black tarmac and replacing it with brickwork or other material. A raised 'bed' could be created in the town centre, with this resurfacing, which would give a clear indication to drivers that they are entering a 'shared space' which prioritises pedestrians. If centred around the Square, this would reduce vehicle dominance and create a more obvious focal point for the town, adding a vibrancy to the area.

Further traffic management measures could include the narrowing of carriageways on the approaches to Blessington, again to highlight to drivers that they are entering a 'slow zone'. Additionally, the rationalisation and realignment of on-street parking should be considered, thereby limiting the number of vehicles in the town centre. This could include reorientation of parking spaces from perpendicular to angled, or parallel, where suitable, being cognisant of the needs of retailers. Such interventions should be progressed in tandem with measures to enhance the public realm of the town centre, particularly planting boxes or seats interspersed throughout where parking spaces previously existed, thereby making it a more attractive place for residents and visitors. Furthermore, an alternative system for traffic movement should be considered for Market Square, removing two of the access points for vehicles and potentially creating a one-way system of entry to the new town development. Cars could instead exit on the inner relief road, rather than back onto Main Street.

Figure 60 Resurfacing of town centre streets and widening of footpaths will reduce driver speeds and create more pleasant environments periods



ALTERNATIVE MODES

Issues of accessibility and mobility do not only relate to pedestrians and drivers. Public transport users and cyclists must also be considered when devising mobility plans and interventions. Blessington possesses a Dublin Bus route, which offers a direct link to Dublin City Centre. However, as the surveys indicated, the quality of public transport is poor, with issues over infrequent and excessively long travel times. This is partly to do with the number of stops, but also the fact that the bus must share roadspace with private vehicles.

Additionally, many residents of Blessington feel there is a need for public transport services to locations other than Dublin, such as Naas. Surrounding towns and villages do not possess any regular public transport connections to Blessington, and vice-versa. The proximity of Naas to Blessington means that there are many people who regularly commute between both locations for work, school or leisure, yet there is currently no public transport service that enables more sustainable travel. A local service that improves the connectedness of towns in the area to one another should be explored.

The Greenway, which has secured funding, has potential to become a major attraction for tourists and cyclists. Proponents of the greenway, which will see a looped cycle and walking path around the lake created, suggest that it could attract upwards of 300,000 visitors a year to the area. Essentially, Blessington will become a haven for cyclists. It is imperative, therefore, that the cycling infrastructure in the town is built to an appropriate standard capable of accommodating increased numbers. Of course, such improvements could have a twofold benefit, ensuring that visitors have suitable infrastructure to use, but also residents who will use these facilities on a daily basis.

Blessington Main Street is a wide avenue which could, if appropriately designed for all road users, include cycle lanes. Regeneration works to improve the pedestrian environment could also involve the inclusion of segregated cycle lanes. The concept of accessibility, previously referred to, extends to cyclists. Blessington, as shown, is a compact, walkable town, which also means it is even more suitable for cycling. Routes from residential areas to schools and the Market Square should be redesigned to facilitate cycling, with segregated paths offering school children safe routes to school.

Figure 61 Segregated cycle lanes in Dublin have proved to be a huge success (Photo credit: Irish Times)



Action	Partners	Timeframe
1 Inner Relief Road – Completion of the Inner Relief Road, with the northern and southern ends connected to the N81 is vital for the future sustainability of Blessington Town Centre. If completed, it will significantly reduce the amount of through-traffic the town centre experiences, making Blessington a more pleasant and attractive location for businesses, residents and visitors.	Wicklow CoCo, NTA, TII, Blessington Town Team, Blessington Forum, Kildare CoCo	Short Term
2 Bicycle Infrastructure – The installation of bicycle stands for parking should take place throughout Blessington, with key locations that attract visitors (such as near grocery stores or cafes) prioritised. More importantly, a network of segregated lanes would increase perceptions of safety. Segregated routes linking schools to residential areas and the town centre should be prioritised.	Wicklow CoCo, Blessington Forum, An Taisce	Immediate Term
3 Develop a Parking Strategy - The removal of parking spaces from the Square and the reorientation of parking along Main Street (realignment of parking to angled parking) should be a priority considering the significant opportunities these changes would present for other urban realm improvements. The introduction of paid parking (beyond 1 to 2 hours) on Main Street should be considered.	Wicklow CoCo,	Short Term
4 Traffic Management – Comprehensive traffic management measures are required to reduce congestion levels, but also reduce the dominance of private vehicles. The Square currently has three access points, each of which are bi-directional. The removal of two of the Main Street/Square access points should be considered, along with a one-way system of access, with entry via Main Street and exiting via the inner relief road.	Wicklow CoCo, NTA, TII, Blessington Forum	Short Term
5 Traffic Management 2 – Main Street, in its current form, is designed to facilitate consistent traffic flows. It enables higher speeds and car dominance. The narrowing of laneways and resurfacing of the roadway in the centre of Blessington should be undertaken to ensure drivers have a visual cue that indicates they are now in a town centre location where pedestrians are prioritised.	Wicklow CoCo, NTA, TII	Medium Term

Action	Partners	Timeframe
<p>6 Public Transport - Undertake an audit of the bus service and connections in demand with aim to enable sustainable and accessible travel. Consideration should be given to the development of a night-bus that serves local communities in and surrounding the town. This would improve accessibility and mobility.</p>	<p>Dublin Bus, Local Link, Blessington Town Team</p>	<p>Immediate Term</p>
<p>7 Brownfield, Infill and Backlands Development - There are several back-lands and derelict sites throughout Blessington that are currently undeveloped. Key sites, such as those that lie vacant between Dunnes Stores and Main Street, offer huge potential to be redeveloped into new streetscapes, improving permeability and densifying development in the core of the town.</p>	<p>Wicklow CoCo, Property Owners</p>	<p>Medium Term</p>
<p>8 Universal Access - Implement the recommendations of the 'Street Route Accessibility Audit' undertaken for the Blessington and District Forum</p>	<p>Wicklow CoCo, Blessington Access Group</p>	<p>Short Term</p>

BUILDING COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Places are nothing without people. Towns and villages that are ‘dying’ are locations where the population is dwindling, and more people are leaving than choosing to live there. While employment is an absolute necessity if towns are to prosper, there are other elements of a ‘place’ that are equally important to people. Intangible things like “sense of community”, which was identified as one of Blessington’s best characteristics in the survey, can positively influence people’s perception of an area.

A sense of community is achieved, in no small part, by an adequate provision of community infrastructure. Community infrastructure, also known as social infrastructure, relates to wide array of services. Education, healthcare, community supports, public spaces, libraries, safety/security, culture, arts and sports facilities are all elements of community infrastructure. When towns possess a quality range of community infrastructure it tends to be reflected in the vibrancy and prosperity of a place. Therefore, ensuring that Blessington has sufficient community infrastructure to service the needs of its population is essential.

In terms of healthcare, Blessington does possess a number of services such as pharmacies, doctor surgeries, dentists and a primary care centre. The primary care centre is a recently developed facility, which provides an important service to local residents. It is important that regular reviews of healthcare provision are carried out to ensure sufficient capacity exists. One notable issue that was raised during the public consultation event and the surveys, was the lack of a permanent mental health service in Blessington.

Safety and security in Irish towns is primarily the responsibility of An Garda Síochána, although the involvement of the community is also important. All public spaces should be just that, public. If people perceive certain places within a town to be unsafe, or if they feel unsafe at particular times, then it has a negative spill over effect, potentially creating ‘no-go zones’ and limiting accessibility for residents. Generally, residents of Blessington perceive the town to be safe, although 15% of survey respondents felt it was unsafe at night. However, issues of anti-social behaviour and drug use were raised on multiple occasions. A consistent, permanent police presence would help tackle these issues. Presently, the Garda Station in Blessington is only open at certain times, limiting their presence.

While a Garda presence would be extremely helpful in enhancing perceptions of safety, there are also other means of doing so. The ‘Purple Flag Initiative’ is an accreditation process that awards town and city centres that offer an entertaining, diverse, safe and enjoyable night out. A significant proportion of survey respondents stated that they felt there was a need for more restaurants that opened in the evening, while others called for a cinema. If a town possesses a range of evening activities, which could be restaurants, cinemas, theatres, then it will attract visitors and create a more vibrant atmosphere, which will in turn improve perceptions of safety. In addition, possessing a strong ‘night-time economy’ ensures towns are not purely day-time locations.

Heritage and culture are also important elements in a town. They offer locations a true ‘sense of place’, providing an identity through historical links to the past. It is important that historical links are emphasised, and heritage and culture are promoted, both for the attention of visitors, but also for local residents. Blessington has a well-documented history, emerging as a market town on Downshire lands.

The Market Square, and buildings such as the Credit Union, offer direct links to this history. Promoting and emphasising a town's heritage is an excellent way to create a sense of place, with Waterford's Viking Triangle a successful example. Beyond the town centre, major attractions such as Russborough House are part of a wider story that informs people of the history West Wicklow possesses.

Providing for the youth is just as important, if not more important, than providing adequate services for older populations. Again, this ties in with safety and anti-social behaviour. If children and adolescents have a range of activities and locations where they can play, meet-up or relax, then they are less likely to engage in anti-social behaviour. While there are sports clubs in Blessington (GAA and Football), their facilities are located out of the town centre. With the absence of a large public park, this means there are very few locations adolescents can congregate. The addition of a multi-use games area (MUGA) and a public park would provide much needed recreation areas for this cohort. Furthermore, the existing playground on Oak Avenue, is poorly located. The development of "pocket-parks" throughout the town, which could include play areas, would offer more children the opportunity to play, in central locations with passive surveillance.

Figure 62 The 'Viking Triangle' in Waterford provides a clear link to the city's history and heritage



Figure 63 Multi Use Games Area



Action	Partners	Timeframe
1 Parks – Blessington is notable for the absence of any large public park. With land beyond the new town development zoned ‘open space’ there is a potential location for the creation of a large park. However, there are also several opportunities for smaller, but more central parks to be developed. Pocket-parks could be located at Dempsey’s Lane and St Josephs Green, with the latter offering a larger space for development.	Wicklow CoCo, Blessington Tidy Towns, Blessington Forum, Residents Assocs.	Short Term
2 MUGA – Multi-use Games Areas are sports facilities that can accommodate a range of sports, such as basketball and football. Such facilities offer adolescents, as well as adults, opportunities to engage in physical exercise, without the need to join clubs. Furthermore, the use of Council lands at Burgage could be considered for the development of a recreation zone with a multi-disciplinary facility that includes a swimming pool.	Wicklow CoCo, Local Sports Partnership, Sport Clubs	Medium Term
3 Gardaí – The possibility of extending the operating hours of the Local Garda Station should be explored.	An Gardaí, Blessington Town Team, Wicklow CoCo JPC	Medium Term
4 Evening Activities – The example of the Purple Flag initiative should be followed, with improvements to Blessington’s night-time economy made. Main Street should be just as active during the night as it is during the day, which will require more late-night restaurants and other facilities.	Business Owners, Retailers, Blessington Town Team	Medium Term
5 History and Heritage – Enhancing the ‘sense of place’ contributes towards more cohesive communities as it provides a town with a strong identity. The creation of a ‘story’ for Blessington, with character areas, such as the Market Square, developed to act as a link to this story will contribute towards the sense of place.	Wicklow CoCo, Heritage Council, Blessington History Soc, Blessington Town Team	Short Term

ENHANCING THE URBAN REALM

A first impression of a place is not made by the area's education facilities, sports clubs or range of retailers it possesses, it is made by the appearance of the paths, roads and squares. If a location is littered with potholes, broken street-lights, uneven paths and lacklustre squares or plazas, people will inevitably perceive the location as unattractive and unwelcoming. This is why the public realm matters. The streets, squares and parks of a town should be considered assets, rather than purely functional spaces. If designed well, these spaces can become locations that people want to visit and spend time in. And this is the key to a good urban realm, it should be welcoming, attractive and accessible to all.

