



Comhairle Chontae Uíbh Fhailí  
Offaly County Council



# OFFALY ARTS INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY 2023-2028

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Commissioned by  
Offaly County Council's  
Arts Office

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# Foreword



**Cllr. Eddie Fitzpatrick**  
Cathaoirleach, Offaly County Council

With the challenges we all face in terms of economic uncertainties, the increasing need for societal cohesion and a changing climate, it has become even more imperative that we find new and imaginative ways to ensure the continued survival and flourishing of our infrastructural arts organisations. Our arts

organisations form the very backbone of quality arts provision and developmental arts programming, maintaining and protecting the well-being of our society.

The commissioning of this research has been timely. It aimed to take into consideration the existing collaborative partnerships built over many years, between Offaly County Council and Birr Theatre and Arts Centre, and between Offaly County Council and Bord na Móna, Lough Boora Sculpture Park. Also to take account of capital projects in progress including the collaboration between Offaly County Council, the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and Tullamore Community Arts Centre committee; with the development of Esker Arts in Tullamore and the establishment of Esker Arts CLG, and the development of the Edenderry Library / Arts space currently in planning. The aim of the research has been to consider a framework towards building a mutually beneficial and progressive working relationship for the greater cultural participation and to enhance the local and national profile for Offaly.

We would like to convey a special thanks to all the stakeholders who gave of their time so generously during the consultation process.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Eddie Fitzpatrick".

Cllr. Eddie Fitzpatrick



**Anna-Marie Delaney**  
Chief Executive, Offaly County Council

The Arts Office of Offaly County Council has, within its remit, the role of supporting and developing a number of Arts Infrastructure organisations within the County. As outlined within the County Offaly Arts Strategy 2018 – 2022 a goal of Arts Office being to:

*'Support the development of concepts and models for spaces, existing and potential that align with innovative art production and presentation, with local enterprise and civic engagement.'*

This requires strategic planning at County level to ensure each organisation is working, not only within the County framework, but also within the National framework as provided by the Arts Council's Review of Arts Centres and Venues and the Arts Council's Arts Centre Policy and Strategy 2019, with the objective 'to develop a co-ordinated, spatially-informed strategy to support and develop the infrastructure for the arts'.

Research for the Arts Infrastructure Strategy, commissioned by Offaly County Council Arts Office, was conducted by Caoimhín Corrigan and Siobhán O'Malley of People Place Consulting between 2021-2022 and adopted by the members of Offaly County Council, in January 2023.

This research will be instrumental in informing the development of the next Offaly Arts Strategy 2023-2028, now in progress.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anna-Marie Delaney".

Anna-Marie Delaney

# Executive Summary

Significant changes are taking place within the landscape of arts infrastructure in Offaly, and in Ireland more generally. These changes present considerable opportunities for the arts, but they also call for a cohesive strategy so that such opportunities can be harnessed for the benefit of County Offaly, and for the contribution the contemporary arts in the midlands can make to national cultural wellbeing.

Offaly County Council recognises that there are four identified signature arts infrastructure projects for the county. These infrastructure projects are:

- ▶ *Birr Theatre and Arts Centre;*
- ▶ *The arts space integrated with the proposed library development for Edenderry;*
- ▶ *Esker Arts, based in Tullamore; and*
- ▶ *Lough Boora Sculpture Park.*

Birr Theatre and Arts Centre and Lough Boora Sculpture Park were both established ca.20 years ago. Birr Theatre and Arts Centre has an established track record and reputation within the county and further afield. Lough Boora Sculpture Park (LBSP) also has a strong reputation but has not seen a new commission since 2010. The collection at LBSP is valued at over €2m and, in the context of climate action, just transition and post-industrial potential, its role within the Irish landscape – social, cultural, economic and physical – is more important than ever.

The proposal for a new library and arts space in Edenderry represents a new model of cultural provision. Within this model, the ambition for the arts is underpinned by the designation and investment secured by the Creative Edenderry project, which affords Edenderry a unique opportunity to shape the ambition and potential of the proposed arts space.

The development of the new arts centre, Esker Arts, in the County Town of Tullamore has been long identified by the Arts Council as warranted and sits well within spatial planning policies. Its scope and potential nonetheless place added importance on ensuring that the contribution and value of the range of arts infrastructure across Offaly is clearly articulated and understood.

This Arts Infrastructure Strategy sets out the policy context for the arts infrastructure in Offaly. The strategy additionally frames a background and context for each of the four identified projects, taking account of ownership and governance, infrastructure readiness and available spaces,

staffing, strategy and programme priorities of each, as well as key partnerships and revenue funding.

The priority now has to be for each initiative to work from a position of renewed strength and that the spirit of partnership, which has guided developments to date, can be sustained to address challenges that arise in the future.

**This Arts Infrastructure Strategy makes five recommendations:**

## Arts Infrastructure Strategy – Five Recommendations

1

That Offaly County Council focuses investment on the four identified signature arts infrastructure projects.

2

That the focus of Offaly County Council and its Arts Office would shift to a more strategic and enabling role, less engaged in programme development, and more engaged in supporting signature arts infrastructure to deliver on their potential, and to deliver on Offaly County Council's strategic priorities.

3

That Offaly County Council's investment in signature arts infrastructure projects supports alignment with current and future Arts Council policy.

4

That a unified leadership approach is put in place to support the developmental role required of the new arts centre in Tullamore and Lough Boora Sculpture Park.

5

That a partnership initiative is established and led by Offaly County Council to support collaboration between the four signature arts infrastructure projects.

# 1. Introduction

This report sets out analysis and strategic recommendations for strategic arts infrastructure in Offaly. People Place Consulting were engaged by Offaly County Council to assess the context for development and sustainability of arts and cultural infrastructure in County Offaly and make recommendations to inform investment and support by the local authority in key arts infrastructure, defined as:

- ▶ *Birr Theatre and Arts Centre;*
- ▶ *An integrated library and arts facility proposed for Edenderry;*
- ▶ *Esker Arts, based in Tullamore; and*
- ▶ *Lough Boora Sculpture Park*

The brief also called for a focus on how the developments of the arts centre in Tullamore and the integrated arts and library space in Edenderry could best be integrated with the existing infrastructure – namely Lough Boora Sculpture Park, and Birr Theatre & Arts Centre – to strengthen Offaly’s overall cultural offering and visibility.

Engagement with the Arts Council indicates that funding sought and secured by artists and organisations in Offaly is below what might be expected relative to its population, location and cultural context. The absence of diverse infrastructure and organisations is understood to be a key factor in this regard and, although there are well-established initiatives and renowned artists from Offaly, the infrastructure investments being undertaken by Offaly County Council, in partnership with local and national stakeholders, recognise the significant potential for further development of the arts in Offaly.

The report takes account of:

- ▶ *the current context for arts and cultural infrastructure at local and national level;*
- ▶ *a review of key existing and proposed arts infrastructure in Offaly; and*
- ▶ *the context for models of operation that align with innovative arts/creative production and presentation, local enterprise and civic engagement.*

The report highlights key strengths, potential challenges and unique selling propositions (USPs) for the four key arts infrastructure projects (named above). The report also seeks to identify how arts infrastructure in Offaly could align and collaborate in a cohesive and complementary fashion; to underpin the sustainable development of each centre and the collective impact that can be had in driving forward the arts in Offaly.

## 2. Policy Context

### 2.1 Project Ireland 2040

Project Ireland 2040 is Ireland's National Planning Framework. It sets out a hierarchy of settlements and related infrastructure for cities, towns, villages and smaller settlements. Under this hierarchy (p.83) the social infrastructure:

- ▶ *Towns with populations greater than 10,000 should have an arts and cultural centre,*
- ▶ *Towns with populations less than 10,000 should have a community centre, sports facility and welfare services.*

Project Ireland 2040 also sets out the populations of towns in line with the 2016 census, noting that Birr has a population of 4,370, Edenderry has a population of 7,359 and Tullamore has a population of 14,607. Building directly on the hierarchy as a guideline for settlements, Project Ireland 2040 additionally notes the need to build a diverse and inclusive Ireland (p.84).

### 2.2 Culture 2025 - Éire Ildánach:

#### **A Framework Policy to 2025 Culture 2025**

is the Government's overarching policy to embrace Ireland's culture and cultural sector. It is established based on the following values:

- ▶ *The intrinsic value of culture;*
- ▶ *The value of culture to our lives and our communities;*
- ▶ *The right of everyone to participate in the cultural life of the nation;*
- ▶ *The importance of the Irish language, our cultural heritage, folklore, games, music and the uniqueness of our Gaeltacht areas;*
- ▶ *The value of cultural diversity, informed by the many traditions and social backgrounds now in Ireland;*
- ▶ *The value of culture as a means of fostering a more sustainable future for Ireland, including through economic and social policy; and*
- ▶ *The value of culture in presenting Ireland to the world.*

Given that the arts infrastructure in Offaly had been underdeveloped (until the considerable collaborative investment between Offaly County Council and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media; with the development of Esker Arts in Tullamore); these values have potential for further expression in Offaly.

### 2.3 Investing in our Culture, Language and Heritage 2018–2027

Investing in our Culture, Language and Heritage 2018-2027, sets out the Government's plans for significant investment on a phased basis to 2027. This investment will support a modern and progressive approach to developing and protecting our culture, language and heritage. Priorities in investment relevant to this report include investment in local arts and cultural infrastructure nationwide (€40m), investment in media production and audiovisual industry (€200m), investment in our national parks and nature reserves (€50m), celebrating and investing in our built heritage (€60m) and protecting our natural heritage and biodiversity (€60m). Our Culture, Language and Heritage 2018-2027 recognises that arts and culture function as a robust social infrastructure and underpin individual wellbeing.



## 2.4 National Biodiversity Action Plan 2017–2021

The principal objectives of the National Biodiversity Action Plan 2017-2021 include stepping up conservation measures to restore peatlands, combat the spread of invasive alien species, implement local Biodiversity Action Plans and invest in agri-environment schemes. The need for solutions to tackle pressures including climate change and financing of biodiversity conservation is recognised nationally and internationally.

Public engagement at local level is recognised as particularly important to increase awareness and facilitate participation in protecting natural heritage. Fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility for conservation will be key to investment and underpin the quality of the tourism and recreation sectors. In the context of Offaly, arts and culture present significant opportunities for creative engagement with biodiversity, particularly in relation to Lough Boora.

