

Chapter 1 Introduction & Vision

1.0 Preamble

This plan is a land use plan and overall strategy for the development of Birr town and environs over the period 2010 - 2016.

For the purposes of this joint plan, “**Councils**” refers to Birr Town Council and Offaly County Council working in partnership. For the purposes of this plan, “**Birr**” refers to both the area of Birr town boundary and Birr environs boundary together i.e. Birr town and environs (refer to Map 1.2).

This plan contains...

Written Statement

The written statement is divided into 15 chapters and sets out the vision, aims, goals and strategy for Birr over the plan period, in addition to the Councils’ policies and objectives under the following headings:

Ch. 1 Introduction & Vision

Regional & County Context
Goals/ Strategic Objectives
Challenges

Ch. 2 Survey & Analysis

Ch. 3 Development Strategy

Settlement Strategy
Housing including housing strategy summary
Local Area Strategies (summary)
Economic Strategy

Ch. 4 Town Centre, Retail & Renewal

Ch. 5 Amenities & Open Space

Ch. 6 Local Area Strategies

Ch. 7 Crinkle Village

Ch. 8 Transport, Movement & Accessibility

Ch. 9 Employment, Economy, Enterprise & Tourism

Ch. 10 Infrastructure & Environment

Ch. 11 Community, Social, Cultural & Sports Development

Ch. 12 Built Heritage

Ch. 13 Natural Heritage & Landscape

Ch. 14 Built Form and Urban Development Standards

Ch. 15 Land-Use Zoning & Zoning Matrix

The written statement is to be read in conjunction with the following appendices:

- Offaly County Housing Strategy (Adopted 2008)*
- Offaly County Retail Strategy (Adopted 2009)*
- Birr Town Record of Protected Structures*

- Birr Strategic Environmental Assessment*
Prepared and (adopted) as part of the plan review process
- Birr LUTS 2007 & Birr Public Realm Plan 2009

1.1 Introduction

This Birr Town and Environs Development Plan 2010-2016 was adopted by the Elected Members of both Birr Town Council and Offaly County Council on **11th and 18th January 2010** respectively and outlines an overall strategy for the **proper planning and sustainable development** of Birr town and environs over the period 2010 – 2016.

Put simply, **proper planning** is:

The right development or land use.....
in the right place...
at the right time!

and **sustainable development** is:

“..development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”
(1987 ‘Brundtland Report’)

This plan is set within a framework of **National, Regional and County policy**, as is a requirement of the Planning and Development Acts 2000 – 2009 and will replace the Birr Town and Environs Development Plan 2004 – 2010. It is been prepared over a two year period in accordance with the requirements of the Planning and Development Acts and will remain in force until January 2016, unless varied or reviewed in the interim*.

Functional Area

This plan relates to the functional area of Birr Town Council (Birr town boundary) and part of the functional area of Offaly County Council (Birr environs boundary) which is within County Offaly (refer to map 1.2). The successful implementation of this plan will have a positive impact on Birr and will compliment the County Development Plan 2009-2015 by enhancing the town and providing spin off benefits for its hinterland in South-West Offaly.

1.2 Settlement Profile

1.2.1 Location and Population

Birr is situated in the Midlands of Ireland and is the largest town in South-West Offaly (refer to map 1.3). The town provides “Key Services” to its rural hinterland and the western part of the Midlands Region. The population of the town and environs in 2006 was 5,053, which represents a 14.6% population increase between 2002 and 2006 and a 21.5% increase between 1996 and 2006.

Birr is conveniently located between the N7 (Dublin-Limerick) national primary route, which is proposed to be fully upgraded to motorway status in the near future, and the M6 (Dublin-Galway). The N52 (Dundalk-Nenagh) and N62 (Athlone-Roscrea) national secondary routes run through the settlement and provide direct access to Tullamore and Athlone respectively. The highly scenic Slieve Bloom Mountains and historic Clonmacnoise site are located in proximity to the east and north of Birr, respectively.

1.2.2 Physical Features

The land extent of Birr town and environs is approximately 950 hectares (2,341 acres). Birr comprises an urban/rural undulating landscape with an outwash of esker deposits. The historic core of the town centre is sensitively built into the receiving landscape, beside the Castle and Demesne and nearby water bodies. The Camcor River, a tributary river of the Little Brosna, originates in the Slieve Bloom Mountains and flows east to west through Birr town. The urban fringe of the town provides alternative landscapes including Crinkle village and rural areas mainly in use for agriculture.

1.3 Main Policy Considerations in the Preparation of this Plan

This plan has been prepared having regard to National and Regional plan/policies in addition to the Offaly County Development Plan and other policies.