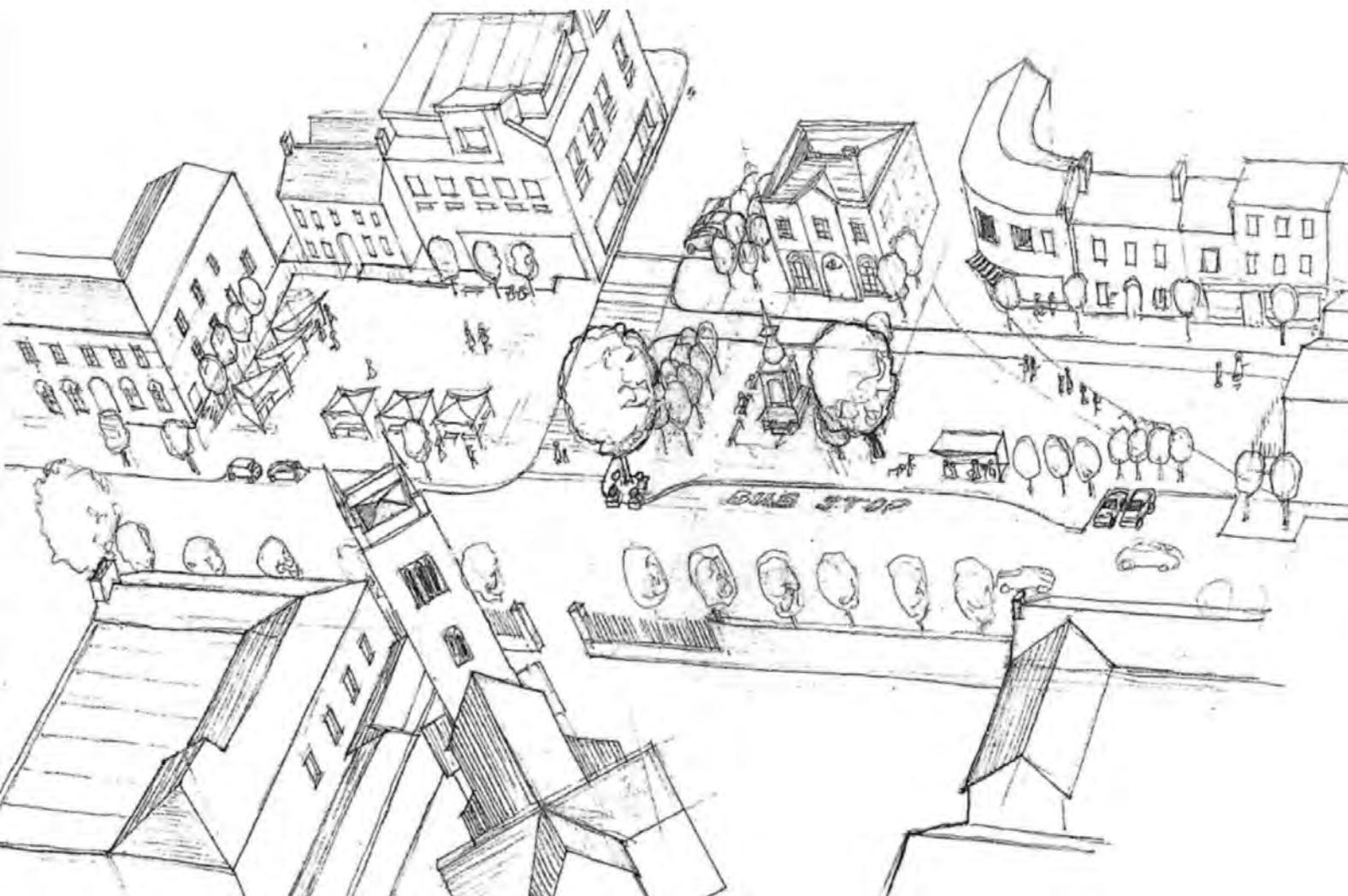
When approaching and entering Blessington, visitors should immediately gain a sense of the place and their initial perception should be positive. Approach roads and routes to towns provide opportunities to create an initial positive impression for visitors. A review of these key entry points to Blessington should be undertaken to establish whether there are too many visual obtrusions in the form of signage, or whether improved landscaping and planting is required. This also applies to roundabouts, where planting or the addition of artwork could improve the perception of the area, as has been shown in Westport (Fig. 64).

The inclusion of planting on streetscapes is known to positively enhance an area. It is important, however, that tree-lined streets do not possess any unnecessary visual cluttering, in order to provide a pleasant transition through the town. Main Street is already lined with mature trees, however, it has greater potential than it currently shows, but the extent and nature of visual obtrusions prevents this. For example, the electricity cabling and poles that run the entire length of Main Street, on both sides, detract from the street's character. By removing the poles and placing the cables underground, significant improvement could be made.

As the focal point of the town, the Market Square should be the 'jewel in the crown' of Blessington's urban realm. As discussed in the section on accessibility, the Square is currently functioning as a car-park. This completely ignores the true value and potential of the Square, which could provide Blessington with a central public plaza that would significantly improve the urban realm. Countless examples from throughout Europe, and indeed Ireland, highlight how important public squares and plazas can be to vibrant communities.

Figure 64 Removing overhead cabling and improving approaches to town centres enhances the area





The Square was once the location where people gathered to trade and interact. It provided a vital social function, and would have ensured a lively, energetic atmosphere in the town centre. Its current role is wasteful and diminishes the attractiveness of the area. Regeneration of the Square should be one of the priority projects adopted in future schemes. While it may inconvenience some drivers, the eventual gain from possessing a new public plaza in the heart of Blessington would far outweigh any losses.

Creating a clear, identifiable sense of place can be achieved through various means, some of which have already been discussed. Towns such as Westport in Mayo, provide excellent examples of how a plan-led approach to design and future development can yield success. Westport's approach had many elements to it, however some of the more achievable aspects include standardising signage and ensuring shopfronts were well-maintained in a traditional style.

Traditional Irish shopfronts have a particular style which stands out amongst the more modern glass facades seen in cities. Assisting business owners in the maintenance and restoration of shopfronts will help to add character to the town centre. Equally, having a standardised signage policy, which would see all town centre signage follow the same pattern and design would create a sense of place, while also ridding the town of excessive and unattractive signs.

Figure 66 Public realm improvements in Clonakilty have transformed the town centre into a space that prioritises people



Action	Partners	Timeframe
1 Visual Cluttering – Overhead cables run the length of Main Street, while the poles that support them and the street lighting also add to the visual obtrusions. Undergrounding of cables would significantly improve the streetscape.	Wicklow CoCo, Service Providers, Blessington Town Team	Medium Term
2 Market Square – A strategy for the regeneration of the Square, which would redefine its boundaries, prioritise pedestrians and enhance its urban realm, should be adopted.	Wicklow CoCo, Blessington Town Team, Blessington Forum, Blessington Tidy Towns	Short Term
3 Village Design Statement – Prepare a Village/Town Design Statement which will consist of design briefs for key sites throughout Blessington and provide guidance to inform any future development. The design brief should seek to protect and enhance the positive characteristics of the town, through the identification of particular styles, landscaping and architecture.	Wicklow CoCo, Blessington Town Team, Blessington Forum	Immediate Term
4 Approaches – Routes into Blessington, and those circumventing it, such as the Inner Relief Road, should contain planting and other attractive visuals, such as artwork, in order to create an awareness that a town centre is near and create a positive initial perception of the area. Visual cues will make clear to drivers that speed reductions will be required.	Wicklow CoCo, Blessington Tidy Towns	Short Term

Action	Partners	Timeframe
5 Seating – Public seating in Blessington is currently inadequate, with the concrete table and benches in the Square an example of inappropriate siting and materials. Benches and seats should be provided in strategic locations throughout, set-back from roads and offering people pleasant locations to sit.	Wicklow CoCo, Blessington Town Team	Immediate Term
6 Signage Strategy – A strategy for the appropriate provision of signage, which also audits existing signage, should be developed. This strategy should seek to consolidate repetitive signage, remove unnecessary signage, identify appropriate locations and create a standard design template to be adhered to. The strategy would also cover parking and tourism signage.	Wicklow CoCo, Blessington Town Team, Blessington Tidy Towns	Short Term
7 Shop fronts - A strategy for coordinated design of storefronts and facias should be prepared. This could provide a sense of tradition and character to the streetscape.	Wicklow CoCo, Business Owners, Blessington Town Team, Blessington Forum	Short Term

PROTECTING THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Sustainability is a concept that has come to the fore in recent years, due to the effects of climate change. Climate change is impossible to ignore, with recent examples of extreme weather events in Ireland proving that we, as a nation, are susceptible to it. The climate marches saw thousands of Irish students and children on our streets and were an indication of the growing awareness that the population has about the need to change how our society functions. Blessington does not exist in a vacuum, and while it alone cannot solve a nation's issues, it can become a leader in sustainability.

The e-Greenway is an example of how sustainability can be interwoven with recreation and tourism development. There are proposals to line the route with e-bike charging points, however this could be extended to cover the town also. The Poulaphouca Reservoir is used for electricity generation, providing a renewable source of energy. Blessington should be in a position to exploit this resource. If car and bike charging points were placed throughout the town, with the electricity provided by the reservoir, Blessington could claim to be Ireland's 'e-charging' capital.

E-charging offers one way to 'greenify' Blessington, but there are others. With ample lands surrounding the town, there are opportunities for significant 'rewilding' to take place. Climate change, as well as the intrusion of humans into habitats, means that many of Ireland's native flora and fauna are under threat. A programme of 'rewilding' should be developed, identifying the locations where this could take place. This could occur on a large scale where land is available, but also throughout the town centre on smaller, empty parcels of land. Native species of flora could be planted in these locations, along with more engineered solutions such as "bird-boxes" and "insect-hotels", with the aim of repopulating the area with native species. Such initiatives would contribute positively towards the natural environment, offsetting some of the damage society has caused through development.

Enhancing the natural environment need not only be an altruistic venture. The extreme weather events caused by climate change are leading to increased instances of flooding, among other problems. Blessington is not immune to spot flooding. The stream to the town's west acts as a mitigation measure for stormwater run-off, however development has been encroaching on the stream's path, with culverting of the stream reducing its ability to absorb stormwater. The development of attenuation ponds would add to the stream capacity to absorb water, but also offer potential new habitats for species of plants and animals. Furthermore, drainage within the town could utilise the 'sustainable urban drainage' (SUDs) approach, integrating stormwater drainage with attractive public realm features.

On a more pragmatic level, Blessington possesses rich natural assets that could be better exploited, albeit in a sustainable and respectful fashion. The lake offers Blessington an enviable natural asset that is currently underutilised. The development of lakeside walking routes, trails and linear parks should be advanced, particularly on lands that are currently empty, such as those between Carrig Glen and the Avon. These routes would enhance the connection between the town centre and existing Greenway, while also affording more direct access to the lake for the public. Equally, access to woodlands, such as Glending, could be improved, offering locals further opportunity for recreation activities in natural environments. Blessington could become an outdoor tourism hotspot on a national level, with direct access to lakes, woodlands and mountains. A coordinated approach to developing its offerings should take place.

Figure 67 An example of how Sustainable Urban Drainage can improve the public realm



Figure 68 The Greenway extension is one example of how to positively exploit the abundant natural assets Blessington possesses



Action	Partners	Timeframe
1 A coordinated Approach for Utilising the Natural Assets – An audit of Blessington’s surrounding natural assets should be undertaken, followed by a strategy that identifies how these assets can be utilised. A network of looped walks, cycle paths, hikes and trails could be developed, with the town of Blessington acting as the ‘hub’ from which to explore.	Wicklow CoCo, Failte Ireland, Irish Trails	Short Term
2 Rewilding open spaces – Throughout Blessington there are areas of open space, public lands and amenity. These areas offer potential locations for the planting of native wildflower species and the erection of bird-boxes, insect-hotels and other interventions that contribute towards the protection and enhancement of the wider area’s native flora and fauna.	Wicklow CoCo, Blessington Tidy Towns, Men’s Shed, Blessington Schools	Short Term
3 Signage – Non-intrusive signage that provides a visual information panel which displays local flora and fauna could be situated in key locations of natural beauty and importance. This would prove informative and offer visitors a better understanding of their surrounding environment.	Wicklow CoCo, Blessington Tidy Towns, Men’s Shed	Immediate Term
4 Stream and Flooding – The stream identified in Phase 1 to the west of the town provides important ecosystem services, including acting as a stormwater run-off. Future developments should be cognisant of this and the culverting of the stream should be avoided. Additional attenuation features, such as ponds, could be developed along the stream course to enhance its capacity.	Wicklow CoCo,, Blessington Town Team	Medium Term
5 Street Trees – The trees that line Main Street are essential for the character of the area, however, many have been damaged by mismanagement or inappropriate activities (crowning). The mature trees should be provided with more protection, with improvements made to the street immediately around each tree. Furthermore, additional tree planting should be considered to extend the range of tree-lining that occurs in Blessington.	Wicklow CoCo, Blessington Tidy Towns, ESB	Short Term
6 Promote a ‘Green Blessington’ campaign which engages with businesses, residents and schoolchildren to raise awareness of biodiversity and support sustainable practices in day-to-day life.	Wicklow CoCo, Blessington Tidy Towns, An Taisce	Short Term
7 E-Charging – Develop electric charging facilities and points throughout Blessington, for all vehicle types, enabling the town to become a leader in e-mobility. This will also include the proposed delivery of e-charging points along the future Greenway route.	ESB, Wicklow CoCo	Short Term

DEVELOPING THE ECONOMY

Many of the actions and suggestions already discussed would have additional benefits beyond their intended themes and would contribute indirectly to improving the economic environment in Blessington. For example, if public realm improvements were undertaken and Market Square became a destination for people to visit and spend time, this would then boost surrounding businesses. Similarly, if Blessington's night-time offerings were improved through the opening of evening restaurants or a cinema, it would also contribute economically.