## 2.5 Our Rural Future – Rural Development Policy 2021 - 2025

Our Rural Future recognises the important roles for culture, heritage and the creative industries in strengthening rural Ireland's offering for young people, community health and wellbeing, tourism and economic development. A key deliverable of Our Rural Future is to 'provide investment for multipurpose spaces in the community (e.g., community centres, libraries, and sports clubs) for a variety of activities, including leisure, community, cultural and services provision'. An arts/cultural centre provides strong potential as a place for people to come together, in a multi-purpose space. Given the lack of a community centre in Edenderry, the library/arts space will provide an important multi-purpose space as a connecting point for community.

In relation to young people, it is interesting to note that stakeholder consultation has 'highlighted that there is also often a gap in the diversity of activities available in rural areas for young people, outside of sports' which suggests a recognition within policy of the importance for young people of spaces for meeting and cultural participation. This

“empower local communities and enhance community health and wellbeing by supporting heritage, arts, cultural activities”

rural development policy notes 'the ongoing challenge of young people moving to Ireland's cities and overseas means a loss of talent and potential for rural communities. It deprives rural areas of a cohort who could act as key contributors to society, to their communities and to the local economy'. The policy 'places a particular focus on supporting young people in rural communities to encourage their active participation in issues that affect their daily lives, to build their leadership capabilities'. It is worth noting that these (active participation and leadership) are areas in which the arts excel. Our rural future additionally undertakes to 'empower local communities and enhance community health and wellbeing by supporting heritage, arts, cultural activities and other

activities to tackle social issues such as cohesion, rural isolation and mental health'. In relation to supporting employment and careers in rural areas (Chapter 4), Our Rural Future notes the close alignment between tourism and culture, which 'attracts overseas visitors to experience our unique cultural offering, as well as contributing to the wellbeing of local communities and supporting jobs in many rural areas'. This alignment has a strong relevance for Birr's 'Destination Town' designation. Finally, Our Rural Future notes that 'the Creative Industries support jobs in areas such as Culture and Heritage, Performing Arts, TV, video and films, software and computer games development, visual arts, design, crafts and architecture. This sector has potential for strong growth, and for the generation of high-quality employment in rural areas. Film Offaly and Offline Film Festival are initiatives of note to harness the potential of this sector in Offaly. Furthermore, one of the aims of the proposed Birr Creative Court is to support and nurture local creatives through opportunities to connect with national and international practitioners in residence, serving to raise the ambition and potential for the local creative sector.

The vision that every person in Ireland should have the opportunity to realise their full creative potential is central to Creative Ireland's ethos.

#### 2.6 Creative Ireland Programme

The Creative Ireland Programme is an all-of-government culture and wellbeing programme that inspires and transforms people, places and communities through creativity. Established in 2017 as a five-year programme, Creative Ireland arose from *Ireland 2016*, the hugely successful state initiative to mark the hundredth anniversary of the Easter Rising. The vision that every person in Ireland should have the opportunity to realise their full creative potential is central to Creative Ireland's ethos. The vision is supported in each county through a Culture and Creativity Strategy delivered by a culture team within each local authority, pursued through the five main pillars of the Creative Ireland Programme:

## Creative Ireland – Five Pillars

### Pillar 1

Enabling the Creative Potential of Every Child.

### Pillar 2

Enabling Creativity in Every Community.

### Pillar 3

Investing in our Creative and Cultural Infrastructure.

### Pillar 4

The Creative Industries: Ireland as a Centre of Excellence in Media Production.

### Pillar 5

Unifying our Global Reputation Participation and access are central to the vision. Connecting artists and other creative producers to communities is also regarded as essential to realising the vision.

The Creative Ireland Programme has also published an independent study in relation to 'Engaging the Public on Climate Change through the Cultural and Creative Sectors'. The report (prepared by M-CO) identifies the role that culture and creativity can play in:

- ▶ Engaging new audiences – including audiences that would have been unlikely to seek out information or attend events relating to climate change;
- ▶ Increasing awareness and understanding – including in relation to scope and scale of the climate challenge and people's capacity to act;
- ▶ Exploring different values and beliefs – embracing tensions and highlighting different value systems and worldviews;
- ▶ Creating space for constructive discussion – where diverse audiences can engage equally beyond challenges; imaging futures and the solutions or trade-offs that might get us there; and
- ▶ Leading by example – where cultural and creative organisations can lead in demonstrating climate action in their operations.

The report also notes some risks and concerns inherent in cultural processes and production, where cultural works are often more concerned with questions than answers. This can present a risk that if participants feel powerless to act on the awareness created. Conversely, if creative practitioners are directed towards the promotion of certain ideas or solutions, such 'instrumentalisation' would be seen to compromise the creative integrity of practitioners and undermine the integrity of the project or any such programme.

Building on this report, the Creative Ireland Programme recently launched the Creative Climate Action fund, which seeks to meaningfully connect people with the profound changes happening in our environment, society and economy arising from climate change.

## 2.7 Our Public Libraries 2022

Our Public Libraries references the significant cultural role of public libraries, central to the delivery and co-ordination of both the Decade of Centenaries 2012-2022 and Creative Ireland 2017-2022. The ambition of 'Our Public Libraries 2022', reinforces the library as a place at the centre of the community with guidance and support across a range of areas including reading and literacy, lifelong learning for all ages, business and employment, and health and wellbeing (p.17). The report sets out three strategic programmes for service development, including reading and literacy, learning and information and community and culture. These strategic programmes include commitments to 'work with local and national partners to establish libraries as a central community, civic and cultural space within their local areas'.

Our Public Libraries also places a strong emphasis on digital literacy, and advocates for libraries to have the full range of technology and equipment to support all types of users, such as study spaces, adult learning zones, assistive technologies, innovation spaces, digital suites and hot desk facilities. This emphasis is underpinned by commitments to provide users with access to training in the latest technologies and to coordinate with designers, software experts and manufacturers to provide training to staff in the use of innovative technology, as well as tutorials to the public. *'Equipped with the latest technologies, they can provide a space for users to experiment and innovate with 3D design, printing, web and graphic design, computer coding, circuit making and game design'* (p.39).

## 2.8 Climate Action and Just Transition

At a global level, (UN, WEF) at a European level (New Green Deal, EU and Digital Transition) and in Ireland at national and local level, climate and sustainability are now at the top of everyone's agenda.

Ireland's **Climate Action Plan 2021** contains a dedicated chapter on "A Just Transition Plan for the Midlands Region", recognising that *'the peat industry and related power generation have been hugely significant for the Midlands region economically, culturally and socially'* (p.50). The plan also notes the appointment of a Just Transition Commissioner with a mandate to recommend to the government the essential elements of a just transition for those workers and communities. The Climate Action Plan 2021 also notes the establishment of the Midlands Regional Transition Team with a mandate to pursue funding opportunities to mitigate the impact of job losses on individuals and the regional economy, develop alternative forms of employment, attract investment, and maximise existing employment opportunities and resources.

The Just Transition Commissioner, Kieran Mulvey, has made four **Just Transition Progress Reports** to Government (April 2020, September 2020, December 2020, and December 2021).

The first report notes that Lough Boora Discovery Park represents (p.46) 'an extraordinary national asset and hidden gem. It showcases what can be achieved with co-operative planning between State services' and identifies that strategic partnerships between Bord na Móna, ESB, the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Coillte, Local Authorities and Waterways Ireland, present an unrivalled opportunity to further expand family active and tourist potential across the entire midland region.

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'The report notes the heartfelt love and pride of place expressed by management and employees in their workplaces, workshops, generation plants, and the bogs themselves. That collective passion should be harnessed and recorded for current and future generations. It is an important part of our tradition and rural history and our progress as a nation over the last seventy years'.

The April 2020 report notes that an interdepartmental group led by the Taoiseach has been established to coordinate the work of Government, including departments with responsibility for culture, community and rural development and heritage and local government. This April 2020 report also notes (p.47) the 'heartfelt love and pride of place expressed by management and employees in their workplaces, workshops, generation plants, and the bogs themselves. That collective passion should be harnessed and recorded for current and future generations. It is an important part of our tradition and rural history and our progress as a nation over the last seventy years'.

The report recommends that a 'Centre for Climate Change' should be established in the Midlands. The purpose of such a centre would be to create an informative visitor centre for the documentation of the Midlands transformative process to a low carbon economy and the eco-sustainability of Ireland's climate change policies and programmes. The history and memory of Bord na Móna and the ESB activity over the last seven decades should be incorporated in one central photographic/

oral history archive. The centre could also be used to facilitate primary and secondary school visits, in particular transition year student visits, to support climate, environmental and other natural sciences education.

The report also highlights the loss of rates income, being particularly sizeable for Offaly and Longford County Councils 'and will affect the provision of the Councils' core and discretionary services' and notes that it would be extremely unfair in circumstances over which these local authorities had no responsibility and for a decision which was not expected until 2027 that they should be burdened with these losses.

The December 2020 report notes the establishment, under the Midland Regional Transition Team (MRTT) of four working groups (WGs) relating to education, training and research (WG1), employment generation (WG2), Employment Continuity Pathways (WG3) and Community Assistance Programme / Social Enterprise Interventions (WG4). This report also highlights Government investment of €31m to support Just Transition along with additional funding opportunities, and the

development of a Territorial Just Transition Plan by each member state of the European Union. The Territorial Plan will help to guide EU investment in this area that might seek to address social, demographic, economic, health and environmental impacts.

Government's response to the first Just Transition Progress Report notes the proposal for the development of a Centre for Climate Change and Just Transition. Government has also provided a July 2021 update on the implementation of the Just Transition Programme in the Midlands. The July 2021 update notes (inter alia) investment of €10m under the EU Life Programme to the Peatlands and People Consortium being led by Bord na Móna to develop a regional Peatlands Knowledge Centre of Excellence, a Just Transition Accelerator to support enterprise development in the region, and an immersive People's Discovery Attraction.