1.3.1 National Spatial Strategy

In the preparation of this plan, the Councils have recognised that the vision for Birr must extend beyond the year 2016, in line with the **National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 (NSS)**. The NSS is a twenty-year planning framework designed to achieve a better balance of social, economic, physical development and population growth between regions and to inform decisions as to where development (and Government investment) should take place. Its focus is on people, on places and on building communities and sets a framework for the balanced development of Ireland with ambitious targets for the development of the Midlands Region.

* Consult with Councils in relation to subsequent variations to this plan or these strategies.

The NSS recognises the need for the closer matching of where people live, with where they work, thereby sustaining:

- “A better quality of life for people
- A strong, competitive economic position
- An environment of the highest quality”

(NSS Section 1.1)

- a wider range of work opportunities
- a better quality of life
- effective urban and rural planning

(NSS Summary Guide)

‘Core messages’ of the NSS

The NSS highlights Birr as an “**Urban Strengthening Opportunity**” for the West-Midlands. Birr can benefit from Tullamore’s Gateway status given its close proximity to same and by acting as a “Key Service Town” for the Western Development Area of the Midlands, which in turn will create additional economic activity for the area.

1.3.2 Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines (MRPGs) (2004)

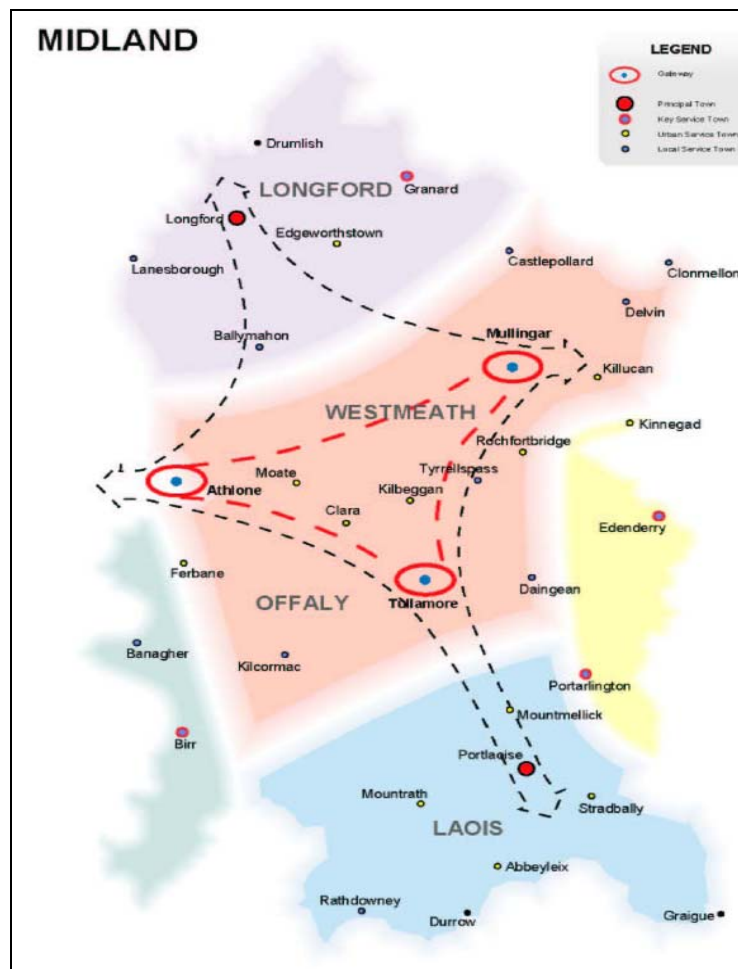
In terms of settlement policy, the MRPG’s divide the Midlands Region into “Development Areas” namely: Central, Eastern, Northern, Western and Southern Areas.

The “**Development Area**” that directly relates to Birr town and environs is “**Western Area**” of the Midlands Region. This area comprises those parts of the Region associated with Birr and with close links to the Mid-West region. In order to achieve strategic goals as set out by the NSS, the MRPG’s estimate that this area would require population growth of **3,500-5,500 persons** over the period 2004-2020, with the bulk of this growth to be channelled into Birr.

The guidelines have designated Birr as a “**Key Service Town**” and further state that “**Key Service Towns**” need to act as important drivers of their own local economies in areas that are comparatively more remote from the main population centres of the region providing vital economic, administrative and social functions.

The MRPG’s further estimate that **approximately 2,000 houses** will be required in the “**Western Area**” of the Midlands up to **2020**, with the provision of this housing to be phased in accordance with the provision of necessary infrastructure such as water services and social facilities e.g. schools etc.