It is important that towns possess all of the attributes that allow their residents to live healthy and fulfilling lives. This means providing community infrastructure that offers services and recreation, appropriate housing and opportunities for employment. Several guides and reviews exist that propose a range of measures aimed at improving the retail and wider economic environment of town centres, such as the Grimsey Review in the UK. Reviews such as this, along with Irish examples that include the Framework for Town Centre Renewal, propose initiatives such as: establishing a town group or team; repurposing of vacant retail units for residential purposes; creating dedicated events and teams to run them; restricting out of town developments; and many more. Blessington already possesses an active and engaged Town Team, so it is taking steps to improve conditions locally.

Repurposing of vacant units for other uses, such as residential or indeed co-working spaces is one of the most commonly suggested actions. Success stories such as the Ludgate Hub in Skibbereen offer excellent examples of how a town can adapt to the digital economy. A renovated building in the centre of town can now facilitate up to 75 entrepreneurs and business owners in a co-working space. Blessington has seen a recent attempt at something similar, with the opening of co-working spaces opposite Dempsey's Lane and at The Avon. Such initiatives should be applauded and supported.

Figure 69 The Ludgate Hub in Skibbereen is a successful digital co-working space that reused a vacant building



The survey results highlight how local residents feel the range and quality of non-grocery retailers is inadequate. It also highlighted how people are keen to support local businesses. This would suggest that there is a gap in the market for more boutique, independent retailers in Blessington. Quite often, the most successful towns also contain numerous independent retailers, offering consumers goods that cannot be found in the chain-stores. Blessington should not attempt to compete with larger town centres, instead it should focus on originality.

This plays into another possibility that presents itself. It was previously suggested that Market Square could once again perform that function. Surrounding Blessington there are local producers, farmers and craftspeople who could be provided with a stage where they can sell their produce. A regular farmer's market held in the Square would offer an interesting event that brings people to Blessington. Blessington's rural characteristics, and proximity to Dublin means there is a potentially large target market for locally-produced goods.

Existing retailers in Blessington could also follow the lead of nearby Naas, where a gift card scheme was launched. The Naas gift card can be used across all involved retailers and businesses, keeping profits local. Something similar could be an option in Blessington.

Finally, the Greenway has received several mentions, for good reason. Its estimated number of visitors, which extend beyond 300,000, could be a significant boost to the local economy, however, the local economy needs to be in a position to exploit it. Presently, there are no hotels in Blessington which means that people are less likely to stay overnight. If Blessington wants to become an active tourism destination, it should have the facilities to cater to this cohort of tourists. 'Experiential' tourism is growing, with people looking to hike, cycle and swim, these visitors are also interested in accommodation that provides something different to the norm. Therefore, potential exists for 'glamping' or similar accommodation in Blessington, tapping into this market.

Figure 70 Farmer's Markets create a sense of occasion in the heart of towns and showcase the best of local produce



Action	Partners	Timeframe
1 Develop an “incubated spending scheme” where Blessington’s retailers agree to accept a ‘Blessington Voucher’. This could help to retain spending within Blessington, instead of seeing consumers shop elsewhere	Retailers, Blessington Town Team, Wicklow CoCo	Short Term
2 Consider the creation of a Business Improvement District (BID) for the town centre where all businesses make a contribution towards the upkeep of the public realm	Retailers, Wicklow CoCo, Blessington Town Team	Short Term
3 Local Food and Craft –Rural locations are synonymous with agriculture and as a Market town, Blessington has a long history of trade in local produce. This tradition should be brought back, with regular farmer’s markets held in the town centre, with local food and produce sold. This would help to identify Blessington as a ‘destination’ and also benefit the local economy.	Retailers, Wicklow CoCo, Failte Ireland, Blessington Forum	Medium Term
4 Independent Retail - Encourage and attract Independent retail and small shops. Blessington could proactively identify and engage independent stores, services and operators who would add to the profile and image of street retailing & services and have a positive impact on the overall offer.	Enterprise Ireland, Wicklow CoCo, Retailers, Blessington Town Team	Medium Term
5 Accommodation - Support and actively seek new accommodation provision (including holidays homes and ‘glamping’) close to the village centre	Failte Ireland, Wicklow CoCo, Blessington Greenway	Medium Term
6 Provide free WiFi throughout the town centre to attract and retain young people and visitors	Wicklow CoCo, Service Providers, Blessington Town Team, Blessington Forum	Short Term
7 Temporary Use – Support the reuse, either temporarily or long-term, of vacant premises allowing local artists or entrepreneurs a space to work. This could also include ‘pop-up shop’ initiatives	Wicklow CoCo, Property Owners	Medium Term

CHAPTER SEVEN

NEXT STEPS

This report is the culmination of work undertaken for Phase 2 of the Blessington Health Check. It has built upon the extensive efforts made during Phase 1 and included many of the recommendations from that report. The primary aim of this phase has been to engage with the local community and understand their thoughts and opinions on how Blessington could be improved.

The recommendations outlined in the report are suggestions informed by professional experience, best-practice examples and by engagement with key stakeholders. It is our hope that they can inspire more people to become actively involved in the attempts already underway to rejuvenate and improve conditions in Blessington.

Blessington possesses key strengths and enviable assets that many towns throughout Ireland could only wish for. Therefore, it is in an excellent position from which it can continue to grow and develop. Blessington's abundant natural assets combined with active community groups and a growing population mean it has all of the requirements needed to become a vibrant and successful town, one recognised as such nationally. This Health Check simply seeks to offer further impetus to achieve such a position.

It is now up to the existing community groups, Local Council and individual residents of Blessington to advance the recommendations of the report, along with other initiatives already underway. This health check is primarily a snapshot of a moment in time, assessing the current conditions in Blessington and offering some suggestions for the future. It is recommended that in approximately 3 years from now the Health Check is returned to and a progress report is made to determine the levels of positive change that have occurred.

A town is never complete and it never stops changing. The challenge is to ensure change is a positive process to make our places better than ever. Our choice is 'business as usual' or 'best in class'. Which will it be?

APPENDIX 1 – GRANTS AND FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Theme	Scheme	Purpose	Range of Funding
Community Development	Tidy Towns Grant and awards	Support Tidy Towns groups to participate in National competition.	€500 to €6,000
	Community Enhancement Programme	Funding for community and voluntary groups and not-for-profit organisations for small scale capital projects that will enhance community facilities for individuals and communities that are impacted by disadvantage.	€1,000 to €20,000
	Community Awards Scheme	The purpose of the Wicklow County Councils Community Award Scheme is to assist local community and voluntary groups that would benefit from small scale or once-off funding to support the groups' activities.	€2,000
	Community Pride Scheme	Large projects that make a significant impact and difference to the lives of the people in their community.	€10,000
	Men's and Women's Sheds fund	Under this part of the Community Enhancement Programme, grants will be provided to Sheds towards small scale capital costs.	Not Stated
	Estate Development Scheme	Grants for Resident's Associations engaged in the positive improvements of their estates and neighbourhoods.	Not Stated
	Healthy Ireland	To support innovative, cross-sectoral, evidence-based projects and initiatives that support the implementation of key national policies in areas such as obesity, smoking, alcohol, physical activity and sexual health	Project dependant
Enterprise	Priming Grants	For start-up businesses trading less than 18 months	Up to €80,000
	Business Expansion Grants	For businesses trading more than 18 months	Up to €80,000
	Feasibility Study Grants	Aim is to help with costs researching your proposed business idea to see if it is viable.	Up to €15,000
	Trading Online Vouchers	For businesses that have a limited online trading presence	Up to €2,500
Tourism & Recreation	Outdoor Rural Recreation Scheme	The Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme is part of the Government's Action Plan for Rural Development and will provide funding for the development of new outdoor recreational infrastructure or the necessary maintenance, enhancement or promotion of existing outdoor recreational infrastructure in Ireland.	Applications up to €12 million
	New Ideas in Ancient Spaces Grant Scheme	Faillte Ireland have launched the New ideas in Ancient Spaces Capital Grants Scheme to encourage the development of compelling	Not Stated

		visitor experiences throughout the Ireland's Ancient East region. This is intended to be the first phase of funding to ensure that the Ireland's Ancient East brand delivers on its promise to visitors.	
	Platforms for Growth Investment Programme	Fáilte Ireland's major new capital investment programme worth €150 million is called Platforms for Growth, and will run from 2019 to 2022. Major new visitor attractions of scale will be developed and existing attractions greatly enhanced under the programme which falls under the Government's Project Ireland 2040 strategy.	Not Stated
	Festivals Innovation Programme	Fáilte Ireland has identified that an opportunity exists for festivals and events to play a more significant role in driving Ireland's tourism performance. This programme has been designed to identify proposals for ambitious and unique festivals and events which will stand out internationally.	Not Stated
	Festivals Investment Scheme	The festival investment scheme is open to multi-disciplinary festivals and single artform festivals taking place in 2020.	Up to €35,000

Culture, Arts & Heritage	Creative Ireland	The grant scheme seeks to find exceptional applications and support relevant activities, projects and events that offer opportunities for enhanced community engagement with creativity and cultural heritage in Wicklow.	€1,000 to €5,000
	Historic Towns Initiative	The Historic Towns Initiative 2020 aims to provide support to historic towns engaged in a programme of heritage-led regeneration.	Total fund of €1,000,000
	Artist in the Community Scheme	Twice yearly, the Arts Council offers grants to enable artists and communities of place/or interest to work together on projects. The scheme is managed by Create, the national development agency for collaborative arts.	Up to €10,000
	Invitation to Collaboration Scheme	An Invitation to Collaboration Scheme supports initiatives in the field of local-authority-led arts development. The emphasis is placed on supporting partnerships that focus on developing projects, resources or services that are ambitious and are testing new ground.	Up to €25,000
	Arts Centre Funding	The purpose of Arts Centre Funding is to invest in and support the infrastructure of arts centres required to sustain and develop the arts in Ireland.	Not Stated

	Local Partnership Scheme	Scheme to encourage new, local authority-led partnerships to develop innovative collaborative arts projects in the area of Cultural Diversity and the Arts.	Up to €20,000
Environment	Local Agenda 21	Projects should focus on environmental awareness and actions that complement national environmental policies such as those on waste, biodiversity, water conservation and climate change.	Not Stated
	Native Woodland Establishment	The Native Woodland Establishment Scheme (NWS Est.) supports the establishment of new native woodlands on 'green field' sites. Its focus is on native species, minimal site disturbance and long-term 'close-to-nature' management.	Range per hectare
	Native Woodland Conservation	Supports the protection and enhancement of existing native woodlands and where appropriate, the conversion of conifers forests to native woodlands. The scheme includes a conservation grant for all work carried out and also premiums for up to 7 years.	Range of funding
Built Environment	Vacant Housing Repair and Leasing Scheme	The Vacant Housing Repair and Leasing Initiative aims to make the most of existing housing stock for social housing.	Maximum cost allowed of €40,000
	Built Heritage Investment Scheme	For the repair and conservation of structures that are protected under the Planning and Development Acts. This Scheme aims to support a significant number of labour-intensive, small-scale conservation projects across the country and to support the employment of skilled and experienced conservation professionals, craftspeople and tradespersons in the repair of the historic built environment.	Maximum of €2.5 million
	Historic Structure Fund	The Historic Structures Fund 2020 (HSF) is for conservation works to heritage structures, in both private and public ownership. The primary focus of the Historic Structures Fund is on conservation and enhancement of historic structures and buildings for the benefit of communities and the public.	Maximum of €1.8 million
	Local Improvement Scheme	Repair and upgrade of non-public roads, often leading to houses and important community amenities such as graveyards, beaches, piers, mountains, etc. or other non-public roads that provide access to parcels of land, or provide access for harvesting	Not Stated

		purposes (including turf or seaweed) for two or more persons.	
	Town and Village Renewal Scheme	The scheme is one of a series of national and local support measures designed to rejuvenate rural towns and villages throughout Ireland. It is funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development and managed by local authorities.	80% of costs
	Rural Regeneration and Development Fund	The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund is a commitment of €1 billion by government to be invested in rural Ireland over the period 2019 to 2027. The purpose of the fund is to support job creation in rural areas, address depopulation of rural communities and support improvements in our towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000, and outlying areas. Initial funding of €315 million has been allocated to the fund on a phased basis over the period 2019 to 2022.	Range

APPENDIX 2 – Survey Questionnaires

Shopper Survey

1. What is your gender?

Male

Female

Other

2. What age range are you? [Select one]

Under 15

25 - 34

45 - 54

65 - 74

15 - 24

35 - 44

55 - 64

Over 75

3. How far from the town centre do you live? [Select one]

I live in the town

1 – 3km

10 – 16km

25km +

Under 1km

4 – 9km

17 – 25km

4. What is your main reason for visiting Blessington today? [Select one]

Bookmakers

Grocery shop

Walking/Passing through

Barber/Beautician/Hair

Professional services

Window shopping

Café/restaurant

Pub/Bar

Work

Chemist

Other shopping

Visit friend/family

Civic (pension etc.)