The Final Progress Report from the Just Transition Commissioner issued in December 2021. In the Recommendations and Future Actions, the report notes (pp.28-29) that *'Of particular benefit over the last two years is the high level of support from various Government Departments and Schemes around the creation, development and reopening of boglands, greenways, canal ways and hill and mountain trails access both for local communities and for national recreational purposes (walking, hiking, cycling and heritage and wild life and bio diversity exploration). These have been of immeasurable wellbeing and staycation opportunity during the Covid pandemic for the national population and has added significantly to the Hidden Midlands tourist potential'* and that *'Consideration should be given to planning new and visionary schemes to enhance these offerings across the Midlands'*.

*'Of particular benefit over the last two years is the ... creation, development and reopening of boglands, greenways, canal ways and hill and mountain trails access both for local communities and for national recreational purposes (walking, hiking, cycling and heritage and wild life and bio diversity exploration).*

## Midlands Pathway to Transition Phase I Objectives and Measures

In October 2020, the MRTT agreed the 'Midlands Pathway to Transition', which sets out the three phases of transition over 10 years. For cultural and arts infrastructure, there are a number of relevant opportunities within the objectives and measures of this plan, relating to Phase 1 (1 – 3 years) including:

### Objective 1

Mitigating redundancies and the effects of restructuring in short term.

**Measure 1.1:**

Finance projects that can be delivered in the short term and will support economic, social and environmental development and provide positive early momentum to the transition process, particularly within impacted communities.

### Objective 2

Assessing, securing and addressing peat related assets and legacies.

**Measure 2.2:**

Assess and secure relevant assets for future economic and community purposes;

**Measure 2.3:**

Assess and secure relevant land assets for future economic and community purposes;

**Measure 2.6:**

Facilitation of the delivery of the Eden Ireland LIFE Integrated Project.

### Objective 3

Developing community resilience and adaptation.

**Measure 3.1:**

Ensure that communities and groups are engaged in transition process and planning;

**Measure 3.2:**

Identify and support the inventory of community led projects across the region and develop related economies of scale and synergies;

**Measure 3.3:**

Develop capacity in affected communities in order that communities and their residents can be active, engaged agents of transition.

### Objective 4

Enhancing public sector capacity and regional profile.

**Measure 4.4:**

Build on current brand, value proposition and collective offering to further promote the region as a place to live, learn, work and invest.

### Objective 5

Innovation, investment and research to realise new opportunities and growth sectors.

**Measure 5.5:**

Progress the establishment of a landmark national Centre for Climate Change and Just Transition in the Midlands.

This report identifies emerging opportunities, including in digitalisation and sustainable tourism, both of which could have relevance for arts infrastructure in Offaly.

Innovative and community-led rural development projects are also noted in Annex 2 of the report. Some of the case studies highlighted could also reflect possibilities for the arts in Offaly. The Creetown Initiative in Scotland with a focus on quality of life for its village, now employs 14 people and has delivered arts projects which have redesigned public realm and also provided important youth and enterprise services. The Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord in Germany is formed on an old iron works and integrates open recreational space with leisure opportunities, including cultural activities such as theatre, concerts, lightshows, festivals and outdoor movies.

The report therefore notes that, in a post-industrial or just transition context, arts and culture have a role to play in developing opportunities for Offaly and the Midlands.

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In addition to these reports, the **National Economic and Social Council (NESC)** has also published **Four Case Studies on Just Transition – Lessons for Ireland**. Of relevance to this study, lessons from the NESC report note that:

- ▶ All the case studies show examples of populations encouraged to reside and work in a particular area by the state in order to develop a particular resource for the public good ...contributing to the economic development and energy security of whole countries.
- ▶ An inclusive, place-based approach is necessary, with an overall focus on regional development, not just the directly affected workers and companies.
- ▶ Regional development programmes also need to be long-term and based in the area for the long haul, so as to build trusting relationships and to support iterative approaches to social dialogue and 'learning by learning'.

- ▶ Understanding the concerns and context of a community facing transition creates a rounded response that is more likely to become embedded in local mobilisations.
- ▶ Such regional bodies with government funding that are founded on a place-based public participation approach need not have major funding but can deliver bespoke supportive projects to affected regions. Process, delivered by trusted local institutions, organisations and people, can be as important as major financial support.
- ▶ Uncovering, valuing and cultivating the existing skills and capacities of a region can assist in sustainably developing the region and creating long-term high-quality employment.
- ▶ It is important to recognise and celebrate the past but how you do this can vary and should reflect the community's perspective. A heritage or museum approach is not necessarily the best approach; ensuring the continued viability of a community may be the best way of recognising past endeavours.



## 2.9 The Arts Council

The overarching policy framework for The Arts Council is based on the ten-year strategy **Making Great Art Work (2015)**. This strategy sets forth a vision for an Ireland in which:

- ▶ The arts are valued as central to civic life, as a hallmark of local and national identity, and as sign and signature of our creativity as a people;
- ▶ The arts are practiced and enjoyed widely in our communities, public spaces (real and virtual) and in dedicated venues and centres across the country;
- ▶ Artists and practitioners whose exceptional talent and commitment lead them to work professionally in the arts can have productive and rewarding careers;
- ▶ Local and national politicians, decision-makers and officials in a wide range of departments and agencies recognise the distinctive societal value of the arts and provide for them accordingly; and
- ▶ The Arts Council as the national development agency for the arts is resourced adequately to address the full breadth of its remit.

Making Great Art Work sets out five priority areas; the artist; public engagement; investment strategy; spatial and demographic planning; developing capacity. In delivering on the goal for The Artist, The Arts Council's strategy seeks to 'value and support artists working in a broad range of contexts' (Objective 5) with supporting commitment to reflect 'the range of practices and variety of settings in which artists make work and engage with the public'. In delivering on the goal for Public Engagement, The Arts Council's strategy seeks to 'create opportunities for increased engagement in the arts by particular communities' (Objective 7). A supporting action within this objective undertakes to 'invest in artists and arts organisations with a commitment to high-quality collaborative, community-focused arts practice'. The Investment Strategy makes clear that investment considerations include quality, artform development and public engagement (Objective 10) a focus on artistic activity (Objective 11) and support for ambitious, original and experimental work (under Objective 13). Within Spatial and Demographic Planning, the Arts Council wishes to ensure that investment in the arts is strategic and sustainable (Objective 17), which includes a supporting

action to 'advise that government capital funds contribute to maintaining and operating the existing built infrastructure, so focusing our current investment on artistic activity'. In relation to this objective, it is important that Birm Theatre & Arts Centre aligns with Arts Council Policy to strengthen its strategic role and position for ongoing support.

The Arts Council **Arts Centre Policy and Strategy (2019)** is aligned to Project Ireland 2040, noting that the aforementioned 'hierarchy of settlement and related infrastructure' suggests that towns with a population of over 10,000 can expect to be served by an arts and culture centre. To this, the policy and strategy notes that the historic development of arts centres does not align with the settlement hierarchy set out in Project Ireland 2040 and that 'approximately half of Ireland's population lives in rural areas, in small towns and villages. People who live in rural Ireland are entitled to access the arts within their own places, or within a reasonable distance' (p.4) and Arts Centre Policy and Strategy makes clear that the Arts Council 'support (for) a network of arts centres which make it possible for artists and audiences to make and see work in rural and urban locations'.

The Arts Centre Policy and Strategy states that:

- ▶ The Arts Council will ensure support (for) a network of arts centres which make it possible for artists and audiences to make and see work in rural and urban locations;
- ▶ The production of work across art forms in a variety of locations, rather than largely concentrated in Dublin, is very desirable. Artists, participants and audiences are served better by the ability to make work in a range of places across Ireland, with regional nuance adding to recognition and ownership of work;
- ▶ Future investment from The Arts Council will be based upon work of excellence within arts centres. This may be in facilities, artform or practice area expertise, in the scale and/or quality of participant and audience engagement, or in the production supports offered by the centre to artists;
- ▶ Larger arts centres will be encouraged to operate as cluster co-ordinators; they will be agents for the development, production and dissemination of work across a range of centres both locally and nationally;
- ▶ The developmental needs and challenges of individual arts centres and networks of arts centres are recognised.

- ▶ The ability of these centres to grow and develop, to support and engage with their communities, has consistently been hampered by the absence of necessary resources: physical space, production expertise, human resources and funding for the production of work.
- ▶ Provision of working space for artists and artistic production was largely not considered. Despite this, many arts centres now directly support artists and the production of work, albeit within the limitations of their physical space.

This further reinforces the importance and central role of Birr Theatre and Arts Centre and the newly opened Esker Arts in Tullamore, to support the work of the creative sector in Offaly, through the commissioning, production and presentation of excellent and innovative work. It also emphasises the need for arts initiatives seeking Arts Council funding to clearly articulate their strengths and potential across practice areas, production supports and public engagement. The Arts Council provides more than funding. As the national agency for the development of the arts, the Arts Council also offers a range of research and policy

supports. These include a **Practical Guide for Board Members of Arts Organisations**, which contains guidance on legal structures, charitable status, building and sustaining a great board and CEO engagement. In previous Arts Council research, the Arts Council also published the 2004 Auditoria Report. The Auditoria Report sought to provide a means to relate infrastructural support programmes to expenditure on performing arts production and touring and of ensuring that appropriate supports are provided to enhance the programming capability of venue managers, while also optimising the efficiency of touring organisations. The report also sought to identify gaps in infrastructure and notes (in 2004) that Offaly remained an area of poor infrastructure. This is not to take from the presence or programme of the Birr Theatre and Arts Centre (established in 2000), where the Auditoria Report noted that a 40km distance between venues was an optimal span for ensuring that each has a viable audience base and that *'long-term objectives will be advanced by assessing progress in addressing gaps in provision, avoiding mutually disadvantageous overlaps and growing the range of activities available to particular audiences within the 40km frame'*

(p.10). Birr is 36km south west from Tullamore and Edenderry is a journey of a further 35km east of Tullamore.

While clearly warranted and long identified by the Arts Council as necessary, the development of Offaly's second arts centre in the County Town of Tullamore, nonetheless places even more importance on the need for Offaly County Council to ensure that the unique contribution and value of each arts initiative is clearly articulated and understood, and to work from that basis to ensure integration and complementarity across the county's arts infrastructure.

