

Chapter 13 Natural Heritage & Landscape

13.0 Aim

To conserve, protect and enhance Birr's natural heritage, where possible. The Councils will aim to strike a reasonable balance between conservation and development objectives in the interests of proper planning and sustainable development.

The following aims/principles will guide the Councils heritage policies and objectives as set out in this plan:

- To avoid damage or loss of natural heritage.
- To mitigate the effects of harm where it cannot be avoided.
- To promote appropriate enhancement as an integral part of any development.
- To promote a reasonable balance between conservation measures and development measures in the interests of promoting the orderly and sustainable development of Birr.
- To continue to seek the protection and enhancement of the town and environs landscape and to ensure that development respects and, where necessary, enhances the appearance and character of the existing landscape.

13.1 Context

13.1.1 Introduction

Birr town and environs comprises of an urban/rural undulating landscape with an outwash of esker deposits. The historic core of the town centre is sensitively built into the surrounding landscape, beside the Castle and Demesne and nearby water bodies. The urban fringe of the town provides alternative landscapes including a village setting and rural areas currently in use for agriculture.

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 Camcor River receives migratory runs of Lough Derg trout, locally known as "Croneen" on route to spawn. The Camcor and Little Brosna River represent "Wilderness Corridors" for wildlife and aquatic life forms through the town.

13.1.2 Natural Heritage

13.1.2.1 Overview

Over 10% of land area of Ireland is formally and legally designated as being of European importance for nature conservation. European and National Legislation now protect many valuable remaining wild habitats through the designation of sites as Natural Heritage Areas (NHA's), (candidate) Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs). The designation of these sites at a national level is the responsibility of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, but it is the responsibility of everyone to protect these sites. The process of designation is ongoing, as other sites may be identified during the life of this plan. Sites of nature conservation value have the potential to increase tourism in the area and add to the aesthetic and recreational appeal of the landscape.

13.1.2.2 Planning and Development Acts, 2000-2009

The Councils are key agencies responsible for the protection of the natural environment. Section 10 of the Planning and Development Acts, 2000-2009 (as amended) requires that a Development Plan include objectives relating to the conservation and protection of the environment, including, in particular, the natural heritage and the conservation of European sites and any other sites, which may be prescribed.

13.1.3 Biodiversity

It is established that biodiversity is being lost at an increasing rate and one of the main objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity was the conservation of biodiversity. The UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) resulted from the Earth Summit held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro. Ireland signed the Convention in 1992 and ratified it in 1996.

Subsequent agreements, EU Directives and Ireland's National Biodiversity Plan have reinforced this message and the commitment to halt the loss of biodiversity.

13.1.4 National Heritage Plan 2002

A key objective of the National Heritage Plan (2002) seeks to "place heritage at the heart of public life". The plan recognises that heritage is communal and we all share a responsibility to protect it. Protection of heritage must begin at local level enabling everybody to become actively involved in preserving and enhancing the heritage of Birr.

13.1.5 Landscape

13.1.5.1 Planning and Development Acts 2000-2009

The Planning and Development Acts 2000-2009 require that development plans contain objectives for the preservation of the character of the landscape where, and to the extent that, in the opinion of the Planning Authorities, the proper planning and sustainable development of the area requires it, including the preservation of views and prospects and the amenities of places and features of natural beauty or interest.

13.1.6 Rural Development

13.1.6.1 Offaly County Development Plan 2009-2015

Chapter 10 of the Offaly County Development Plan 2009-2015 contains a chapter of policy statements, polices and objectives for rural development in County Offaly. The Councils will adopt these polices and objectives where necessary and relevant to the small parcels of land on the urban fringe of Birr town and Crinkle village. Refer to Chapter 9 for policies and objectives relative to rural development on the urban fringe of Birr.

13.2 Strategy

13.2.1 National and European Designations

Natural Heritage Areas are designated by the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the DoEHLG under the provisions of the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000 in recognition of nationally important habitats, species and sites of geological interest. Natural Heritage Areas (NHA's) cover nationally important semi-natural and natural habitats, landforms or geomorphological features, wildlife plant and animal species or a diversity of these natural attributes.