Attending event

School

Doctor/GP

Tourism

Other [Name] _____

5. Are there any other reasons you visit the town? [Multiple choice]

Bookmakers

Grocery shop

Walking/Passing through

Barber/Beautician/Hair

Professional services

Window shopping

Café/restaurant

Pub/Bar

Work

Chemist

Other shopping

Visit friend/family

Civic (pension etc.)

Attending event

School

Doctor/GP

Tourism

Other [Name] _____

6. How often would you visit Blessington? [Select one]

Daily

Once a week

Once a month

2/3 times a week

2/3 times a month

Less often

7. What mode of travel do you use to travel to town most often? [Select one]

Bus

Cycle

Taxi

Car

Motorbike

Walking

8. If driving, where did you park today? [Select one]

On-street

Public carpark

Residential area

Store carpark

Other [Name] _____

9. Name the **one** thing you **like** most about Blessington.

10. Name the **one** thing you **dislike** most about Blessington.

11. In terms of retail/shopping, what are the main reasons you shop here? [Multiple choice]

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I don't shop here | <input type="checkbox"/> Ease of parking | <input type="checkbox"/> Large range of shops |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Close to work/school | <input type="checkbox"/> Good value prices | <input type="checkbox"/> Pleasant environment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Customer service | <input type="checkbox"/> Good variety of shops | <input type="checkbox"/> Public transport links |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Close to other amenities | <input type="checkbox"/> Habit | <input type="checkbox"/> Support local business |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Easy to get to | | |

Other [Name] _____

12. What type of business/store did you most recently visit in the town? [Select one]

- | | | | |
|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cafe | <input type="checkbox"/> Dry Cleaners | <input type="checkbox"/> Newsagent | <input type="checkbox"/> Pub |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chemist | <input type="checkbox"/> Hardware | <input type="checkbox"/> Petrol Station | <input type="checkbox"/> Restaurant |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clothes store | <input type="checkbox"/> Florist | <input type="checkbox"/> Post Office | <input type="checkbox"/> Supermarket |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Beautician/Hair | | | <input type="checkbox"/> Takeaway |

Other [Name] _____

13. What type of business/store would you like to see in Blessington?

14. How often do you shop online?

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daily | <input type="checkbox"/> Once a week | <input type="checkbox"/> Once a month |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2/3 times a week | <input type="checkbox"/> 2/3 times a month | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |

15. What **3 words** would you use to best describe Blessington?

1) _____ 2) _____ 3) _____

16. What other town or area do you visit regularly, and why (Choose 1 only)?

Location: _____ Reason: _____

17. Rate the following aspects of Blessington's retail environment on a scale of 1 (Very Bad) to 5 (Very Good):

Pedestrian footfall	1	2	3	4	5
Provision of car parking	1	2	3	4	5
Traffic congestion	1	2	3	4	5
Attractiveness of the town	1	2	3	4	5
Cleanliness of the town	1	2	3	4	5
Public transport provision	1	2	3	4	5
Bicycle parking facilities	1	2	3	4	5
Quality of streetscape and public areas	1	2	3	4	5
Range and quality of cafes/restaurants	1	2	3	4	5
Range and quality of grocery stores	1	2	3	4	5
Range and quality of other retail	1	2	3	4	5
Vibrancy of the town centre during the day	1	2	3	4	5
Vibrancy of the town centre at night	1	2	3	4	5
Blessington as a 'place to do business'	1	2	3	4	5

Business Survey

1. What is the nature of your business? [Select one]

Convenience retail (Newsagents, etc.)		Health services (GP, Medical, etc.)	
Specialist retail		Leisure (Gym, fitness, etc.)	
Pub/Bar		Civic/Administration	
Cultural/Community		Finance	
Professional services (Solicitor, etc.)		Bookmakers	
Voluntary/Charity		Barber/Hairdresser/Beautician	
IT/Technology		Restaurant/Cafe	

Other (please specify): _____

2. Where is your business located? [Select one]

Town Centre		Retail/Business Park	
Edge of Town Centre		Outside of the Town	

3. How long has your business had a presence in Blessington? [Select one]

Under a year		4 – 10 years		Over 20 years	
1 – 3 years		11 – 20 years			

4. What was the main reason for establishing a presence in Blessington? [Select one]

Hometown		Identified a need/niche in area	
Access to target market		Access to good transport links	
Affordable rents		Lack of competition	
Historical links		Affordable property	

Other (please specify): _____

5. Which of the following best describes your business? [Select one]

Part of a national/international chain	
Independent business with multiple outlets	
Independent, stand-alone business	
Start-up	

6. How many staff do you directly employ?

Please specify: _____

7. How would you say that your business is currently performing? [Select one]

Very well		Well		Okay	
Poorly		Very poorly		Prefer not to answer	

8. What are your normal hours of operation?

Monday		Friday	
Tuesday		Saturday	
Wednesday		Sunday	
Thursday			

9. Would you consider alternative/additional opening hours (Late evenings, Sundays), if there was a demand for such?

Yes		No		Maybe	
-----	--	----	--	-------	--

10. Do you and/or your employees have access to private, off-street car parking?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

11. Would the prioritisation of pedestrians in the town centre, through traffic-calming and other similar measures, be something your business would welcome?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

Other (please specify): _____

12. Does your business have a website or/and online presence?

Yes		No		In the process	
-----	--	----	--	----------------	--

13. Which of the following, if any, do you feel are a threat to your business in the medium term? [Multiple Choice]

Cost of overheads		Town centre inaccessible to customers	
Premises size/suitability		Cost of employing staff	
Competition from other businesses		Loss of business to online retailers	
Lack of customers		No threats to business	
Town centre unattractive to customers			

Other (please specify): _____

14. Describe Blessington as a place to do business in 3 words. [Open]

15. How could Blessington be improved as a place to do business? [Open]

16. Is there a retailer/business type, currently absent from Blessington, that you feel would contribute towards the economic vitality of both the town and your business, if established in the area? [Open]

Rate the following aspects of Blessington's retail environment on a scale of 1 to 5:

	Very Bad					Very Good
Pedestrian footfall	1	2	3	4	5	
Provision of car parking	1	2	3	4	5	
Traffic congestion	1	2	3	4	5	
Attractiveness of the town	1	2	3	4	5	
Cleanliness of the town	1	2	3	4	5	
Public transport provision	1	2	3	4	5	
Bicycle parking facilities	1	2	3	4	5	
Quality of streetscape and public areas (parks, square, etc)	1	2	3	4	5	
Range and quality of cafes/restaurants	1	2	3	4	5	
Range and quality of grocery stores	1	2	3	4	5	
Range and quality of other retail (clothing, footwear, misc.)	1	2	3	4	5	
Vibrancy of the town centre during the day	1	2	3	4	5	
Vibrancy of the town centre at night	1	2	3	4	5	
Blessington as a 'place to do business'	1	2	3	4	5	

Appendix 3 – Review of Relevant Policies, Strategies and Frameworks

Statutory Plans

At a national level the **National Planning Framework (NPF)** is Ireland’s main strategic planning document that aims to steer the direction of the country’s future growth and development. The NPF informs all other planning and economic development documents that are prepared at regional and county levels. Documents such as County Development Plans and Regional Assembly strategies must be cognisant of the main aims the NPF provides. As a high-level strategic document there is little direct guidance on local issues, however it is still worth noting some of the core principles of the NPF which should be considered in the context of the future growth of Blessington.



Figure 71 National Strategic Outcomes (Source NPF)

The NPF is structured around ten core principles which it names as its ‘National Strategic Outcomes’. These outcomes, as seen in Figure 72, offer a frame to guide a particular type of growth and development, as envisaged by the Irish Government. In relation to Blessington, the following key outcomes are, it is argued, the most relevant and worthy of further discussion:

- **Compact Growth** – This is a call for a more “streamlined and coordinated approach” to the development of lands within and around our urban settlements. Sustainable growth will require effort to minimise the levels of urban sprawl that take place. This means greater emphasis on developing backlands, brownfields and other underused or vacant sites and buildings within our cities, towns and villages.
- **Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities** – Although Blessington is a short distance from Dublin, it does display many characteristics of a typical rural Irish town. It is an objective of the NPF to ensure that all rural communities are provided the opportunities to improve their economies, accessibility, broadband and environment, in order to make them an attractive place to live for future generations.

- **Sustainable Mobility** – The NPF establishes the need to transition away from the use of private vehicles powered by combustion engines to more sustainable modes of transport. The damage to our environment that has been caused by private vehicles is now quite evident, therefore the NPF places an emphasis on utilising less carbon-intensive modes where possible, but also promoting the use of active modes such as cycling and walking.
- **Enhanced Amenity and Heritage** – Investment in quality public realm of cities, towns and villages will be prioritised, which includes public spaces, parks and streets, as well as recreational infrastructure. Amenities in rural areas, such as national and forest parks, activity-based tourism and trails such as greenways, blueways and peatways are also included. Creating places that people want to be is not only important for the areas themselves, but also for the health and wellbeing of the communities.

The following table provides a list of some of the most relevant, in relation to Blessington, National Policy Objectives from the NPF.

Table 7. Selected policy objectives of the NPF

NPO 6	Regenerate and rejuvenate cities, towns and villages of all types and scale as environmental assets, that can accommodate changing roles and functions, increased residential population and employment activity and enhanced levels of amenity and design quality, in order to sustainably influence and support their surrounding area.
NPO 15	Support the sustainable development of rural areas by encouraging growth and arresting decline in areas that have experienced low population growth or decline in recent decades and by managing the growth of areas that are under strong urban influence to avoid over-development, while sustaining vibrant rural communities.
NPO 16	Target the reversal of rural decline in the core of small towns and villages through sustainable targeted measures that address vacant premises and deliver sustainable reuse and regeneration outcomes.
NPO 18a	To support the proportionate growth of and appropriately designed development in rural towns that will contribute to their regeneration and renewal, including interventions in the public realm, the provision of amenities, the acquisition of sites and the provision of services.
NPO 18b	Develop a programme for ‘new homes in small towns and villages’ with local authorities, public infrastructure agencies such as Irish Water and local communities to provide serviced sites with appropriate infrastructure to attract people to build their own homes and live in small towns and villages.
NPO 22	Facilitate tourism development and in particular a National Greenways, Blueways and Peatways Strategy, which prioritises projects on the basis of achieving maximum impact and connectivity at national and regional level.
NPO 24	Support and facilitate delivery of the National Broadband Plan as a means of developing further opportunities for enterprise, employment, education, innovation and skills development for those who live and work in rural areas.
NPO 27	Ensure the integration of safe and convenient alternatives to the car into the design of our communities, by prioritising walking and cycling accessibility to both existing and proposed developments, and integrating physical activity facilities for all ages.
NPO 28	Plan for a more diverse and socially inclusive society that targets equality of opportunity and a better quality of life for all citizens, through improved integration and greater accessibility in the delivery of sustainable communities and the provision of associated services.

NPO 53

Support the circular and bio economy including in particular through greater efficiency in land management, greater use of renewable resources and by reducing the rate of land use change from urban sprawl and new development.

Ireland has three regional assemblies that form the second layer of government in the country, between national government and local authorities. These newly formed Assemblies have recently produced **Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies** (RSES) for their respective regions, which translate the guidance and aims of the NPF to a regional level. The **Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly** (EMRA) cover the wider Dublin region, including Wicklow.