The Arts Council's Arts Centre Policy and Strategy builds on a **2019 Review of Arts Centres**. This review advises that, across the 48 arts centres within the study, the average funding to each arts centre (in 2017) was €151,999 from the respective local authority, and €112,214 from The Arts Council (p.23). This 2019 review notes that many centres receive under €100,000 from one or both of these funding sources and it would take any new arts centre a number of years to demonstrate its potential and develop strong funding relationships.

## 2.10 Life Worth Living 2020 – The Report of the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce (November 2020).

This report makes a number of recommendations in relation to:

- ▶ Income, taxation and financial provision measures;
- ▶ Education and training supports;
- ▶ Technology supports;
- ▶ Mental health supports;
- ▶ Social protection measures; and
- ▶ Copyright measures.

This taskforce also noted recent National Economic Plan stakeholder engagement sessions<sup>1</sup>. From these sessions Life Worth Living noted that 'the position and future of towns and cities warranted much discussion as the economic landscape changes and remote working becomes more of a norm. The quality of life in our regional towns and villages will play a key role in delivering a balanced regional economy as envisaged in the National Economic Plan' (p.9).

Life Worth Living also reflects on Project Ireland 2040's objective for Ireland to be a society where individual wellbeing is the cornerstone of all public policy. Deriving from that (Project Ireland 2040) plan, the capital development programme for the cultural sector outlined in the aforementioned Investing in our Culture, Language and Heritage 2018 – 2027 may well seek to incorporate learnings or new opportunities that have arisen during the COVID-19 pandemic.

the...future of towns and cities warranted much discussion as the economic landscape changes and remote working becomes more of a norm...

1 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/60532-national-economic-plan-stakeholder-engagementsummary-report-of-breakout-sessions/>

### 2.11 Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027

Under the County Development Plan, the arts are recognised as central to ‘Social Inclusion, Community and Cultural Development’ (Ch.9) noting that arts and cultural facilities not only contribute to the artistic, social and general quality of life of communities, they are also significant contributors to the economy of the County by attracting visitors, investment and job creation.

The Plan also notes that the renovation of Tullamore Community Arts Centre will be a valuable contribution for the people of Tullamore and surrounds, and acknowledges the contribution of Birr Theatre and Arts Centre and Public Access Arts in Edenderry and commits to supporting same, where appropriate.

Specific development policies, in this regard, seek to:

- ▶ Assist, where feasible, in the provision and extension of social, community and cultural facilities and amenities within the county;
- ▶ Implement the Creative Ireland Programme 2017-22, Council’s Arts Strategy 2018-2022 and the Offaly Culture and Creative Strategy 2018-2021; and
- ▶ Maximise the per cent for art scheme for Offaly in relation to its major capital projects which provides opportunities for artists of all disciplines to create work for the public realm.

Chapter 4 of the County Development Plan deals with landscape and biodiversity but nonetheless recognises the integrated potential of the sculpture park at Lough Boora, noting: *‘The development of Lough Boora Discovery Park in Offaly, voted ‘Irelands Favourite Place’ in a nationwide Royal Town Planning Institute competition in 2018, is an example of a suitable after use for a cutaway bog, providing important habitats for a wide range of animals, birds and plants along with amenity facilities such as a Sculpture Park, visitor centre, angling area, bird watching facilities and walking and cycling routes’* (p.107).

*‘The development of Lough Boora Discovery Park in Offaly, voted ‘Irelands Favourite Place’ in a nationwide Royal Town Planning Institute competition in 2018, is an example of a suitable after use for a cutaway bog, providing important habitats for a wide range of animals, birds and plants along with amenity facilities such as a Sculpture Park, visitor centre, angling area, bird watching facilities and walking and cycling routes’*

*Offaly County  
Development Plan  
2021–2027 recognises  
Birr’s role as a Tourism  
Destination Town having  
particular regard to its  
built heritage including  
Birr Castle, Gardens  
and Science Centre...*

Within the County Development Plan, the context for tourism and recreational development (Ch.6) notes that Offaly sits within two of Fáilte Ireland’s regional tourism brands, with the majority of the county located within Ireland’s Ancient East, while the west of the county bordering the River Shannon is located within Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands. Ireland’s Ancient East has been developed by Fáilte Ireland as a branded visitor experience encompassing the rich heritage and cultural assets in the midlands and eastern part of the country and focuses on Ireland’s rich built, natural and cultural heritage, interpreted at key historical sites, many of which are owned and managed by the Office of Public Works. Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands focuses on the brand of ‘the green heartlands of Ireland’s natural beauty’, centred around rural communities. The Hidden Heartlands promotes land and water trails in counties along the River Shannon.

Offaly County Development Plan 2021 – 2027 recognises: *‘Birr’s role as a Tourism Destination Town having particular regard to its built heritage including Birr Castle, Gardens and Science Centre, its accessibility and proximity to key tourism destinations including natural amenities, and recreational opportunities including the Slieve Bloom Mountains, Lough Boora Discovery Park and Banagher Marina on the River Shannon’.*

The plan also highlights Tullamore’s role as *‘a tourism hub and its development as a Tourism Destination Town having particular regard to its distilling heritage including Tullamore Dew Visitor Centre, its accessibility and proximity to key tourism destinations including natural amenities, and recreational opportunities including the Grand Canal and adjoining greenway, Lough Boora Discovery Park, Slieve Bloom Mountains, Durrow Monastic Site and Clara Bog Visitor Centre’.*

Edenderry is recognised as an important service hub for the Grand Canal greenway in the East of the county (p.200). The County Development Plan also references the potential of the Grand Canal Greenway to develop regional projects with Kildare, Laois & Westmeath (p. 189)

Tourism objectives in the County Development Plan, with relevance to this strategy include:

- ▶ To facilitate the development of a tourism resource using cutaway peatlands in conjunction with Bord na Móna and Fáilte Ireland, subject to environmental considerations and nature designations, for example, recreational forestry, outdoor pursuits, peatways on the network of bogs and industrial railways and a designation of a National Peatlands Heritage Park.
- ▶ To promote the existing educational and amenity facilities at Clara Bog Nature Reserve and Visitor Centre and Lough Boora Discovery Park and their expansion, subject to appropriate assessment.
- ▶ To build on Birr's role as a Destination Town in particular having regard to its built heritage and proximity to key tourism attractions.
- ▶ To explore the potential of Tullamore becoming a destination for Whiskey tourism based on the presence of the Tullamore Dew Visitor Centre in the town, and the potential of Tullamore forming part of a 'Whiskey Trails' linkage throughout the region and beyond.

Where arts provision is addressed clearly within the plan, including in its role in relation to tourism and in relation to biodiversity and landscape (at Lough Boora), the proposal for development of a National Peatlands Heritage Park, its linkages to a Centre for Climate Change and Just Transition (noted under Just Transition, above) and its potential in the context of Lough Boora Sculpture Park require further exploration.

Tullamore's role 'as a Tourism Destination Town [is noted with] regard to ... its accessibility and proximity to key tourism destinations including natural amenities, and recreational opportunities including the Grand Canal and adjoining greenway, Lough Boora Discovery Park, Slieve Bloom Mountains, Durrow Monastic Site and Clara Bog Visitor Centre.'

## 2.12 OFFALY Local Economic and Community Plan 2016 – 2021

Offaly's Local Economic and Community Plan 2016 – 2021 places people, place and business as the heart of the county's development. The LECP notes that Offaly has a wealth of internationally significant and monastic and archaeological sites (e.g., Clonmacnoise, Durrow and the extinct volcano at Croghan Hill), that peatlands comprise 20% of the land-use in the county and 8% of land area of Offaly is formally designated as being of European importance for nature conservation.

The LECP also identifies that Offaly benefits from steady population growth and from large tracts of publicly owned lands. The plan acknowledges a number of challenges for the county, including:

- ▶ Promoting the 'Offaly' Tourism brand – raising awareness and recognition.
- ▶ Ability to attract and secure new Foreign Direct Investment into the county.
- ▶ Achieving a balance between protecting and enhancing the environment.

These are challenges where the arts can play an important role for Offaly.

The LECP also notes specific opportunities for Offaly in relation to:

- ▶ Creative industries such as Design and Innovation, Film production etc.
- ▶ Quality of life – heritage, landscape, culture, and the international significance of Clara Bog.

In line with the objective to promote strategic economic locations around the county, the LECP includes an action for cultural infrastructure (Action 3.1) which commits to ‘work to support the three major year-round Cultural Centres in Offaly, for their cultural tourism potential, by carrying out the following’:

- ▶ Develop supports and employment opportunities for Arts facilities,
- ▶ Enhance existing arts features at key visitor attractions.

The LECP also specifies actions relating to the arts centre in Tullamore, and to community participation in the arts and investment in quality and sustainable projects, and ensuring that Offaly Arts Strategies are informed by artists, communities, agencies and the voluntary sector.

### 2.13 OFFALY County Council Arts Strategy Inspire, Imagine, Involve 2018-2022

The vision for Offaly County Council’s arts strategy is that “the arts are embedded and integrated into the way of life of the people of County Offaly; accessible to and experienced by all citizens, as well as attracting visitors to the county”. The emphasis on citizens and visitors is notable, while the core values recognise the importance of transparency, of co-operation and partnership in addition to diversity of opportunity, diversity of practice and diversity of place for arts development in the county. It identifies the vital areas for development under three priority strands:

the arts are embedded and integrated into the way of life of the people of County Offaly

- ▶ **The people – enhancing public engagement with the arts;**  
With a goal to ‘Expand opportunities for people to engage and participate in the arts, countywide, through new partnership based initiatives and the consolidation/ development of existing county arts office programmes’.
- ▶ **The place – promoting the arts in civic space;**  
With a goal to ‘Enhance sense of place and build on the distinctive cultural identity of County Offaly by engaging artists to collaborate in the design and development of the counties physical, social and cultural spaces’.
- ▶ **The process – nurturing artistic talent and creative endeavour;**  
With a goal to ‘Continue to nurture and support artistic endeavour, so that great art can be enjoyed by all’.

Highlighted among the key strengths of Offaly includes FilmOffaly and the strong pool of creative talent based locally; high quality arts and community festivals, predominantly based in Birr; Birr Theatre and Arts Centre for presenting and promoting the arts and, as an incubator hub for arts festival management.