Currently there are no candidate Special Protection Areas and/or candidate Special Areas of Conservation within Birr. There are currently two proposed Natural Heritage Areas within the town and environs, which are houses for bats. Table 13.1 and Map 13.1 illustrate the two proposed Natural Heritage Areas within Birr. The ecological interest that underlies proposed NHA's is taken into account in decisions on planning applications. The designation of sites within Birr and subsequent protection afforded to them does not always preclude development from occurring. However, the Councils role is to ensure that development, when considered appropriate, is carried out in a manner that does not impede or disturb the biodiversity of the proposed/designated site.

Table 13.1 Proposed Natural Heritage Areas in Birr

Proposed Natural Heritage Areas	
Site Code	Site Name
000568	Birr (Domestic Dwelling)
000569	Birr (Domestic Dwelling)

13.2.2 Biodiversity Action Strategy for Offaly

The Biodiversity Action Strategy for Offaly was adopted by Offaly County Council in June 2005. This policy document sets out the process and principles for the biodiversity action plan in Offaly. In addition "State of the Wild in Offaly" was published in 2007. This publication sets out the baseline data known about each of the flora and fauna species groups in Offaly. The Councils will endeavor to continue efforts to reduce the loss of biodiversity in Birr.

The Councils will seek to protect the Natural Heritage of Birr. There may be instances when development may be deemed appropriate in areas that are not designated for conservation protection but where the Councils consider that

significant biodiversity is present. In this instance, applicants will be requested to undertake an ecological report of the site. Efforts should be made by the applicant to ensure that minimal disturbance is caused to the existing biodiversity within the site. Evidence of significant biodiversity may be detected because of the nature of the site e.g. waterway, esker, woodland, presence of protected species etc. In such instances, the Councils may recommend the following actions to be taken in order to protect and enhance the identified ecological features:

1. Retain existing habitats e.g. trees, scrub, grassland, ponds and incorporate into open space areas.
2. Leave rough grassland areas (with appropriate mowing regimes) as wildlife corridors, particularly adjacent to linear features such as roads and watercourses).
3. Retain existing boundary hedgerows between developments and private property. Fencing and man-made boundaries should be erected where necessary but not in the place of a hedgerow.

13.2.3 Offaly Heritage Plan 2007-2011

The Offaly Heritage Plan is the second Heritage Plan to be prepared and published for the County. It outlines a five-year, specific action plan of work to be carried out in County Offaly, overseen by the Offaly Heritage Forum. The programme delivery is co-ordinated by the Offaly Heritage Office and lists a number of actions to be undertaken over the Heritage Plan Period. The Councils will continue to work with the Heritage Forum in relation to achieving its targets over this Development Plan period.

13.2.4 Nature Protection outside Protected Sites

The Councils acknowledge that it is important to maintain and enhance the character and quality of the urban and rural environment in its entirety as wildlife heritage is not confined to statutory designated sites, but is found throughout the countryside and in built-up areas. Protecting areas in isolation from each other with little regard to conservation in the wider countryside is considered inappropriate.

All development proposals should respect significant wildlife habitat areas and corridors so as to protect flora and fauna and to conserve and enhance their habitat. It is through the conservation of ecological infrastructure such as hedgerows and riparian corridors that we can develop a "network of sites". These allow for the migration and the exchange of species between conservation areas. The Councils will continue to develop Camcor Park with the aim of creating a "network of sites" through the town and flowing into the surrounding open countryside. The provision of Green Belts between built up urban areas can play a significant role within this ecological network. The Councils will encourage the management of features of the landscape, which are of major importance for wild fauna and flora. Such features are those which, by virtue of their linear and continuous structure (such as rivers with their banks or the traditional systems for the marking of field boundaries) or their function as stepping stones (such as ponds or small woods), are essential for the migration, dispersal and genetic exchange of wild species.