Three key principles underpin the entire strategy and should guide how it is understood:

- Healthy placemaking to promote quality of life through the creation of healthy and attractive places;
- Climate action efforts that seek to enhance climate resilience and accelerate transition to a low carbon society;
- Economic opportunity for the region, where the right conditions for sustainable economic growth and quality jobs are met, ensuring a good living standard for all.

The RSES also has 16 Regional Strategic Outcomes (RSO) which are closely aligned with the NPF. The three key principles also frame the RSOs.

A series of policy objectives are outlined for each chapter, which seek to provide an indication of exactly how the EMRA intend on delivering upon their outcomes. A table below provides some of the most relevant in relation to Blessington and this Health Check.

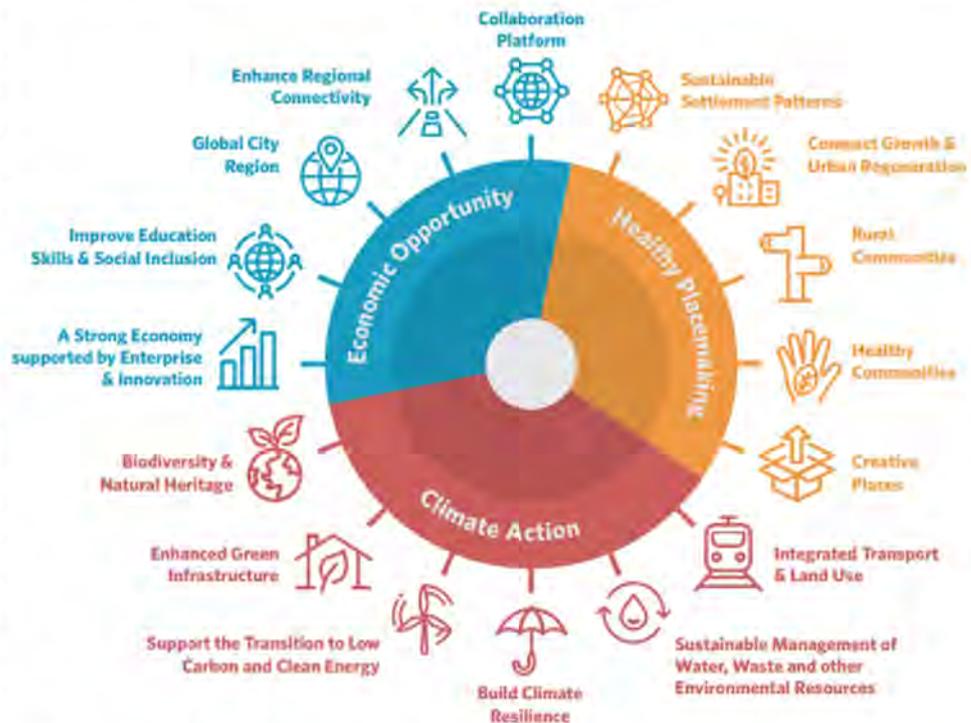


Figure 72 Regional Strategic Outcomes (EMRA RSES)

RPO 4.80

Local authorities shall manage urban generated growth in Rural Areas Under Strong Urban Influence (i.e. the commuter catchment of Dublin, large towns and centres of employment) and Stronger Rural Areas by ensuring that in these areas the provision of single houses in the open countryside is based on the core consideration of demonstrable economic or social need to live in a rural area, and compliance with statutory guidelines and plans, having regard to the viability of smaller towns and rural settlements.

RPO 6.4	Local authorities shall identify measures in LECPs for regeneration in small towns and villages cores.
RPO 6.6	Support local authorities to explore mechanisms for the emergence of a diversified sectoral mix in rural areas. This includes the identification of appropriate locations to drive regeneration of these rural towns and villages for example by the provision of serviced sites for housing and co-working/incubator space near Institutes of Technology to facilitate technological spillovers through greater connections and linkages.
RPO 6.7	Support local authorities to develop sustainable and economically efficient rural economies through initiatives to enhance sectors such as agricultural and food, forestry, fishing and aquaculture, energy and extractive industries, the bioeconomy, tourism, and diversification into alternative on-farm and off-farm activities, while at the same time noting the importance of maintaining and protecting the natural landscape and built heritage.
RPO 6.8	To support the sustainable development of tourism in the Region in line with the strategic objectives of both Ireland's Ancient East and Ireland's Hidden Heartlands experience brand propositions.
RPO 6.12	Local authorities shall include objectives in development plans and local area plans supporting emphasis on placemaking for town centres, for example through inclusion of a Placemaking Strategy for towns and implementation of Town Centre Renewal Plans.
RPO 6.13	Local authorities shall support the preparation of Design Guidelines to provide for improvements in the appearance of streetscapes and for revitalising vacant spaces for example with cost effective, temporary uses that build on the longer-term vision for space.
RPO 6.14	EMRA will support the use of targeted financial incentives to re-establish the dominant role of town centres provided for in planning policy to encourage a greater take up of town centre development opportunities for retail, residential, commercial, and leisure uses.
RPO 6.17	Support the maintenance of, and enhanced access to state and semi-state lands such as National Parks, Forest Parks, Waterways, etc., together with Monuments and Historic Properties, for recreation and tourism purposes. Access should be planned and managed in a sustainable manner that protects environmental sensitivities, ecological corridors, and the ability of local infrastructure to support increased tourism.
RPO 6.21	EMRA will work with local authorities and Fáilte Ireland to identify destination towns within the Region for the prioritisation of investment and supports to drive tourism growth in the Region, to spread the benefit of tourism throughout the Region and to encourage the increase of tourism product development.
RPO 7.42	Local authorities shall include proposals in statutory land use plans to facilitate and encourage an increase in electric vehicle use, including measures for more recharging facilities and prioritisation of parking for EVs in central locations.
RPO 8.13	Support the Local Link Rural Transport Programme throughout rural areas of the Region.
RPO 9.8	To work with local authorities, government departments and relevant agencies to promote increased urban densities in all existing settlements and the use, where appropriate, of Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) and other incentives including development contributions to encourage urban regeneration of brownfield lands over

	the development of greenfield sites and to promote more active land management and co-ordinated provision of enabling infrastructure particularly on publicly owned lands
RPO 9.10	In planning for the creation of healthy and attractive places, there is a need to provide alternatives to the car and to prioritise and promote cycling and walking in the design of streets and public spaces. Local authorities shall have regard to the Guiding Principles for 'Healthy Placemaking' and 'Integration of Land Use and Transport' as set out in the RSES and to national policy as set out in 'Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas' and the 'Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets (DMURS)'
RPO 9.11	Local authorities shall support the preparation of Design Guidelines to provide for improvements in the appearance of streetscapes and for revitalising spaces for example with cost effective, temporary uses that build on the longer-term vision for space.
RPO 9.14	Local authorities shall seek to support the planned provision of easily accessible social, community, cultural and recreational facilities and ensure that all communities have access to a range of facilities that meet the needs of the communities they serve.
RPO 9.27	EMRA will support local authorities to work with local communities to promote historic towns in the Region in the practice of heritage led regeneration, to promote the sensitive and adaptive reuse of historic building stock and industrial structures where appropriate, and to strengthen their capability to draw down European and national funding.

In the latest version of the RSES there is reference made to a proposed *"appraisal planning and design of LUAS network expansion to Bray, Finglas, Lucan, Poolbeg, Hazelhatch, Booterstown and Blessington"*. If the delivery of a LUAS to Blessington was realised that would be a significant boost to the town and surrounding areas. However, a Ministerial Direction from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government received subsequent to the adoption of the RSES has called for the removal of Hazelhatch, Booterstown and Blessington, as this runs contrary to national strategy.

Wicklow's most recent **County Development Plan (CDP)** covers the period 2016 to 2022. It is the primary planning document that guides the growth and development of County Wicklow; therefore it is of significant relevance to Blessington. The CDP establishes strategies for the County such as settlement hierarchies, housing and retail hierarchies, among other things. While some of the terminology used throughout is outdated, as it references the now redundant National Spatial Strategy and Regional strategies, it still offers strict guidance on future growth.

Blessington is designated to the 'level 4' category on the CDP's settlement hierarchy, a level it shares with Newtownmountkennedy. Arklow and Greystones are designated as level 3 settlements, with Wicklow/Rathnew on level 2 and Bray as the only level 1 settlement in the County. Further descriptive definitions of the towns are provided, with Blessington deemed to be a 'Hinterland Area Moderate Growth Town'. The settlement hierarchy is important as it sets out the targeted population growth envisaged by the Council, in accordance with national level policy and also informs the County's housing strategy. The CDP provides a housing growth distribution table up to the year 2028. Blessington's targeted population for 2028 is set at 7,500, which is a significant increase on the stated 2011 figure. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the targeted housing stock also sees a

substantial increase. The population growth target and housing stock target up to 2028 for Blessington are as follows:

	2011	2022	2025	2028
Population Targets	4,780	6,540	7,020	7,500
Target Housing Stock	1,865	2,519	-	3,168

Furthermore, an ‘economic development hierarchy’ is also set out in the CDP, although it does state that economic development is covered in greater detail in various Local Economic and Community Plans that exist for areas within the county. Nonetheless, as a ‘moderate growth town’ Blessington is assigned the economic function as an “attractor for substantial investment” where its investment targets will involve FDI and what is termed ‘people and product intensive industries’. The economic development hierarchy is accompanied by employment growth targets which are set for each settlement. The employment targets establish the existing labour forces, the existing number of jobs and provide the ratio of jobs to labour force. A target labour force, target jobs ratio and number of jobs required by 2028 are then outlined, as per below.

2011			2028			
Labour Force	Existing Jobs	Job Ratio	Target Labour Force	Target Jobs Ratio	Required Jobs	Growth
2,299	984	43%	3,125	65%	2,031	1,047

Regarding retail, Blessington is considered a level 3 centre that should fulfil its role as ‘serving a wide district’. The CDP states that at present the town is well-served by convenience retail through the locating of stores such as Super Valu, Dunnes and Aldi in the town. However, it notes that comparison retail is more limited, provided by a small number of independent shops on Main Street and Dunnes. Indicative future allocations for retail floorspace are provided, with 2,000 m² for convenience and 4,000 m² for comparison.

Chapter 8 discusses ‘community development’ which refers to a mixture of measures and actions that aim to improve local communities. The CDP plays a supporting role to the LECP in this respect, where it will:

- Facilitate the delivery of community infrastructure through reserving land for community infrastructure, manage the expansion of residential development in line with infrastructure, and require the delivery of community infrastructure as part of development proposals
- Facilitate improved physical access to community infrastructure and services through “coordinating easily accessible public transport, cycling or walking, ensuring all new facilities are universally accessible and enhancing community infrastructure
- Facilitate the maintenance, restoration and upgrading of cultural and natural heritage of communities, environmental upgrading and general actions to enhance the environmental, amenity and physical attributes of communities.

A hierarchical model is presented which outlines the community infrastructure that is deemed necessary based upon town size. The table below provides an overview of what should be available at level 2 and level 3 settlements. It is worth considering that Blessington has a target population of over 7,000 for the near future, therefore community infrastructure delivery should match this population ambition.

Table 8 Community infrastructure required for settlement level

Level 2 Settlement Population 7,000 to 15,000	Level 3 Settlement Population 2,000 to 7,000
Multi-purpose Community Resource Centre	Community/Parish Hall
Sport & Recreation Centre	Multi-purpose Community Space/Meeting Rooms
Swimming Pool/Leisure Centre	Local /Town Park (s) and Open Spaces/Nature Areas
Youth Resource Centre	Outdoor Multi-Use Games Area – Synthetic/ Hardcourt
Local Multi-Purpose Community Space/Meeting Rooms	Playgrounds
Outdoor Water Sports Facilities (where applicable)	Playing Pitches
Neighbourhood and Local Parks	Library
Outdoor Multi-Use Games Areas – Synthetic/ Hardcourt	
Playground(s)	
Playing Pitches	
Alternative/Minority Sports Facilities	
Open Space/Urban Woodlands/Nature Areas	
Library	

Blessington Town Centre is an architectural conservation area (ACA) which means it is afforded a level of protection that other town centres may not possess. Indeed, it is a core heritage strategy of the CDP to “ensure the protection of the architectural heritage of Wicklow through the identification of Protected Structures, the designation of Architectural Conservation Areas, the safeguarding of designed landscapes and historic gardens, and the recognition of structures and elements that contribute positively to the vernacular and industrial heritage of the County”. Blessington’s designation as an ACA means that efforts must be made to preserve the character of the townscape, which takes into account the building lines and heights. Any future development in Blessington should seek to retain its special characteristics.