The planned actions under the Offaly Arts Strategy 2018-2022 have a clear and targeted approach, identifying specific initiatives including: arts, health and wellbeing organisation, Anam Beo, Music Generation (with Westmeath), partnering with Bord na Móna in relation to Lough Boora, support for artists, for FilmOffaly, and for youth arts programmes.

There are also specific actions in relation to support for key venues in Birr, Edenderry and Tullamore. In relation to Birr, the art strategy commits to (2.1.3) '*Continue to provide resources to Birr Theatre and Arts Centre to sustain the quality of its programme while developing its business potential as a festivals hub (Birr Vintage Week and Arts Festival, Scripts Ireland's Playwriting Festival, OFFline Film Festival, Hullabaloo! Offaly's Children's Arts Festival, Birr Festival of Music)*'. This measure includes the possibility of a hub for festivals in Birr. Although the hub is not described in any detail, the measure seems to reflect a felt need and opportunity that is seen as strategically important for Offaly.

The consultation process highlighted many development and investment priorities for the county, and the arts strategy also includes a SWOT analysis (p20). Highlighted among the key strengths of Offaly includes FilmOffaly and the strong pool of creative talent based locally; high quality arts and community festivals, predominantly based in Birr; Birr Theatre and Arts Centre for presenting and promoting the arts and, as an incubator hub for arts festival management. Key weaknesses referred to insufficient built arts infrastructure in terms of locally based creative spaces for community participation and work spaces for artists; a fragmented arts landscape between the east and west of the county, particularly evident in the main centres of Tullamore, Edenderry and Birr. Key opportunities highlighted the development of the Sculpture Park at Lough Boora Discovery Park as a high-quality national arts facility; working with the Local Enterprise Office to stimulate crossover, co-creation and co-production between arts and other sectors; building the FilmOffaly project to invest and grow the talent pool and skills base positioning Offaly to evolve as a regional hub that supports national film and audio-visual clusters in the east and west of Ireland. Threats highlighted



the lack of clarity around the artistic ethos of Lough Boora Sculpture Park and the gaps in infrastructure and facilities to support artists to build a sustainable career at home, leading to outward migration from the county.

Spaces and places formed one of the eight strategic areas for development in the previous **Offaly County Council Arts Plan 2012 – 2016**, highlighting arts spaces for performance, exhibition and creation of work/studios in public and private ownership in the county. Acknowledging the pivotal role of Birr Theatre & Arts Centre as the home of the arts in Offaly since 2000, the plan highlighted the need to be mindful of BTAC concerns regarding the emergence of the proposed Tullamore Arts Centre and Offaly County Council's role in encouraging a mutually supportive relationship. An objective relating to the proposed Tullamore Arts Centre highlighted the need to work in collaboration with other

cultural infrastructure in the county, particularly Birr Theatre and Arts Centre, 'to develop initiatives, share resources, increase audiences and participation and raise the profile of Offaly nationally' (p.41). The plan acknowledged the new phase of Lough Boora Sculpture Park at that point (2012), the value of the project in terms of cultural tourism to the county and the value of the high standard of artistic integrity which has elevated the project's international profile. This was supported by objectives to establish a partnership organisation in which to deliver a programme and commission artworks and balance the programme of new commissions with a dynamic programme of activities (p.42). A Civic and Community space for Edenderry was also included in this plan with the objective of supporting and promoting community and youth arts activity and examining how the arts could be integrated into a new civic facility in Edenderry (p.44).

#### **2.14 Creating Collaborative Communities, Offaly Libraries Interim Development Plan 2022 – 2023**

Offaly Libraries Interim Development Plan references library involvement in many socially inclusive library events for the community, delivered free of charge via the library branch network and/or online. These include cultural activities such as the Children's Book Festival, Bealtaine Festival, Seachtain na Gaeilge, Heritage Week, STEAM programmes, Exhibitions, Author visits, Music events, Poetry, Art and a variety of activities in support of national library campaigns. The proposed Edenderry library and arts space aligns with 'Our Public Libraries 2022' which highlights the importance in servicing community and culture, (p. 29), highlighting accessibility, outreach initiatives for marginalised groups and welcoming community spaces to share diverse cultural experiences with new communities and cultures in Ireland (p.30).

### 2.15 Offaly's Culture and Creativity Strategy

This Culture and Creativity Strategy aligns with the Creative Ireland Programme and sets out an integrated approach between Arts, Libraries and Heritage; *'The Culture Team has the mandate to deliver on Pillar 2; enabling creativity in every community, however Offaly County Council's role is not exclusive to Pillar 2 and will collaborate with communities, groups and agencies to assist with developing and delivering the other priorities'* (p.9). Offaly County Council's strategic priority under Pillar 1 (Creative Youth) of the programme specifically references *'STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Maths), Music Generation and culture and creative programming for children in the library and community'*.

Pillar 2 (Creative Communities) prioritises optimising the meeting of art and nature at Lough Boora Parklands, cultural programming in libraries and key commissions in response to heritage with potential for regional partnerships.

This strategy also notes that, under Pillar 4 of the Creative Ireland programme, the Government is committed to developing Ireland as a centre of excellence in media production. Building on this, Offaly's Culture and Creativity Strategy recognises the strong media and film production sector working in the county, referencing the OFFline Film Festival in Birr and committing to investment in the first OFFline Animation Residency.

### 2.16 Offaly County Council – Arts Council Framework Agreement

This framework agreement forms the basis of shared investment approaches between Offaly County Council and the Arts Council. It is through this agreement that aspects of the respective policies and ambitions of the local authority and the Arts Council are operationalised and funded. The shared ambition to invest in the continued development of Lough Boora Sculpture Park is one of the key projects identified in the framework agreement. A review of this framework is due to be undertaken in the coming months.

### 3. Infrastructure in Context

This section looks at the standing and readiness of the key arts infrastructure considered within this strategy:

- ▶ Birr Theatre and Arts Centre;
- ▶ An integrated library and arts facility proposed for Edenderry;
- ▶ The arts centre nearing completion in Tullamore; and
- ▶ Lough Boora Parklands

Each of these four projects is considered in the context of their location, their offer and in terms of their development across a number of headings, including:

- ▶ Ownership of site/land
- ▶ Infrastructure readiness and available spaces
- ▶ Governance Structure
- ▶ Paid Executive
- ▶ Strategy (in place)
- ▶ Clear Programme Priorities
- ▶ Partnerships / collaborations (that can aid delivery on strategy and programme priorities)
- ▶ Revenue Funding





## 3.1 Birr – Birr Theatre & Arts Centre

Birr Theatre and Arts Centre (BTAC) has played a pivotal role in the development of the arts in Birr and County Offaly for more than 20 years as a host venue for local, national and international performances. BTAC has also played an important strategic and developmental role for four of the five festivals in the town, namely, Scripts Playwrighting Festival, Hullabaloo Children's Arts Festival, Offline Film Festival and Birr Festival Of Music. BTAC has been an important resource for emerging festivals, providing essential support with funding applications and subsequent professional financial management and administration within the initial years of the festivals.

The provision of space for presentation of events, in addition to production, promotional and box office supports are also invaluable to Birr Festivals. BTAC continues to produce Scripts Festival in association with Jasango Theatre, and Hullabaloo Children's Arts Festival in association with Offaly County Council Arts Office. The strength of Birr Theatre & Arts Centre as an incubator hub for arts festival management' was highlighted in County Offaly Arts Strategy *Inspire I Imagine*

*I Involve 2018-2022*. It is also recognised in 'Seeing The Beyond – Birr Festivals Planning for a Shared Future' a report commissioned by Birr 20:20 Vision CLG with support from Offaly Local Development Company. The report (led by Dermot McLaughlin, Creative Strategic Solutions) identifies that *'the support that Birr Theatre provides is in the first instance strategic and developmental, aimed at achieving the end goals of having a cluster of quality festivals and events available to the community in Birr. This support allows festivals to develop artistic programmes that stimulate, challenge, and entertain audiences, and that broaden inclusion, participation and access to culture and the arts for people in Birr'* (p.36). The report also notes that BTAC provides performance spaces as well as administrative, promotional, marketing and production supports.

'Seeing the Beyond' recommendations include continuation of the strategy group, engagement of professional services to provide shared executive support to Birr Festivals, equipment to support live streaming, engagement with tourism bodies and establishing a working group to explore

the potential for an action research project with the arts office. In addition, a specific recommendation (No.4) references BTAC, noting that *'under the auspices of Birr Theatre and Arts Centre, all the festivals will devise an evidence-informed strategy for audience development and engagement for the Birr festivals consortium'*. This alignment reflects the confidence of consultees and stakeholders in the role and expertise of BTAC in relation to audience development.

...This support allows festivals to develop artistic programmes that stimulate, challenge, and entertain audiences, and that broaden inclusion, participation and access to culture and the arts for people in Birr.

While Birr Theatre & Arts Centre has utilised its available space very well, the building is limited to the theatre space and a small foyer space for all public facing activities, thus limiting the capacity for a dedicated visual arts space, and in terms of the production and development of visual arts work within the building.

While Birr Theatre can cater for performances as well as providing spaces for meetings, rehearsals, and workshops in the performing arts space (e.g., across music, dance, theatre, literature and storytelling) there are clear gaps in Birr in relation to gallery space, space for visual arts workshops and artists' workspaces.

A working group, established under the auspices of Birr 2020, has been exploring the potential of the old Courthouse in Birr as a creation space for studios, residencies, additional rehearsal space and development of work across various arts disciplines, including film, animation, visual art and dance. This 'Creative Court' idea would respond to one of the core issues in County Offaly Arts Strategy 2018-2022 which focused on the need to develop and strengthen arts infrastructure,

artist studios and creative participation hubs for community engagement (p.20), and as a creative hub to support local artists to build a sustainable career path and strengthen their creative practice in Offaly.

The former Courthouse is now in the ownership of Offaly County Council (since Summer 2021). A conservation masterplan has been commissioned and emergency works are underway to conserve the building envelope. The use of the building has not yet been determined and, even after the completion of the aforementioned emergency works, it is understood that significant additional work would be needed to make the building ready for any intended purpose.