Birr Castle Demesne represents a further important natural environment area in the town. Also, potential exists for the creation of a wetlands reserve in the flood plain of the Little Brosna River north of Riverstown.

13.2.5 Riparian (River) Buffer Zones/Wildlife Corridors

Riparian¹ buffer zones are used to protect a particular watercourse from the impact of human activity or development in an area. The buffer zone if sufficiently large and managed will:

- Filter out pollutants and sediment from overland surface runoff.
- Provide a refuge for animals with close affinity to rivers (e.g. otters, kingfishers, dragonflies).
- Create habitat necessary for fish and other aquatic life.
- Provide amenity and recreation to local people and visitors to the area (fishing, scenic walks etc).
- Enhance flood alleviation.

¹ A riparian buffer zone is a strip of vegetated land bordering a river or stream

In particular, the Camcor and Little Brosna Rivers represent “Wilderness Corridors” for wildlife and aquatic life forms through the town. The Councils’ policy of providing and extending the linear park along the Camcor River will safeguard and further enhance this amenity.

Where developments are proposed adjacent to waterways and notwithstanding the consideration of setback distances to mitigate against flooding, the Councils will generally seek a setback distance of between **30 metres** to **50 metres** from the **waterway’s edge**. The Councils may reduce or increase this setback depending on the size of the site and the nature of the development proposed.

13.2.6 Eskers

The Councils recognise the unique importance of Birr’s Esker Landscape deriving from its geological, zoological, botanical and scientific value. Map 13.2 highlights the location of these eskers which have been designated areas of high amenity in the Offaly County Development Plan 2009-2015 (refer to Chapter 5). The Councils will seek the protection of eskers within the Plan area from further unnecessary degradation. Proposals for development upon or adjacent to eskers will be determined by reference to the need to conserve the character and scientific value of eskers and the extent to which the proposed development would be damaging to these qualities.

13.2.7 Mushroom Stones

Mushroom Stones are important geological features that are shaped by the movement of water in postglacial lakes. Map 13.2 indicates the location of the Mushroom Stone in Birr, locally known as the “Nun’s Stone”.

13.2.8 Landscape

The Councils have a key role in the preservation of the landscape, views and the amenities of places and features of natural beauty within Birr. This can be achieved through the adoption of policies and objectives and their implementation within the development management process. Map 13.3, “Corine Landcover Map”, gives a technical view of Birr’s landcover and Map 13.4 indicates Birr’s topography.

As already described in the Context Paragraph, Birr’s landscape is undulating with a core urban area extending outwards to a rural urban fringe, with linear water bodies running through same. Subsequently, the Offaly County Development Plan 2009-2015, has identified the different landscape areas of Birr and characterised same in relation to their **degree of sensitivity to various kinds of development** (refer to map 13.5). Typical to urban areas, the majority of Birr is classified as “**Low Sensitivity**”. The three eskers systems within the town and environs are classified as “**High Sensitivity**”. As already highlighted in Chapter 5, these three eskers have been also designated as “**Areas of High Amenity**” and while the esker to the north of the town has been badly damaged, the esker south to the town, at Hillside, remains in good condition and warrants protection which corresponds to its green space zoning.

The designation of areas of high amenity within County Offaly and Birr provide a basis for the protection of views and prospects of certain visually vulnerable features. However, there may be a number of individual views and prospects which warrant protection within the town and environs area. Site visits for each particular planning application will finally determine if any views will be affected by a proposed development. The protection of a view, and its application through the Development Management process (Objective BTEO 13-07) is simply to protect that view and not to cross over with other controlling policies, for example the single rural house policy.

13.2.9 Trees, Hedgerows, Traditional Stonewalls

A hedgerow survey for County Offaly, including Birr, was undertaken in 2005. The Councils recognise the heritage and amenity importance of hedgerows within the environs of Birr town. Hedgerows provide a corridor role in the facilitation of the movement and distribution of wild flora and fauna through the landscape (habitat for insects, nesting sites for birds, assist mammals in their survival). In addition, hedgerows also provide a service to farms in terms of boundaries, have a scenic appearance and their root systems regulate water movement and improve the quality of water.