The CDP also offers the following statements and descriptions of planned or intended future scenarios impacting Blessington which are noteworthy:

- The intention to realign the N81 to the west of the town is reiterated. It is stated that there is a need to “reserve free from development all lands located in the current route corridor for the N81 realignment” and that the “development of this route or the planned inner relief road, would contribute significantly to the enhancement of the overall quality of the town centre”.
- The recreational value of the Poulaphouca Reservoir and surrounding area is acknowledged when stated that “opportunity exists to capitalize on the tourism potential associated with the Blessington Greenway walk from the town of Blessington to Russborough House.
- Blessington’s location on the border between Kildare and Wicklow is noted with collaboration and consultation between both local authorities during the preparation and development of any strategies or plans cited as essential. Furthermore, it is stated that opportunities exist to “foster economic links” with the towns of Newbridge, Naas and Kilcullen, where their access to the M9 could be exploited.

The **Blessington Local Area Plan 2013-2019** is the most recent Local Area Plan (LAP) prepared for the town. LAPs are statutory documents that are prepared by Planning Authorities as a means of coordinating the future growth and development of a settlement, suburb or other area of significant interest and importance in a town or city. The Blessington LAP was prepared during the lifetime of the Wicklow CDP for 2010-2016, which means it is slightly outdated considering a more recent CDP has been adopted. However, as the LAP has not had a subsequent iteration prepared, this version still retains its importance and relevance.

A vision for Blessington is provided in the LAP which, it says, will be achieved by the following:

- Reinforcing and improving the visual appearance of the central area of the town with particular attention on the town centre area which is a designated architectural conservation area, and encouraging development that will enhance the town's vitality and vibrancy;
- Addressing the problems that arise for the town resulting from a national route passing through the centre of the town and the implications of the re-routing of the N81;
- Improving linkages between the existing main street and the new town centre development and providing further linkages between these areas and the remainder of the plan area;
- Facilitating the provision of infrastructure to meet the demand for development and future population needs in a sustainable manner;
- Promoting and ensuring the protection and suitable recreational and tourism use of natural habitats (in particular the protected habitats of the Poulaphuca Reservoir), cultural heritage, ecological resources, networks, quality landscapes and the protection and enhancement of biodiversity.

The LAP addresses a multitude of planning matters, including population targets and housing, taking its steer from the 2010 CDP. The quantum of zoned land is also discussed, with proposed residential zonings providing proposed densities for housing per hectare. Blessington town centre has the highest allocated density of 40 units per hectare, with the vast majority of other areas possessing a density of 28/ha. 'Cookehill Zone 3' is an outlier in this regard, with a density of 36 units per hectare.

A strategy for the Town Centre is developed and includes measures to enhance retail, as both are heavily interlinked. A series of goals for the commercial core of Blessington are outlined:

5. Addressing vehicular/pedestrian circulation and car parking;
6. Ensuring high quality surroundings and addressing dereliction/vacant sites;
7. Protecting the buildings, features and places of heritage value;
8. 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.

It is acknowledged that Main Street and Market Square are currently dominated by traffic, with very little space afforded to pedestrians, cycle lanes and potential outdoor seating areas. On-street parking and the traffic generated from what is a national road, means this environment is not suitable for either free-flowing vehicular movement, or indeed pedestrians. Primary access to the new town development occurs via the Market Square, which significantly reduces the attractiveness of this area. However, until such a time as the inner relief road is completed, it is stated that significant alterations to traffic flow, parking, cycle lanes and the pedestrian environment will be challenging. The following points are mentioned in the LAP, in relation to the above, although not all receive 'objective' status:

- Complete the inner relief road to remove through traffic and heavy vehicles

- Widen footpaths and provide cycle lanes alongside on both sides of Main Street between Dempsey's Lane and the Catholic Church, which will also result in the narrowing of the carriageway
- Provide spaces for outdoor seating and eating on the street to improve vibrancy
- Enhance the pedestrian linkages between the Main Street and new town development to consolidate them as a single retail area
- Develop a parking management strategy that reduces the number of cars parked for full days on Main Street (often commuters who then travel to Dublin via bus)
- Encourage and deliver upon the reuse and redevelopment of infill and brownfield sites in the town centre.

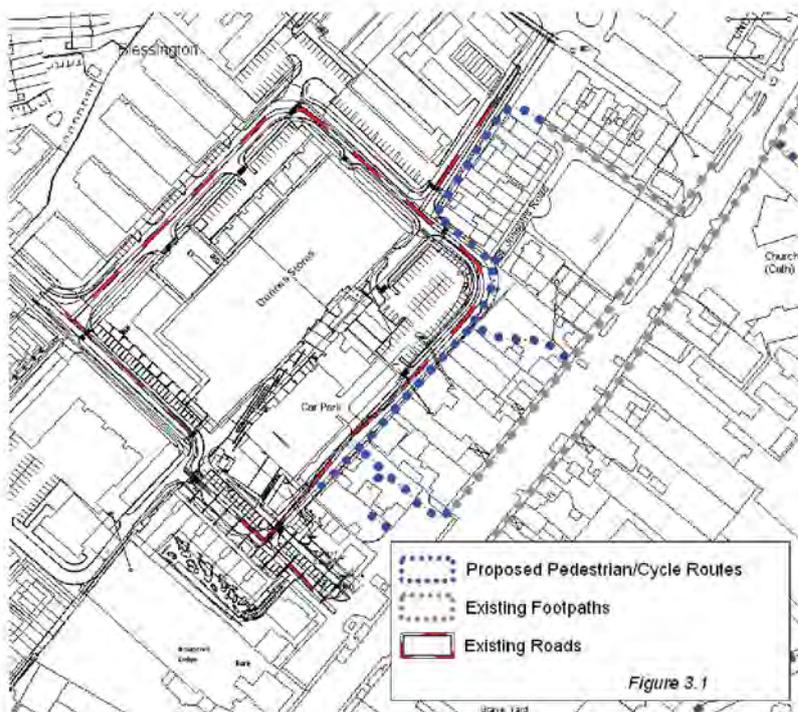


Figure 73 Proposed Public Realm Improvements (Blessington LAP)

There are four opportunity sites identified in the LAP which were selected to assist in achieving the aims of the town centre and retail strategy. These sites offer excellent opportunities to improve the environmental conditions of the town centre.

Opportunity site 1 is the Main Street link site where there exists the potential to create a new pedestrian and cycle link between Main Street and the new development.



Figure 74 Opportunity Site 1



Figure 75 Opportunity Site 2

The second site (OP2) is the Market Square/Old Forge site where a new mixed-use redevelopment could take place which also facilitates the delivery of a new pedestrian street directly linking the new development with the Square.

OP3 is on lands to the south of the town centre, where the Naas Road meets the N81. It is argued that these lands offer an excellent opportunity for mixed use development that also incorporates a small park or civic space.



Figure 76 Opportunity Site 3

The fourth site (OP4) is the open space that adjoins the St Josephs Road housing estate. An improved public park with detailed design for both hard and soft landscaping could be delivered and offer the surrounding community and excellent amenity, also open to others.



Figure 77 Opportunity Site 4

The zoning map (Fig 81) also highlights several key locations and priority areas, known as Action Areas and locations with Specific Local Objectives. Action Area 1 will see a mixed-use residential development that contains 1.32ha for community and educational purposes, 4.51ha active open space and 4.15ha for residential. Action Area 2 at Burgage Mór is again mixed-use residential, with 3.95ha zoned active open space and a further 5.48ha for the mixed residential. Action Area 3 sees a mix of residential and employment, including 2.5ha as employment, 0.8ha community use, 3.55ha mixed residential and 3.35ha for active open spaces. Finally, Action Area 4 is located at Doran's Pit and has significant potential for development with 17ha zoned mixed residential, 0.5ha for neighbourhood centre uses, 1.5ha equipped play spaces and 10.8ha for open space (in the form of a woodland park).

In terms of formal objectives, the LAP sets out a series of objectives based upon themes or areas of interest. Table 9 provides the primary objectives that have relevance to the Health Check. This table does not include the opportunity site objects discussed previously.

Table 9 LAP Objectives

TC1	To support and facilitate activities and developments that will improve the vitality, connectivity and vibrancy of the town centre areas.
TC2	To promote the development of opportunity sites within the town centre in accordance with the specific criteria set out for each identified area as set out in subsection 3.3.3.
E2	To protect employment zoned land from inappropriate development that would undermine future economic activity or the sustainable development of such areas.
E3	To encourage the redevelopment of already developed or brownfield employment / mixed use lands for enterprise and employment creation throughout the settlement, subject to the proper planning and sustainable development of the area and compliance with all other objectives of this plan.
E4	To encourage the development of significant new employment zones at - Downshire demesne lands (part of permitted 'Cookehill' development) - Roadstone - Haylands / Mart site in accordance with the detailed requirements set out in Section 10 of this plan.
E5	To require the design and layout of employment lands located at Blessington Demesne to provide for a pedestrian walkway (linked to the proposed public park) along the southern boundary, adjoining Action Area 1.
T1	To promote and facilitate improvements to tourism and recreation infrastructure in the Blessington area.
T3	To support and facilitate in co-operation with relevant bodies, the provision of amenity routes around the Poulaphuca reservoir in an environmentally sustainable manner
CD1	To ensure sufficient lands are zoned for community needs within the plan area and to implement the objectives of the Chapter 15 'Social and Community Infrastructure' of the Wicklow County Development 2010 - 2016 as applicable to the plan area.
CD3	To facilitate opportunities for play and sport and support the implementation of the County Council 'Play' and 'Sports & Recreation' Policies and their objectives, including the collection of development levies.
CD4	The redevelopment for alternative uses of open space and recreational lands whether owned by private recreational clubs or publicly owned, will normally be resisted by the Council unless suitable alternative recreational facilities can be provided in a convenient location.
S7	To facilitate the completion of the Inner Relief Road
S9	To improve / provide new footpaths and cycleways on existing roads as funding allows and to facilitate the provision of new roads, footpaths and cycleways as detailed in chapters 3, 5 and 10 of this plan.
BD3	In the interests of the protection and enhancement of biodiversity in Blessington, it is an objective of this plan to: - Protect trees, hedgerows and wooded areas (particularly those containing indigenous species), watercourses and other features of the natural landscape - Require the planting of indigenous plant and tree species in new developments and in the restoration of former quarry lands

BD6	The Council shall seek to promote access to amenity areas of the plan for the benefit of all, on the basis of co-operation with landowners, recreational users and other relevant stakeholder groups to promote “agreed access” on public and privately owned land in the plan area on the basis of sustainability, consultation and consensus.
BD7	To protect those features that have been identified in the Architectural Conservation Area Appraisal as contributing to the town centre’s overall appearance and heritage value and to ensure that new development contributes positively to the designated Architectural Conservation Area.
BD8	To facilitate the appropriate refurbishment and renewal of architecturally significant buildings and to accommodate new uses in old buildings to ensure their continued use/preservation
BD9	To encourage the retention of original features, which are important to a building’s character such as window type, materials, detailing, chimneys, entrances and boundary walls, both within and outside the architectural conservation area.