Map 1.3 Midlands Region in Context (MRPG's)



Source: Midland Regional Planning Guidelines (2004)

In recognition of the foregoing, the Councils have looked towards the 2020 MRPGs targets and worked back to 2016 to set a planning framework to:

- (i) Secure the NSS/MRPG objectives and
- (ii) Ensure that growth is measurable against the MRPGs over this plan period.

1.3.3 Offaly County Development Plan 2009-2015

The County Offaly Development Plan 2009-2015 was adopted on 19th January 2009. The aim of the plan is to achieve a strategic and coordinated plan-led approach to future development of the County. Therefore, strategic planning issues relating to Birr are included in the County Plan.

The Councils have prepared the Birr Town and Environs Development Plan 2010-2016 in a manner that is consistent with the Offaly County Development Plan 2009-2015 and related policy documents such as the County Housing Strategy and the County Retail Strategy.

Table 1.1 Offaly's Settlement Hierarchy

County Offaly Settlement Hierarchy	
Linked Gateway Town/County Town	
Tullamore	
Large Towns	
Birr , Edenderry, Portarlinton (combined with Laois side)	
Medium Towns	
Clara [supporting Gateway town]	
Local Service Towns	
Banagher, Ferbane, Kilcormac, Dainean	
Villages [23 no.]	
Belmont, Ballinagar, Ballycumber, Bracknagh, Cloghan, Clonbullogue, Cloneygowan, Coolderry, Crinkle , Geashill, Killeigh, Kinnitty, Mucklagh, Moneygall, Mountbolus, Pollagh /Lemanaghan, Riverstown, Shannonbridge, Shannonharbour, Shinrone, Rahan, Rhode, Walsh Island.	
Sraids [25 no.]	
Ballinamere, Ballyboy, Ballyfore, Blueball, Boher, Boora (Leabeg), Brosna, Cadamstown, Clareen, Clonfinlough, Croghan, Doon, Dunkerrin, Durrow, Fivealley, Garryhinch, Horseleap, High Street, Killina, Killurin, Killyon, Lusmagh, Rath, Roscomroe, Tober.	
Open Countryside	

It is extremely important that this plan conforms to these documents as they set **strategies, policies, objectives and an overall vision for the County as whole**, which is a key part to the future development of Birr. This plan embraces Birr's status as a "**Large Town**" and its position within the County Settlement Hierarchy.

Table 1.2 Extract from Offaly's Settlement Hierarchy in the County Development Plan 2009-2015

<p>Tier 2 - Large Towns Large Town-Birr</p> 	<p>Tier 5 - Villages Village-Crinkle</p> 
<p>The role of the Large Towns is to strengthen the settlement pattern across the County and to provide support to their immediate surrounding hinterland (including Local Service Towns, Villages, Sraids and the open countryside) as well as being self-sustaining. It is anticipated that the Large Towns will reinforce their role as key centres within the settlement hierarchy through the provision of employment opportunities, business, industry, education, tourism and infrastructure.</p>	<p>Villages are smaller settlements, many of which are very attractive and rural in character. Due to their existing and envisaged size, their general structure as small Country settlements, their range of housing requirements and their semi-urban character, their plans include statutory 'zoning' of land for particular purposes.</p>

1.3.4 National Development Plan 2007-2013

In preparing this plan, the Councils also had regard to the **National Development Plan 2007–2013 (NDP)** which sets out a programme for national investment in infrastructure, community development etc. The NDP aims at further improving quality of life in Ireland and strengthening the country's economic success within the overall planning framework as set out by the National Spatial Strategy. Harnessing the investment that is directly beneficial to Offaly through a planning framework that allows the greatest potential for the sustainable development of Birr, is a challenge for this plan.

1.3.5 Other Plans

The Birr Town and Environs Development Plan must also link closely to the Offaly County Development Board Strategy entitled *“Bringing the Future into Focus – A Strategy for Economic, Social and Cultural Development”*, which is in place for the period 2002–2012 and focuses on quality of life.

The Councils' also had regard to the BMW (Border Midlands & Western) Regional Assembly Operational Programme 2007-2013.

1.3.6 Strategic Environmental Assessment

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is a systematic process of predicting and evaluating the likely environmental effects of implementing a proposed plan, or other strategic action, in order to ensure that these effects are appropriately addressed at the earliest appropriate stage of decision-making on a par with economic and social considerations. The SEA has been carried out in order to comply with the provisions of the SEA Regulations and in order to improve planning and environmental management in Birr. This plan should be read in conjunction with the Environmental Report of the SEA. An SEA Statement has been prepared, subsequent to the plan being adopted in 2010, to inform how the SEA process influenced and contributed to the evolution of the final adopted plan.