13.2.10 Sand and Gravel Extraction

The Councils recognise the importance of sand and gravel extractions for the economic/ infrastructural development and as a valuable source of employment, for Birr and its hinterland. It is also recognised however that exploitation of deposits can have a seriously damaging environmental impact on the scientific, recreational and amenity value of the Birr's natural landscape, in particular its **esker network**.

The Councils acknowledge that a satisfactory balance is required between the needs of the building industry and the need to protect the environment. The Councils acknowledge that serious damage has been done to eskers to the north of Birr town in which some has almost disappeared and no longer warrants protection. Map 13.2 shows the extent of these eskers. The eskers to the south of the town are still considered to be worthy of preservation and where new sand and gravel extractions will not be permitted.

The suitability of any extraction enterprise shall be assessed on the basis of the sensitivity of the local environment to such impacts; the scale of the development proposed and the capacity of the road network in the area to accommodate associated traffic.

It shall be the Councils' policy to ensure that those extractions which would result in a reduction of the visual amenity of "**Areas of High Amenity**" or damage to areas of scientific importance or of geological, botanical, zoological and other natural significance shall not be permitted. It is the Councils' policy that all such workings should be subjected to landscaping requirements and that worked out quarries should be rehabilitated to a use agreed with the Councils, which could include recreational, amenity and end-of-life uses. The use of these rehabilitated sites shall be limited to wastes such as soil, stone and subsoils and sites shall be authorised under the appropriate waste regulations.

The Councils will have regard to the DoEHLG's Guidelines for Planning Authorities for Quarries and Ancillary Activities 2004 when assessing applications relating to the extraction industry in Birr. In this regard, bonds or levies will be required by the Councils as a condition of any planning permission granted to ensure satisfactory reinstatement on completion of extraction. The Councils will require the payment of a contribution towards the cost of road improvement and reinstatement works necessitated by permitted developments.

The Councils recognise the unique importance of Birr's Esker landscape deriving from its scientific, botanical, archaeological and historical value. All proposals for sand and gravel extraction at Eskers will be determined by reference to the need to conserve the environment, character and scientific value and the extent to which the proposed development would be damaging to these qualities. Aggregate Potential Mapping is one measure of determining where potential gravel extraction can take place in Birr. The Geological Survey of Ireland carries out this survey work in association with Local Authorities. The Councils will cooperate with the GSI to ensure the completion of aggregate potential mapping for Birr and County Offaly.

13.3 Policy

Natural Heritage

BTEP 13-01 It is the Councils' policy to have regard to the views and guidance of the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the DoEHLG, in respect of proposed development, where there is a possibility that such development may have an impact on sites with proposed and/or nature conservation designations.

BTEP 13-02 It is the Councils' policy to prohibit any development that would be harmful to or that would result in a significant deterioration of habitats and/or disturbance of protected species within Birr and to support/co-operate with statutory authorities and others in support of measures taken to manage proposed or designated sites in order to achieve their conservation objectives.

BTEP 13-03 It is the Councils' policy to protect, conserve and enhance Birr's biodiversity and natural heritage including wildlife (flora and fauna), habitats, landscapes and/or landscape features of importance to wildlife, especially along the Camcor and Little Brosna Rivers and the Castle Demesne.

BTEP 13-04 It is the Councils' policy to continue to promote education, knowledge and pride in the natural heritage of Birr.

BTEP 13-05 It is the Councils' policy to conserve, protect and enhance where possible wildlife habitats such as rivers (including riparian buffer zones/wildlife corridors), streams, wetlands, trees, woodlands and scrub, hedgerows and other boundary types such as stone walls and ditches providing a network of habitats and corridors essential for wildlife to flourish.

BTEP 13-06 It is the Councils' policy to protect riparian corridors by reserving land along their banks for ecological corridors and maintain them free from inappropriate development, where appropriate, and discourage culverting or realignment.