Provision of workspace for the arts and creative industries could provide complementarity with BTAC in relation to programming, commissioning and presentation of work. As a workspace, it could also provide a hub for residencies with film and animation production companies, and for festivals in Birr to connect and develop work with artists and creatives based there. Such uses need to be further

defined, however, and considered in the context of the available space and how it could be adapted. A governance model and a sustainable financial model for the 'Creative Court' would also have to be established. The space may have some income-generating potential through shared and individual workspace rental. The potential post-COVID

While Birr Theatre can cater for performances as well as providing spaces for meetings, rehearsals, and workshops in the performing arts space there are clear gaps in Birr in relation to gallery space, space for visual arts workshops and artists' workspaces.

shift to remote/nomadic working may support the development of such a space, but careful consideration is required in relation to the fit-for-purpose nature of the proposed facilities. Careful consideration would also need to be given to demand for workspace, and how the Creative Court would complement spaces such as Stream Birr.

Birr is a key tourism town and has been recognised under **Fáilte Ireland's Destination Towns** scheme, which is funded under Project Ireland 2040, with the aim of driving sustainable growth in the Irish tourism sector and higher revenue and job creation around Ireland. This scheme provides funding to Councils to enhance public spaces such as squares, streetscapes and markets in a way that will

engage tourists and enhance their experience in key towns, which could include spaces for food and craft markets, areas for town centre events, public art displays as well as orientation and signage to help visitors explore a town's local heritage. This strategy comes at a time when Birr stands to benefit from strategic opportunities associated with its designation as a Destination Town by Fáilte Ireland.

This scheme provides funding to Councils to enhance public spaces such as squares, streetscapes and markets in a way that will engage tourists and enhance their experience in key towns, which could include spaces for food and craft markets, areas for town centre events, public art displays as well as orientation and signage to help visitors explore a town's local heritage.

## Birr Theatre & Arts Centre

Ownership of site/land	Owned by Birr Scientific & Heritage Foundation. Birr Stage Guild CLG has a 105-year lease and has responsibility for cost of maintenance of building.
Infrastructure Readiness (and available Spaces)	Opened July 2000. The theatre space has a seating capacity of 220. It is a flexible space which can be used for rehearsal spaces etc. Dressing rooms x2, sometimes used for small workshops. Foyer space used for exhibitions.
Governance Structure	Governed by Birr Stage Guild (Musical & Drama Society), Company Limited by Guarantee. Plan to establish a new Board of Directors, instead of existing management company structure.
Paid Executive	Two FTE (36 hours) posts: Director and Marketing/Accounts. Four PT posts: Technician/Caretaker x2 (19.5 hours); Box office/reception & Administration/ Communications (directly engaging audiences, e.g., young people, schools, older people to build audience).
Birr	Programme across all artforms, primarily music (contemporary & classical), film, theatre & youth arts. Co-producing Scripts Festival, Hullabaloo Festival.
Clear Programme Priorities	Programme across all artforms, primarily music (contemporary & classical), film, theatre & youth arts. Co-producing Scripts Festival, Hullabaloo Festival.
Partnerships/ Collaborations	Catalyst for development of recent Birr Festivals (Offline, Scripts, Hullabaloo). Co-producing 'Scripts' and 'Hullabaloo' Festivals with partners.
Revenue Funding	Pobal Community Services Prog. Is main funder, covering 70% of payroll costs. Additional funding through Offaly County Council and the Arts Council.



## Birr Theatre & Arts Centre – SWOT

### STRENGTHS

- ▶ Important hub for production and presentation of work;
- ▶ Key role in facilitating the development of festivals in Birr and in Offaly;
- ▶ A detailed strategy agreed;
- ▶ Initiation of local outreach, community and youth projects;
- ▶ Responsive to local needs;
- ▶ Growing audiences for its programme in the theatre;
- ▶ Birr. The resources of the town would be the envy of many other towns and – coherently curated and articulated – it provides an endless context and source for collaborative engagement. The town also has a long-standing, independent and confident approach to cultural heritage and development with well-developed local networks and resources.

### CHALLENGES/WEAKNESSES

- ▶ Resourcing – and the challenges that paucity of resources places on engaging more broadly/proactively across the arts sector;
- ▶ Limitations of space for office, meetings, workshops, artist residencies;
- ▶ The arts centre lacks an appropriate space for visual arts programme. While the foyer offers an opportunity for artists making works of certain type/scale, the space will not enable a visual arts programme that is competitive in a national funding context and such emphasis undermines the strategic intent and potential of the arts centre;
- ▶ Strategic artistic positioning to reflect alignment with Arts Council Arts Centre Policy (e.g., in relation to developmental programmes, diversity of artist supports beyond performances, workshops and exhibitions etc.);
- ▶ There is a need to broaden the networks and guidance available to the arts centre; e.g., expert outsider perspectives on the board, in relation to wider arts sector, linkages to cultural tourism etc (noting that the ambition to bring in additional perspectives is acknowledged in the BTAC strategy).

# Birr Theatre & Arts Centre – SWOT

## OPPORTUNITIES

- ▶ To develop a strategic vision and priorities for festivals partnership (e.g., to formalise partnerships with festivals, clarify shared objectives and any opportunities for joint programming, shared residencies and nature of supports in service delivery);
- ▶ Given the nature of the space, there are opportunities to programme offsite work beyond its four walls, especially relating to visual arts. This might engage with / take account of curator-in-residence programmes at other arts spaces (e.g., Lismore Castle or Roscommon Arts Centre). Such a programme might be co-ordinated and curated to realise integrated projects in partnership with Birr Castle, with local festivals and/or with a view to the Creative Court proposal. The advance programme to VISUAL Carlow, the work of Uilinn in Skibereen (pop. 2778) and the approach to artists supports of the Glens Centre in Manorhamilton may also be relevant to programme approaches for BTAC;
- ▶ Partnership with Birr Castle Science Gallery & Museum and astrophysics observing facility (I-LOFAR) for creative residencies/commissions crossing into STEAM and creative industries;
- ▶ Film, animation, audio and visual arts and creative residencies/studios through Birr Creative Court to expand artistic programme with innovative approaches/digital media
- ▶ To collaborate with the new arts centre at Tullamore and use the opportunity of the new arts centre to highlight structures and progress already in place in Birr.
- ▶ To play a leadership role in delivery of the 'Seeing the Beyond' initiative relating to festivals.
- ▶ To play a leadership/lead partner role in the development of Birr Creative Court.

## THREATS

- ▶ Covid-19 restrictions will continue to impact the current operational model, affecting box office income potential with limited capacity or changed audience patterns.
- ▶ Pobal CSP funding would be discontinued.
- ▶ Proposals for the development of 'Birr Creative Court' would be in competition with the work of BTAC, or impact on support for BTAC.
- ▶ The evening economy of Birr is not embraced/promoted, linkages to science and technology are left untapped and the potential of BTAC to be a driver is limited.
- ▶ The rates impact of the transition from peat-related industry and power generation weakens Offaly County Council's ability to develop/sustain social, cultural and recreational services.

## Key Considerations Arising:

The Strategic Plan of Birr Theatre and Arts Centre (BTAC) is ambitious in its reach. Its stated mission is wide-ranging, supported by 11 aims and objectives. The 'areas for development / goals' are structured across artform development, building requirements, succession and sustainability (the latter relating to 'staff' and 'funding' and the operating of the centre rather than sustainability in a climate context).

The BTAC proposes a review of visual arts policy. The visual arts space in BTAC is not competitive and, while there will continue to be many artists who wish to exhibit there and benefit from the footfall in the centre, it is recommended that the available space should be targeted to support commercial and promotional opportunities for the kinds of work that can sit well in the space. If funding is to be sought for visual arts projects and programmes, such initiatives should be presented as offsite projects.

Within BTAC's strategy's 'areas for development', some of the goals reflect operational rather than strategic concerns, highlighting that operational pressures remain a focus. A refined strategic

approach is required if BTAC is to retain a leadership position in the changing context of cultural development and opportunities in Birr; as well as the changing context of the arts in Offaly and more widely. The post-COVID context may prove challenging for BTAC, as it may for many venues, but it may also enable BTAC to focus on areas of strength.

The BTAC strategic plan asserts the ambition for BTAC to 'be the centre of the creative ecosystem in the town of Birr'. Given the richness of Birr's offering which is unique in Offaly, in the Midlands, in the Hidden Heartlands and arguably in Ireland – from strategic initiatives relating to cultural tourism and festivals, and the 'Creative Court', to broader potential in linkages with the castle and with science, engineering, invention, astronomy, STEAM, botany, photography etc) – this ambition to be the centre of the creative ecosystem for Birr should be paramount for BTAC. This goes beyond audience development. What can BTAC do for Birr?

Such a focus does not mean a narrowing of perspective. On the contrary, it means

propagating Birr's place in the world. It also aligns well with the Arts Council's 2019 Arts Centre Policy and Strategy, which recognises that *'the production of work across art forms in a variety of locations, rather than largely concentrated in Dublin, is very desirable. Artists, participants and audiences are served better by the ability to make work in a range of places across Ireland, with regional nuance adding to recognition and ownership of work'*.

The planned action (within the BTAC strategy) to seek new board members should include external perspectives with established networks and track records at a national level in commissioning, producing and promoting the arts. Projects and developmental initiatives should also seek to partner widely (nationally and internationally) – leveraging what Birr has to offer. Alongside this, where BTAC can continue to bring together good audiences to see good work, there will be continuing demand from artists and companies to tour to Birr.



## 3.2 Edenderry – Proposed Integrated Library & Arts Facility

A new integrated library and arts facility is proposed for Edenderry. This space is proposed in **Blundell Masterplan (2020)**, which identifies the need for a new library and arts space for Edenderry. This masterplan considers an approach which, when completed, would increase permeability within key areas of the town and connect the main (JKL) street with mixed-use development and parkland around to residential amenity and the grand canal. The Blundell Masterplan recognises that Edenderry's 'location to key transport corridors has seen the population benefit from more affordable homes but leaving little draw and time to spend in the town centre itself. For a largely youthful population there is low usage of services in town and clear indicators of economic downturn with evident town centre vacancy and derelict sites'.

The masterplan notes 'the need for a new library and arts space' identifying that it will 'become an important community destination on JKL Street, providing life, activity, and a new link to the park beyond ...(and) act as an anchor, helping to drive valuable town footfall and activity throughout the day and week'.