1.3.7 Habitats Directive Assessment

The purpose of the HDA, in this context, is to determine whether plans or projects have implications for any Natura 2000 sites in Birr (Refer to Chapter 13) and to ascertain whether there will be adverse impacts on the integrity of these sites.

Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive states:

Any plan or project not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site but likely to have a significant effect thereon, either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, shall be subject to appropriate assessment of its implications for the site in view of the site's conservation objectives. In the light of the conclusions of the assessment of the implications for the site and subject to the provisions of paragraph 4, the competent national authorities shall agree to the plan or project only after having ascertained that it will not adversely affect the integrity of the site concerned and, if appropriate, after having obtained the opinion of the general public.

Where relevant, projects and masterplans arising from this plan should be screened by the applicant for the need to undertake Appropriate Assessment under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive.

1.4 Overall Vision

The Offaly County Development Strategy and the Offaly County Council Corporate Strategy share the same **“vision statement”**, and the Councils' aim is to apply this vision in terms of its land use and planning implications through the implementation of this Town and Environs Development Plan. It reads:

That all people in Offaly will enjoy equal opportunity and a good quality of life – that they will look forward to the future with confidence while cherishing the past.

For Birr Town and Environs Development Plan 2010-2016, this means having regard to:

- (i) How land use and planning **decisions will impact on quality of life** for the people of Birr.
- (ii) How such decisions will impact on **Birr as a location to live and work of choice**, not necessity.
- (iii) How such decisions will impact on the **need to protect Birr's natural and built assets**.

It is intended that this vision will act as a "prompt" for all strategies, policies and objectives of this plan.

The policy framework and "overall vision" mentioned above give rise to significant planning challenges for the Councils over the plan period and beyond. The following paragraph lists these challenges, which arise from an examination of demographic issues (examined in Chapter 2) and overall planning issues, which act as supporting information and rationale for the challenges.

1.5 Challenges for this Plan

- To maintain the moderate level of population growth experienced in Birr in recent years.
- To channel new growth and development into a form which compliments the attractive town of Birr in an orderly and sequential fashion and to use opportunities to enhance the town's built and natural features - "Birr as a place to Live".
- To enhance "Birr as a place to work" by providing a framework for and positive encouragement of employment growth.
- To integrate new and existing development as much as possible within its surroundings, both in the town centre, Crinkle village and in outer areas - "Birr as an attractive, orderly and well planned town".
- To increase the quality of the visitor's experience of Birr - "Birr as a place to visit and enjoy".

1.6 Goals/ Strategic Objectives for this Plan

The overall aims and goals for Birr town and environs will strategically address the main challenges impacting on this settlement and subsequently shape the policy and objectives of each chapter within this plan.

1. To use the provisions and targets of the Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines (MRPGs) in the making, implementation and review of this plan and in particular the MRPGs population target for Birr, to channel appropriate levels and types of development into Birr town and Environs.
2. To implement a balanced and sequential approach to development in the making, implementation and review of this plan in order to make best use of services, to use development opportunities to enhance the town and to ensure the compact and orderly growth of Birr.
3. To facilitate an appropriate balance between residential development and other uses in all parts of Birr and Crinkle and to set a positive framework for the development of, in particular, employment, educational and open space uses, together with community facilities and commercial services.
4. To encourage clustering of development of differing types and the integrated development of larger undeveloped areas identified within this plan.
5. To positively reaffirm the role of Birr's Town Centre and to implement positive measures for the continued vibrancy of the centre using its attractive built form as positive factor while acknowledging the strong level of protection of buildings and structures necessary.

6. To maintain and improve Birr's attractiveness as a place to live, work-in and visit by implementing, where possible, the recommendations of the Birr Public Realm Study where they apply to both the Town Centre and outer areas, by encouraging environmental and access improvements as part of new development and by protecting the environs from inappropriate development.
7. To continue to protect and enhance the built and natural environment of Birr town and its environs and to use, where possible, a positive approach towards development where it can be proven to enhance, preserve, re-use or increase the accessibility (where appropriate) of such features.
8. To enhance Birr as a place to work by setting a positive and flexible framework for the consolidation of existing, and the creation of new employment.
9. To preserve the separate identity of Crinkle village and encourage a moderate level of residential development together with the expansion of its commercial function for local needs.
10. To preserve, enhance, identify and secure new road, pedestrian, cycleway and green corridor linkages between and amongst residential areas, the River Camcor linear parkland, the town centre and existing and planned roads. The Area Based Strategies identify such opportunities.