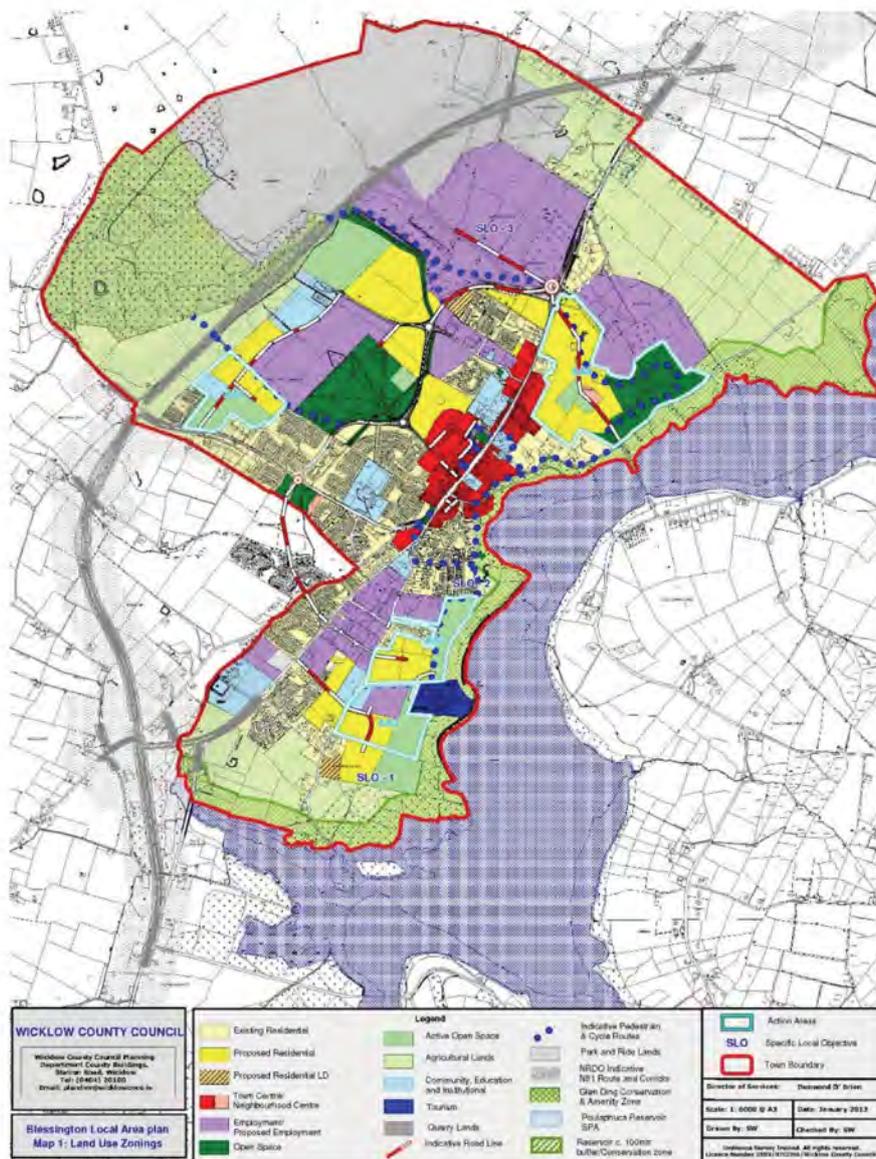


Figure 78 Land Use Zoning Map (Blessington LAP)

A Framework for Town Centre Renewal was prepared by the Retail and Town Centre Renewal Working Group to provide a platform for structured engagement between the retail sector and relevant Government Departments. In the last few decades town and village centres across Ireland, and indeed further afield, have seen retailers struggle resulting in what seems like a terminal decline. There are a multitude of reasons why town centre retailers have struggled, and quite often this is context dependent. However, two core reasons are the movement of shoppers to online providers, and the increased development of out-of-town shopping centres. The framework highlights a number of key attributes and the steps to follow to help combat against this decline and achieve a successful town centre renewal.

Key attributes of a successful town include:

- **One Vision, One Voice:** Collective and collaborative work with all stakeholders progressing towards the same aims
- **Local Steering Group:** The concept of a 'Town Team' is proposed to steer and guide
- **Local Business Champion:** A well-respected and influential business owner or community member is need to drive projects on and speak up for the town
- **Place-making Strategy:** Having a strategy to guide and help design attractive urban realm and civic spaces is vital
- **Strong Occupancy:** Dereliction and vacancy are a blight that can negatively impact an area
- **Programme of Events:** Regular events that take place in the town centre will attract visitors
- **Visual Appearance Strategy:** This involves more temporary measures that maintain an attractive appearance, particularly for sites of buildings in the process of change
- **Financial Supports:** Targeted financial incentives that keep and attract retailers and residents to town centres
- **Artisan Food and Craft Supports:** A strong collection of indigenous retailers selling local food and craft produce gives a town a unique selling point
- **Tourism Offer:** Exploit assets that would prove attractive to visitors, but also ensure there is sufficient infrastructure to support these visitors
- **Online Platform:** A town centre website that promotes local retailers, attractions and news, while offering a brand for the town is becoming increasingly important

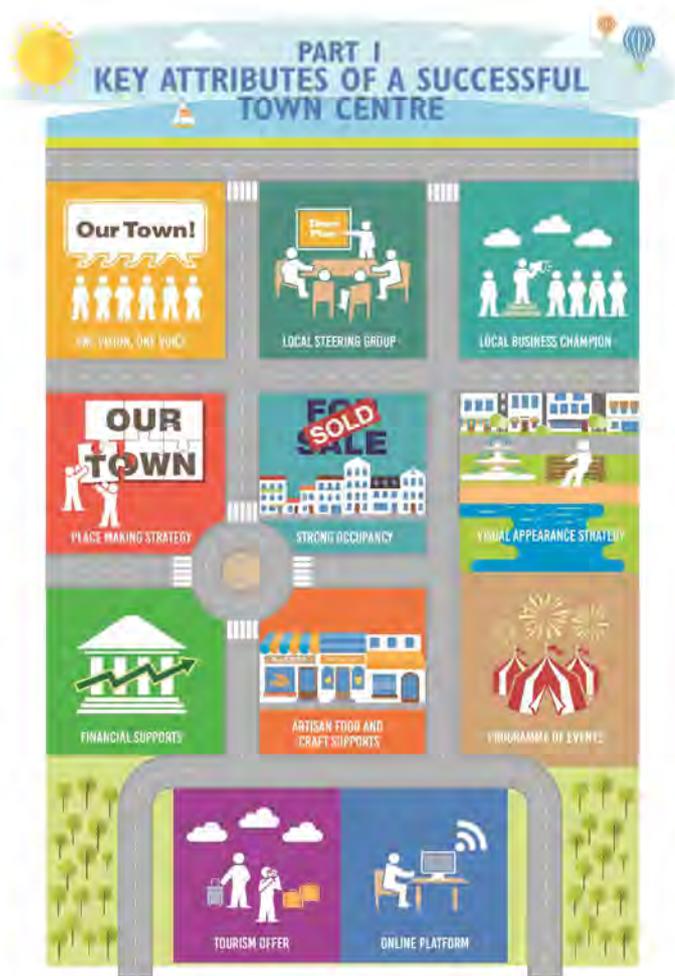


Figure 79 Attributes of a Successful Town (A Framework for Town Centre Renewal)

One of the key proposals from the Framework is for towns to undertake a health check, which is precisely what this report is doing for Blessington. It is worth noting the key indicators proposed in the framework for assessing a town during this health check.

Proposed Health Check Indicators	
Diversity of uses	Environmental Quality
Competitive offering	Public realm
Representation	Customer views and behaviour
Commercial rents	Perception of safety and crime occurrence
Accessibility	Commercial yields on non-domestic property
Proportion of vacant street level property	Pedestrian flows

In 2009 the Irish Government released the *Urban Design Manual* which was a best-practice guide to appropriate planning and design of urban locations. The guide acted as a supplementary document to the 'Guidelines for Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas', which was an official document that was to inform the creation of development plans and local area plans by Local Authorities. Together, both documents offer a useful introduction and overview to the principles of sustainable urban planning and design.

One of the core concepts central to both guides is that of 'sustainable communities', with the overarching aim being an attempt to offer a manual to create such communities. Blessington, as a relatively compact town with a growing population should aim to achieve this status of a sustainable community. The following statement provides a useful summary of how to design for a sustainable community:

"A key design aim in delivering sustainable communities is to reduce, as far as possible, the need to travel, particularly by private car, by facilitating mixed-use development and by promoting the efficient use of land and of investment in public transport. Such policies will help to sustain viable local services and employment."

Figure 81 shows the twelve criteria that are used throughout both documents as a means of assessing the design quality of new developments, neighbourhoods or local area plans. It is useful to consider each element when determining the quality of a streetscape and area, such as Blessington. In addition to the criteria for evaluation, general advice is provided for development that will take place in towns of a similar size to Blessington. This advice includes:

- Ensuring that future development in towns and villages is plan-led. This generally refers to Local Area Plans (LAPs), but could also be non-statutory documents such as Village Design Statements, or others;
- A goal of retaining and enhancing the compact nature of towns and villages should be targeted through the prioritisation of walking and cycling trips over cars for local trips
- Similarly, the use and re-use of brownfield sites and derelict, vacant or abandoned buildings should be a priority as this keeps development within the existing 'urban footprint' of the town. Backlands sites offer excellent opportunities for compact growth, while there can be cases made for greenfield sites that are contiguous to the existing urban pattern;
- When developing central sites, such as backlands, the maximisation of permeability for pedestrians and connectivity to existing roads and streets should be sought. The creation of dead-ends and cul-de-sacs are not recommended;

- Higher density developments can be considered in appropriate locations where it does not disrupt existing patterns, or there are high-quality public transport routes adjacent. Developments should reinforce the existing built form, not disrupt;
- The scale of new residential schemes should be proportional to the pattern of existing development. Smaller, phased sites that are spread across the town would be preferable to extremely large sites in one location. ‘Leap-frogging’ where development occurs away from existing urban patterns should be avoided.



Figure 80 Assessment Criteria (Urban Design Manual)

Perhaps one of the most important frameworks to consider when discussing regeneration, development and urban structures in an Irish context is the Government’s **‘Design Manual for Urban Streets’** (DMURS). The manual sets out an integrated design approach to the design and regeneration of streets in Irish cities, towns and villages. DMURS has an overarching aim to create more liveable, attractive urban locations, and attempts to achieve this through good design. In its own words; *“well designed streets can create connected physical, social and transport networks that promote real alternatives to car journeys, namely walking, cycling or public transport”*.

DMURS begins by addressing the major issue in urban design, head on. Cars dominate our urban environments and their dominance has been facilitated and enabled by the way in which we have designed our streets. Theories about road design are introduced, including the four models of road design which summarise the relationship between cars and people as follows:

1. Where traffic and people are segregated and the car is dominant.
2. Where cars and people are segregated entirely from one another.
3. Where traffic and people mix, but on an “equitable” basis, sharing space.
4. Where the car is excluded entirely (pedestrianisation and other measures).

Ireland has, until recently, tended to approach urban street design with an emphasis place upon the first two models. As a result, planners became preoccupied with traffic flows and capacity on our roads, with street design prioritising vehicular movement. Of course, this was at the expense of the pedestrian environment. This approach can be seen in most of our residential neighbourhoods, where a main distributor road facilitates free-flowing traffic and off this run an access road into a housing

estate. From here several 'dendritic' routes extend outwards into cul-de-sacs. This creates an environment that is unattractive and inefficient for walking, instead facilitating car use.



Figure 81 Typical street layout of residential neighbourhood which facilitates car use (DMURS)

A different approach, which takes the perspective of the pedestrian is suggested and detailed throughout DMURS. It initially focuses on three core principles to understand this perspective:

- **Connectivity:** Segregated design, ones that prioritise traffic flows, creates an unattractive and challenging environment for pedestrians where *“walking distances are increased, route choice is highly limited and users have to navigate a complicated street network”*, all of which discourage people from walking. Neighbourhoods and attractions can be severed from one another due to barriers created to ensure traffic flow is maintained. Pedestrians are forced to walk unnecessarily long distances and greater cohesion of communities can be impacted.



Figure 82 An example of inefficient design that restricts permeability (DMURS)

- **Comfort:** Once again, in the name of traffic flows, streets can be designed in a manner that is unappealing for pedestrians. Sometimes, barriers are created that are technically meant to

protect pedestrians, but instead create feelings of confinement, examples include guard rails that reduce walking space. Other issues such as narrow footpaths, excessive obstructions like poles and signage, and blank walls that create a sense of isolation are unhelpful.

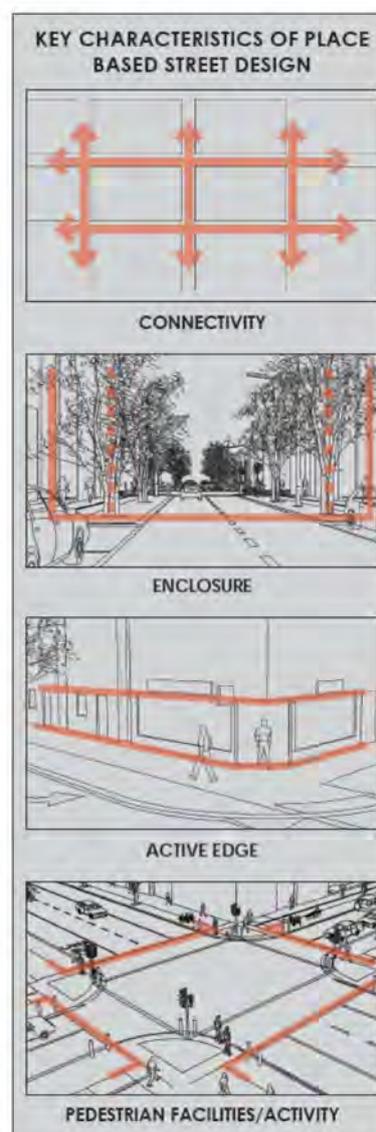
Figure 83 An example of street design where pedestrians are marginalised (DMURS)



- **Safety:** Quite often design considerations that were meant to create a safer environment do the opposite. For example, wide carriageways with no visual obstructions such as trees or shrubs, that appear clear and open were meant to improve driving safety, but instead create conditions where drivers are more inclined to speed. Additionally, pedestrians follow ‘desire lines’ (the shortest route) which means they often must cross busy roads at inappropriate locations. With few pedestrian crossings along many roads, pedestrians are more likely to cross elsewhere, thereby endangering themselves and others.