Recognising the need for such a facility, the proposed library and arts space project has been successful under a category 2, Rural Regeneration Development Fund (RRDF) application for €2.6m. An Architect-led design team has commenced preliminary design stage. It is proposed that once final design and planning is complete, a category 1 RRDF application will be progressed to enable the next phase of the project.

The proposal is for library and arts space, which would include:

- ▶ Community library, meeting rooms, e-learning and research facilities;
- ▶ My Open Library services;
- ▶ Shared Library and Arts space;
- ▶ Artists' studios;
- ▶ Outdoor programming area.

While the art space forms part of the integrated library and arts facility, it is envisaged that the design of the facility will enable the arts space to operate separately, when required. As currently proposed, the library and arts facility is well located.

*'the need for a new library and arts space' identifying that it will 'become an important community destination on JKL Street, providing life, activity, and a new link to the park beyond ...(and) act as an anchor, helping to drive valuable town footfall and activity throughout the day and week'.*

Edenderry has a unique opportunity to develop processes, programmes and structures that can explore and guide how the arts element of this programme should be run through Offaly County Council's success in securing the Arts Council **Creative Places designation and award for Edenderry**. Through this initiative Creative Places Edenderry, Offaly County Council and Edenderry Municipal Council is working in partnership with Creative Lives, a charity which supports and encourages people to be creative in their everyday lives, on an ambitious

€500,000 three-year project to galvanise the creative and cultural scene in Edenderry.

The project led by Creative Lives includes a steering committee inclusive of Offaly County Council Arts Office and Edenderry Municipal District, together with Offaly County Library Service, Creative Edenderry, North Offaly Community Development Network and Edenderry Community Cabin. The ambition of the partners is to facilitate the emergence of a strong cultural identity for the area and support

sustainable networks and opportunities for cultural engagement and participation. It will aim to achieve this through open, collaborative methods engaging with the community at grassroots level.

The work builds on recent initiatives delivered in partnership by Creative Lives and Offaly County Council Arts Office, which resulted in the creation of the Creative Edenderry community group.

The ambition of the partners is to facilitate the emergence of a strong cultural identity for the area and support sustainable networks and opportunities for cultural engagement and participation. It will aim to achieve this through open, collaborative methods engaging with the community at grassroots level.

## Edenderry – Proposed Integrated Library and Arts Facility

Ownership of site/land	Land owned by Offaly County Council
Infrastructure Readiness (and available Spaces)	Integrated Arts and Library Building forms a key part of Blundell Masterplan and RRDF Funding application.
Governance Structure	It is anticipated that the space will be jointly managed by the arts office and the library service of Offaly County Council.
Paid Executive	It is anticipated that the space will be jointly managed by the arts office and the library service. The library service will have on-site resources primarily engaged in delivering library services and events programmes. It is not yet clear what on-site resources will be available to support arts-led programmes.
Strategy	No strategy in place for the arts space, but key pillars / priorities of a strategy could be distilled from the Creative Places project.
Clear Programme Priorities	No, but the Creative Places project will be of enormous value in this regard.
Partnerships/ Collaborations	The Creative Places project includes Offaly County Council Arts Office and Edenderry Municipal District, together with Offaly County Library Service, Creative Edenderry, North Offaly Community Development Network and Edenderry Community Cabin. The Arts Council and Creative Lives are also key partners in this project..
Revenue Funding	It is envisaged that the programme for the arts space will be resourced through initiatives led by the arts office and the library service.

# Edenderry Arts & Library Facility - SWOT

## STRENGTHS

- ▶ Offaly County Council is leading the project and, the local authority brings capital development expertise as well as expertise in relation to library services and arts programmes.
- ▶ The incorporation of on-site artists' studios is important in affording the project a creative identity. This can play to the location of Edenderry and its connectivity to the greater Dublin area, and enables residency programmes that engage with Edenderry.
- ▶ Co-location of arts and library spaces brings efficiencies in capital and energy costs and can also place the arts in a strong municipal context with the potential to remove barriers.
- ▶ Participation in and support of the Creative Places Edenderry consultations and for emerging projects, has allowed for first hand engagement with artists and the community as regards their aspirations for library and arts provision in Edenderry
- ▶ The location of the proposed space within the town.

## CHALLENGES/WEAKNESSES

- ▶ There is no detailed strategy, programming approach or operating model as yet agreed, albeit the proposed space takes account of a general deficit in relation artist workspaces in the county
- ▶ Arts services in local authorities are less well-resourced than library services. If the arts service and the library service are to share the programme of the arts space 50/50, the basis of programme and operating costs needs to be determined, or whether library personnel will facilitate/enable arts-led events.
- ▶ It can be challenging for the profile of 'hybrid' arts spaces to assert themselves in wider professional arts contexts.



# Edenderry Arts & Library Facility – SWOT

## OPPORTUNITIES

- ▶ The ‘Creative Places’ initiative offers a clear and strategic focus to the arts in Edenderry, helping to explore and define the ways in which an integrated / flexible space can add value.
- ▶ Integrated / flexible spaces can be dynamic and a new facility which has the potential to set its own agenda.
- ▶ Integrated programming may serve the integrated space/agenda well, where arts and libraries collaborate with each other and with relevant external partners to optimise investment. (Offaly County Council’s Culture and Creativity Strategy may also be relevant here).
- ▶ There is an established relationship between arts and library services, through shared programmes or support from libraries for arts programmes e.g., Hullabaloo. This can be built upon to devise a workable strategy for Edenderry.
- ▶ A young and expanding population. The arts space offers an opportunity to engage with these cohorts and connect the commuter population with the culture of the county.
- ▶ The new space may address current weaknesses in visual arts infrastructure in the county.

## THREATS

- ▶ That the new/commuter population will continue to look to Dublin, rather than Edenderry/Offaly for culture/recreation.
- ▶ Integrated / flexible spaces can be challenging and there is not yet a clear brief for the arts space, where guidance (such as that from Theatre Forum) recommends that programming policy for a venue should be in place before the venue is designed;
- ▶ That capital funding for the arts space is not realised;
- ▶ The rates impact of the transition from peat-related industry and power generation weakens Offaly County Council’s ability to develop/sustain social, cultural and recreational services;
- ▶ That arts resources are not sufficient to sustain a programme over time and the space becomes an extension to the library service and rather than meeting local arts needs/potential. In such a scenario, library resources alone may not be sufficient to sustain the space or the programme.

## Key Considerations Arising:

Edenderry is Offaly's second largest town with a population that doubled between 1996 - 2016. The population is younger than the national average and significantly more diverse, while many residents normally commute to the Dublin area for work. Offaly County Library has a well-established tradition of wider civic and cultural engagement from storytelling and readings to events around local history, science and technology and linkages with local festivals and national initiatives. The Creative Places Edenderry project is potentially a game-changer for the proposal to develop an arts space in Edenderry – developing art-led engagement alongside the development of the proposed capital project.

The Creative Edenderry project affords partners the opportunity to explore programme options, identify priorities, consider the operational requirements of such programme priorities and put a strategy in place wherein the space to be developed can sustain and build on the level of activity and service which Creative Edenderry will nurture.

At the time of writing, this is a proposed project and limited consideration has been given to how the proposed arts space will function, vis-à-vis:

- ▶ Breakdown between arts and library use;
- ▶ Breakdown of exhibition, performance and participative uses; and
- ▶ How the space will be managed.

The commuting population is a challenge in itself. Have they time and the inclination to connect with Edenderry and Offaly? How well do they identify with the county as a place where they can live their fullest life? Will post-COVID changes and remote working create new opportunities for engagement here?

Ideas of 'belonging' fit well within a municipal<sup>2</sup> context; that people feel that an arts space belongs to them and that they belong in an arts space. Where a local authority provides a robust basis for the development of public facilities, crucial elements of design, management and (day-to-day) operating processes need to be structured to achieve a sense of belonging, where that is seen to be a critical success factor for Edenderry.

The commuting population is a challenge in itself. Have they time and the inclination to connect with Edenderry and Offaly? How well do they identify with the county as a place where they can live their fullest life? Will post-COVID changes and remote working create new opportunities for engagement here?

<sup>2</sup> 'Belonging to a town or a city'; <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/municipal>

It follows therefore that the demographic dynamic within Edenderry's population need to be harnessed within the space and it is crucial to note the importance of the overall project in terms of social inclusion. As such, Offaly County Council's collaboration with the Creative Places Edenderry project can ensure a greater sense of community and belonging, enabling social inclusion and cohesion through shared cultural activities. While it is important that those aims are factored into the programming ethos of the space, it is also imperative not to confuse the purpose of the Arts and Library Space with the functions of a Community Centre. For example, some activities that would normally take place within a Community Centre may not fit the purpose or be compatible with the operation of the Arts Space. However, a

clear and agreed approach to joint programming of the space between the library service and the arts office can ensure a good balance of professional arts events, exhibitions, workshops, talks and performances, as well as socially inclusive library programming for the community, including readers' events, book clubs, knitting circles and other activities in support of national library campaigns.

If the space is to be a hub for 'shared cultural activities' that suggests an energy where noise, laughter, debate and collaboration could all be key features. The ability to insulate sound and screen off the space from unwanted observation, distraction or interruption will also be key.

A number of other key questions will also arise in the design process. What artforms will it cater for? Will the space enable workshops for both wet and dry work? Will the facility include storage space for groups, where they can access equipment/materials to make set-up and use easy? How will light and lighting be managed in the space? The design and functioning of the arts space need to be well considered and interrogated from the perspective of patrons, active/participative processes, and those producing/presenting projects and programmes. Given their recent experience in the development of the new arts centre in Tullamore, Offaly County Council is well-placed to take on these design challenges.

It follows therefore that the demographic dynamic within Edenderry's population need to be harnessed within the space and it is crucial to note the importance of the overall project in terms of social inclusion.

In addition to design of the arts space, consideration needs to be given to whether the flexibility of the arts space (additional to the flexibility the arts space affords the library) relies on:

- a) **Scheduling** – That workshops/performances /meetings which involve movement will not take place at the same time as exhibitions are on display within the space (unless artists/insurers confirm that they are content with this arrangement); or
- b) **Staffing** – That operational resources are in place to screen/remove/safeguard visual art works when the space is required for quick turnaround of the space between exhibition and performances and turn the space around again for the activity/experience required the following day.