BTEP 13-07 It is the Councils' policy to promote the protection and preservation of existing hedgerows and to encourage planting of native hedgerow species.

BTEP 13-08 It is the Councils' policy to use native species in Birr, including on Councils property, for landscaping works carried out by or on the part of Birr Town Council/Offaly County Council.

BTEP 13-09 It is the Councils' policy to protect the identified Mushroom Stone (locally known as the "Nun's Stone") listed in Paragraph 13.2.7.

Landscape

BTEP 13-10 It is the Councils' policy to ensure that a pro-active view of development is undertaken whilst maintaining respect for the environment and heritage, as per the general principles of sustainable development. Further it is policy to conserve, protect and enhance the landscape of Birr at a number of levels:

- The value of the landscape itself, the form and historic character of urban Birr and the associated open countryside on the urban fringe.
- The value of the landscape as a resource for economic growth in accordance with its physical and visual attributes.
- The value of the landscape and its role with habitats and species whose diversity enriches the environment.

BTEP 13-11 It is the Councils' policy to control development as per the manner in which the County landscape classification refers to Birr (refer to map 13.5)

Rural Development on Urban Fringe

BTEP 13-12 It is the Councils' policy to encourage the development of environmentally sustainable agricultural practices, to ensure that development does not impinge on the visual amenity of the countryside and that watercourses, wildlife habitats and areas of ecological importance are protected from the threat of pollution.

BTEP 13-13 It is the Councils' policy to encourage state and private afforestation, both native broadleaf and coniferous species, in appropriate locations in Birr environs, in co-operation with Coillte and the Forest Service and in line with national policy.

BTEP 13-14 It is the Councils' policy to ensure those extractions (quarries/sand and gravel pits) which would result in a reduction of the visual amenity of areas of high amenity (as illustrated in Chapter 5 - Map 5.2) or damage to areas of scientific importance or of geological, botanical, zoological and other natural significance shall not be permitted. It is Councils policy that all such workings should be subjected to landscaping requirements and that worked out quarries should be rehabilitated to a use agreed with the Councils which could include recreational, amenity and end-of-life uses. The use of these rehabilitated sites shall be limited to wastes such as soil, stone and subsoils and sites shall be authorised under the appropriate waste regulations.

BTEP 13-15 It is the Councils' policy to prohibit any development that would be harmful to or that would result in a significant deterioration of habitats and/or disturbance of species in a Special Protection Area (SPA), Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC), Natural Heritage Area (NHA) and Proposed Natural Heritage Area (pNHA).

13.4 Objectives²

BTEO 13-01 To conserve and protect European and National sites and to ensure that any development proposal in the vicinity of, or affecting a European or National designated site, provides sufficient information to show how its proposals will impact on the habitat of the site, and appropriate amelioration, and the Councils will consult with the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government in this regard.

BTEO 13-02 To protect, conserve and enhance Birr's biodiversity and natural heritage. The principle of enhancement will be taken into account in the Development Management Process. It is a particular objective to protect plants, animals species and habitats, which have been identified by the Habitats Directive, Birds Directive, Wildlife Act and the Flora Protection Order.

BTEO 13-03 To carry out ecological studies in order to have improved baseline data and decision-making capacity.

BTEO 13-04 To investigate in conjunction with the appropriate prescribed bodies, the feasibility of establishing a Wetlands Park on Little Brosna Flood Plain.

BTEO 13-05 To seek the preservation of important features of geological interest within Birr.

BTEO 13-06 To support agricultural development and encourage the continuation of agriculture as a contributory means of maintaining population in the hinterland of Birr and sustaining the rural economy.

BTEO 13-07 To preserve scenic views and prospects throughout the town and environs area which will be assessed on a case-by-case basis, as part of the development management process

² The order of listing of objectives is not intended to indicate priorities. Subject to the availability of resources, it is the Councils' aim to monitor and accomplish the objectives listed in this section within the period of this plan.