Place-based design is deemed to be the best solution. It emphasises connectivity, enclosure, active edges and pedestrian facilities.

- **Connectivity:** Vibrant and active places are also well-connected places that prioritise pedestrian movement. Providing a walkable, interconnected street network that enables ease of movement in an efficient manner for pedestrians is key.
- **Enclosure:** The planting of trees and vegetation, and the reorientation of buildings towards the street, facing onto it, creates a more intimate environment. This sense of enclosure gives pedestrians the perception of safety and reduces instances of driver speeding.
- **Active edge:** Streets with active frontages, or edges, are those where there are entrances, doors, windows and seating that face and open onto the street itself. This creates a vibrancy that itself will generate further pedestrian flow.



- Pedestrian facilities: Wide footpaths, unobstructed routes, safe and well-designed crossings all contribute towards an improved pedestrian environment that encourages people to walk and spend more time in the area.

Other Relevant Policies, Proposals and Guides

A recent example of a guidance document for the appropriate and sustainable development of urban environments is the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland's (RIAI) document '**Creating Places for People – The RIAI Town and Village Toolkit**'. This report was released in May 2019 and it was developed by the RIAI as a response to repeated requests to provide expert advice on how to assess the quality of urban centres.

Health, wellbeing and happiness are the foremost components of good design and it is suggested that this means "*designing places for people*". In other words, create places that prioritise people over vehicles or even buildings, and create more welcoming environments for the most vulnerable, this plays into the concept of universal accessibility. The report argues that "*removing or slowing through-traffic and providing more attractive modal options (walking, cycling, public transport) can allow public spaces, streets and squares to be improved as social spaces with a range of activities that can be enjoyed by everyone, increasing both local community participation and appealing to visitors*". Creating an inclusive, welcoming and safe environment that people will want to visit and spend time in can be achieved if the following considerations are made:

- Plan compact towns with facilities clustered
- Identify convenient routes and streets for people to walk along
- Utilise public places for a variety of means
- Improve the quality of the public places, making them attractive and comfortable
- Introduce trees and planting to bring nature back to areas

The second theme builds upon the previously introduced concept of accessibility. The size of Irish towns makes them "*ideally suited to encourage active movement as part of everyday life*" due to their compact size. This means that there are a range of options available that can improve on the second theme; connectivity, accessibility and movement. Designing our streets so that walking and cycling are encouraged, and indeed prioritised, is an obvious option. For longer journeys, an integrated public transport network, or a community bus service for more rural locations should be considered. This is one example of several recommended considerations:

- Develop a multi-modal movement strategy which prioritises active travel
- Identify routes that connect main uses and activities which would enable pedestrian movement. Are these routes attractive, can they be improved, are there short cuts?
- Traffic management that minimises traffic circulation. Provide visitor parking at main arrival points that have good pedestrian access.
- Prevent land-use planning schemes that encourage vehicular movement over active travel
- Check all routes and streets for things such as visual and physical clutter, such as sign posts and overhead wiring. Can these be removed?

The third theme that is the focus of the report relates to viability and variety. Sustainable, healthy towns are those that are vibrant and have strong and adaptable economies. Mixed uses and variety in retail and commercial activity can help with this. It is equally important, however, to ensure that a town and its hinterland have the capacity, or critical mass, to support an increased range of services and economic activity. By creating compact towns where development is contained within the urban

footprint, the required critical mass for services and retailers can be achieved more easily, while active travel can also occur. Some of the considerations for this theme include:

- Undertake a capacity study to understand deficiencies or oversupply
- Existing physical assets should be surveyed to determine their state as well as potential use
- What are the land use patterns in the town and how can existing, but poorly managed plots be better integrated?
- Plan for change, so that evolution can occur, and buildings are flexible and adaptive for potential future uses
- Work with the community to create events and activities that will attract people

Many of the themes overlap, and this is again the case with the theme of environmental sustainability, which also promotes the reuse of brownfield sites. The consolidation of the existing built environment, as opposed to sprawl and development on greenfield sites, is central to this theme as it is others. Protecting and enhancing biodiversity and natural assets is vital, while enabling active transport and healthy choices should be integral to development too. Other considerations include:

- Exploit opportunities for renewable energy use and capture
- Undertake sustainable building practices
- Understand the surrounding environmental limitations of the landscape
- Build to capitalise and utilise natural assets, such as direction of sunlight
- Take all necessary steps to reduce waste and pollution, and their impacts

The final theme worth noting is the fifth which addresses the urban form and character of a place. Engendering a sense of place should be an important consideration as it helps to create cohesive communities. There are many ways this can be achieved, one of which is creating a 'legible' place. This means a place that is easily understood in terms of its street patterns, architecture, landmarks, topography, etc. Creating a street pattern that has a defined hierarchy of routes that bring people to central locations is an example. "Fine grain" smaller urban plots and blocks are preferable to larger blocks. Equally, the scale of buildings and widths of streets are important for place. Considerations should include the following:

- Identify the 'urban grain' of the area and replicate this with the new developments
- Provide a comfortable and attractive urban realm (no overhead wires, limit signage, etc.)
- Respect features of the environment that have meaning and contribute towards the town's 'story', and are part of the collective memory
- Consider the comfort of the area. Is it adequately protected from environmental conditions?

The ***Toolkit for Community-Led Village Design Statements*** is one of several similar initiatives implemented by the **Heritage Council** that attempts to empower local communities to have a much stronger say in the future development of their localities. It does this through promoting the creation of a community-led village design statement, which gives communities a 'voice' and strengthens their understanding of planning, heritage management and conservation.

A village design statement (VDS) is a "mechanism for protecting, celebrating and enhancing local distinctiveness and contributes significantly to the delivery of sustainable development". It analyses, understands and describes the unique characteristics of a village, the elements that make the place distinct, and proposes a series of design principles that are to be adhered to for future development. It also creates several recommendations and actions that aim to enhance the uniqueness of the place,

but in a manner that is respectful. The following are identified as the core heritage and design elements that should be considered in a VDS:

- Historic village form and settlement pattern
- Villagescape, historic streetscape and character areas
- Key approaches to the village
- Landmarks
- Green infrastructure and natural heritage
- National monuments

In order to reverse the trend of decline that is evident across many of Ireland's towns and villages, the **Heritage Council** undertook research into the most appropriate policies that could be of benefit, culminating in the release of their report on *Policy Proposals for Ireland's Towns*. Although more and more people are now living in urban environments, many of our town centres are experiencing high levels of vacancy and dereliction. The Heritage Council argue that "heritage-led urban regeneration" offers an opportunity to bring a vibrancy and vitality back to these ailing locations.

One of the core elements of the Heritage Council's argument is that there is a monetary value of historic urban environments. Essentially, evidence shows that proximity to heritage assets adds value to housing, which itself shows the homeowner's pride in place.

In many cases towns have been "turned inside-out" by suburban commercial and residential developments which draw activity out of the town centres. It is the role of the planning system to protect the heritage value of towns by preventing developments that can potentially decimate historic town centres. The report calls for a planning system that "fully incorporate heritage management". Additionally, a restrictive planning system creates regulatory barriers that prevents the innovative reuse of vacant or derelict buildings.

The following bullet points are the six key policy recommendations the report proposes:

1. The Irish Government should produce an "Irish Urban Policy" which describes and sets out to protect the strategic social, cultural, economic and environmental role of Irish towns;
2. The 'Living City' regeneration initiative should be extended to include historic core areas of all Irish towns, where they are protected as Architectural Conservation Areas;
3. Planning authorities should ease the regulatory burden that deters people from 'living over the shops';
4. The strategic economic role of towns in local economies identified in the CEDRA report should be targeted in future funding programmes;
5. All initiatives should be monitored for effectiveness in achieving the aims of 'heritage-led urban regeneration';
6. The Heritage Council should be funded to administer a 'Rural Towns and Villages Network' that supports community efforts to revitalise town centres.

In 2012, Failte Ireland released a report titled *Historic Towns in Ireland: Maximising your Tourism Potential*. The guide was aimed at any interested party, including Local Authorities, who sought to capitalise on the growing numbers of cultural tourists Ireland was seeing. It offers guidance on how the tourism amenity value of towns can be improved. Some of the core recommendations are as follows:

- Movement around the town should be easy and comfortable for visitors. This means placing an emphasis on pedestrians, as walking is the best way for visitors to fully appreciate and experience what the town has. Therefore, pedestrianisation of certain areas should be considered, particularly along routes frequented by visitors.
- Vehicular traffic can dominate historic towns. If excessive on-street parking and busy two-way roads exist in the centre of a town, visitors may feel unwelcome and “in the way”. The heritage value of a town is damaged by excessive vehicular access, and this should be managed in a more appropriate way
- Littering and rubbish can lead to poor perceptions of a place, therefore ensuring there are sufficient bins that are regularly emptied is important.
- Perceptions of safety are important for visitors, particularly if they are in a location at night. Popular areas, buildings and the paths leading to these locations should be comfortably lit
- The character of the streetscapes gives a first impression. Quite often there is simply a need to ensure streets and building facades are clean, however consideration to regular painting schemes should be made, devising a colour palette to use on buildings and giving a colourful sense of character. Similarly, traditional shopfronts are truly original to Ireland and should be protected and replicated.
- The unique selling point of a town needs to be identified and emphasised. This could be built heritage or natural environment, or a collection of both, nonetheless, it should all be enhanced and exploited.
- Public art such as murals, statues or monuments offer towns an interesting and attractive component that visitors will want to view and learn more about. The installation of public art should be considered in appropriate locations
- Farmers markets, festivals and other similar events provide residents and visitors alike with additional reasons to spend time in a town centre. Old market squares that exist in many Irish towns offer the ideal locations for these events, with a link to the areas heritage too

It is also worthwhile referencing international examples of best-practice guides for design and development of our public spaces. Perhaps the most influential and successful guidance programme of recent years is *Transport for London's (TfL) 'Healthy Streets'* programme, which was developed in conjunction with the Mayor of London's Office. Healthy Streets is a series of guides and manuals that identify ways to promote active travel and, as a result, create better, more liveable communities and neighbourhoods.

The Healthy Streets Approach uses ten indicators of what makes streets attractive places, and these indicators can be used to evaluate existing and planned future street conditions. Figure 32 is taken from the Healthy Streets guide and shows the ten indicators of a healthy street, which are:

- Pedestrians from all walks of life – Streets should be welcoming places for everyone;
- Easy to cross – Streets should be easy to cross, with direct routes for pedestrians that make crossing at anytime convenient;
- Shade and shelter – Shade and shelter from wind, rain and direct sun provides for a more comfortable environment;
- Places to stop and rest – Streets that possess plenty of locations to stop, sit and relax benefit those with mobility issues and local businesses;
- Not too noisy – Motorised vehicles and heavy trafficked streets are noisy, unappealing places for people;

- People choose to walk, cycle and use public transport – Active travel benefits all of society and streets should facilitate this as much as possible;
- People feel safe – Safety is key, so people should not fear road traffic or other threats to personal safety;
- Things to see and do – Stimulating and interesting environments will attract people, so nice views, street art, planting and shops or venues will see increased users on a street;
- People feel relaxed – Uncluttered, clean and well-maintained streets improve relaxation;
- Clean air – Motorised transport causes air pollution, streets should help mitigate against this

Of course, while the Healthy Streets indicators were developed by TfL for initial use in evaluating London’s streets, they are not tailored entirely to London itself. Instead the indicators promote values and concepts of good planning and design that can be administered anywhere, and this includes Blessington. With Main Street in Blessington providing the town’s traditional heart, perhaps some of the guidance of Healthy Streets could be implemented here?



Figure 84 Healthy Streets Indicators (TfL)



BLESSINGTON Town Health Check

REPORT | PHASE 2 | JANUARY

2020

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Business Integration



2020

BLESSINGTON Town Health Check