Both tactics (i.e., scheduling and staffing) should ideally be deployed, with programme/ calendar windows restricted at certain times of year for arts projects that involve more significant installations, and design solutions also considered to enable 2-D or screen-based work to be safely managed for most of the year, when the arts space might be safely used for rehearsals, workshops, performances that involve movement.

Edenderry will need to plan and strategise beyond the lifetime of the Creative Places Edenderry process, and should do so from the outset. The expertise and resources of full-time arts centres in Birr and Tullamore are likely to be valuable partners. Such partnerships could support initiatives in Edenderry, initiatives from Edenderry, or joint projects and programmes.

How does Edenderry wish to leverage the resources that will be in place in Birr and Tullamore for the longer term? Are there partnerships that can be established now in the context of Creative Edenderry that will continue to 'pay back' for Edenderry in the longer-term, when the Creative Edenderry project ends? It is important that any partnership initiative in this context is clearly targeted to benefit Edenderry, against which Creative Edenderry and Offaly County Council Arts Office can assess whether proposals from the arts centres in Birr or Tullamore (or other arts partners) can deliver for Edenderry. The success of such partnership initiatives would be beneficial in terms of strengthening ties between new residents in Edenderry and the rest of Offaly and what it has to offer.



## 3.3 Tullamore - Esker Arts

The arts centre in Tullamore, Esker Arts has long been anticipated with some stakeholders dating the ambition back to the 1990s. Offaly County Council had a stated objective for the development of an arts centre in Tullamore in the 2003 – 2009 County Development Plan and the Arts Council's 2004 Auditoria Report notes the gap in arts infrastructure in Offaly. There was a significant campaign of community fund-raising, and the initial proposed approach had to be shelved before the local authority stepped in to purchase and develop the current premises. This development was made possible through the collaborative investment of Offaly County Council and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and Tullamore Community Arts Centre committee; leading to the establishment of Esker Arts CLG. Esker Arts was opened (after the final approval of this completed document) in April 2023.

The arts centre comprises a 228-seat performance space with dressing rooms and green room, plus an outdoor auditorium, two gallery spaces, a number of workshop/studio spaces, a theatre bar, coffee dock, and a number of offices.

The scale and mix of facilities within this arts centre compares favourably with arts centres in other county towns. Where there are currently a number of flexible (art room/workshop etc.) this may enable uses to vary over time, or across programmes, to meet the needs of the centre. Such flexibility may be of particular benefit to the visual arts; the ground floor gallery is well located (close to the street, entrance and information desk) with larger projects being able to benefit from access to the larger first floor gallery.

Many stakeholders highlight the location of Tullamore as a key strength for the arts centre; that it is central and easily accessible by road and rail in a national context that might broaden its appeal to touring work, events, seminars or participative projects. The additional spaces within the centre could also work as breakout rooms for larger events or smaller meeting rooms for boards, groups or networks looking for a central location to meet.

Tullamore is the county town in Offaly and the largest town in Offaly. The arts centre in Tullamore is also central within Offaly and the midlands region, making it an ideal base from

which to operate county-wide or midlands-wide programmes. The spaces within the building could also lend the centre potential to function as a workspace or resource space, potentially providing office space for projects such as Music Generation, Film Offaly, Youth Arts, arts-in-health

Many stakeholders highlight the location of Tullamore as a key strength for the arts centre; that it is central and easily accessible by road and rail in a national context that might broaden its appeal to touring work, events, seminars or participative projects.

or other initiatives. Locating additional services there would add to the services the centre offers, drawing in additional users and would also be likely to aid collaboration and efficiencies in the development of the arts centre and provide integrated support to the arts in Offaly and/or the midlands.

It is estimated that there are over 30 arts groups in Tullamore alone and events like Shakefest and TradFest and the Hullabaloo Festival are likely to see opportunities to present events and workshops in the new arts centre. It is understood that school groups and youth groups have used function rooms in licenced premises for some initiatives and, in the absence of the space and professional support of a dedicated arts centre, it has been challenging to sustain or develop participative programmes. It is encouraging also that the former Kilroy's building, from which the new arts centre has been developed, was used for advance programming by local groups and projects.

The development of the centre raises questions in relation to existing arts infrastructure in the county, particularly in relation to Birr Theatre and Arts Centre and Lough Boora Sculpture Park. How will these organisations work together? How can they create space for each other? How will they promote each other? (The context for the space for Edenderry is somewhat different in that it is a proposal in development, will be preceded by the arts centre in Tullamore and the Edenderry community now has programme development funding and a steering committee that can enable pilot partnership processes and longer-term planning).

It is estimated that there are over 30 arts groups in Tullamore alone and events like Shakefest and TradFest and the Hullabaloo Festival are likely to see opportunities to present events and workshops in the new arts centre.

## Tullamore – Esker Arts

Ownership of site/land	Building owned by Offaly County Council.
Infrastructure Readiness (and available Spaces)	Building now opened (after the final approval of this completed document), April 2023. The configuration of spaces includes: 2 x Gallery Spaces. Auditorium with seating capacity of 228. Outdoor auditorium. Dressing rooms. Workshop/ Rehearsal Spaces. Possible studio/workspace/project space/meeting rooms
Governance Structure	A new governance arrangement exists to manage the new centre, this being a board of management for Esker Arts Ltd., having regard to the best practice guidelines issued by the Arts Council. TCAC, in consultation with Offaly County Council, are managing a fundraising drive for funds towards the capital development costs.
Paid Executive	Esker Arts has in place a Director, a Technical Building Manager, a Marketing Manager and an Administrator. Additional staff are engaged on a casual basis as required.
Strategy	Business plans have been completed in the development phase for the centre, but strategies/plans are required for the operational development of the centre.
Clear Programme Priorities	The appointment of the new director has seen the development of programming priorities commence, taking account of learnings from other arts centres, the mix of spaces, the demographic, and the wider context for the centre and this strategy.
Partnerships/ Collaborations	Offaly County Council worked closely with a local board of TCAC and local action group that have been involved in campaigning and fundraising for an arts centre in Tullamore for many years. The centre may also provide sufficient workspace for other organisations/projects; e.g., Hullabaloo Festival, Film Offaly.
Revenue Funding	Planning is underway to seek funding once arts centre operations commence.



## Tullamore – Esker Arts – SWOT

### STRENGTHS

- ▶ The community of Tullamore is invested in the arts centre, having played a key role in developing the project;
- ▶ The leadership of Offaly County Council in getting the project from concept to completion reflects a clear commitment to the arts centre and its strategic importance to Offaly.
- ▶ The scale and mix of spaces within the centre.
- ▶ Location: By train, Tullamore is within 1 hour of Dublin and 1.5hrs of Galway, and centrally located in Offaly. Within the town, the centre is well located to support the retail and evening economy and outdoor events/festivals.
- ▶ Although small in number, professional events presented in other spaces in advance of the centre's development have been well supported.

### CHALLENGES/WEAKNESSES

- ▶ The uses of some spaces are yet to be finalised.
- ▶ While the rationale for the centre is solid, and in line with the rationale for many existing arts centres, the specific purpose/potential of the centre has not been fully explored to underpin an authentic or ambitious brand in the current context.
- ▶ The context for arts centres has changed and the context of Offaly has changed from the position of employment and socio-economic and cultural confidence in play when an arts centre was first considered.
- ▶ New governance structures can take time to bed in and will require continuing support and guidance from Offaly County Council

## Tullamore – Esker Arts – SWOT

### OPPORTUNITIES

- ▶ The centre is emerging at an important time for the community, post-COVID – when culture and creativity has seen us come together and Offaly people have been immersed in the beauty and potential of their county;
- ▶ The long-standing and diverse commitment to the centre could serve as a valuable platform for the centre's development. There is an opportunity in sustaining this commitment to the ongoing development of the centre for the town and county;
- ▶ There is considerable arts experience and expertise within the town and county that could coalesce around the arts centre.
- ▶ The context for arts centres has changed. The centre is being established following extensive review and reflection on the role and potential of arts centres by the Arts Council and by existing arts centres. It can chart a new path in this context.

### THREATS

- ▶ The rates impact of the transition from peat-related industry and power generation weakens Offaly County Council's ability to develop/sustain social, cultural and recreational services.
- ▶ People may not immediately want to be indoors, and the centre will take time to find its niche within touring itineraries and low audiences may lead patrons and producers to consider that the centre is not working.

## Key Considerations Arising:

The long-standing nature of the commitment to the development of an arts centre from a diverse range of stakeholders would offer significant potential to any arts centre. The protracted journey required to achieve an arts centre in Tullamore has, however, been challenging in terms of stakeholder cohesion and such lengthy commitment across a range of stakeholders can create diverse expectations.

Such commitment needs to be harnessed and sustained, and the facilities within the centre lend themselves to a great diversity of programme. Much of the initial ambition for the centre was based on a long-established regional arts centre model, operating largely around facilitating community activity, serving a touring ('receiving house') function for the performing arts and presenting a range of exhibitions.

This model has worked well for many centres, and the new centre in Tullamore should seek to provide an excellent service, present touring work and enable a range of community and cultural activity. But it is no longer sufficient for an arts centre to rely on a basic service-provision model that offers 'more of the same' in one location as audiences might get in another location. While many stakeholders would have preferred if an arts centre had been completed in Tullamore 10 or 20 years ago, Offaly now has an opportunity to open an arts centre that is right.

The context for an arts centre in Tullamore has changed dramatically since initial proposals for the centre were developed:

- ▶ Arts Council policy and thinking has moved on, in terms of the role of arts centres in the production of work across a variety of artforms. This policy notes that artists, participants and audiences are served better by the ability to make work in a range of places, with regional nuance adding to recognition and ownership of work, and that further investment from the Arts Council will be based upon work of excellence within arts centres. This may be in facilities, artform or practice area expertise, in the scale and/or quality of participant and audience engagement, or in the production supports offered by the centre to artists.
- ▶ Significant capital investment by Offaly County Council means that the centre has a responsibility beyond Tullamore.

- ▶ The centre that has been achieved is the only space of its kind in the county and is somewhat different to spaces in neighbouring counties (e.g., Dunamase in Portlaoise, Mullingar Arts Centre and the arts spaces in Nenagh and Athlone) and therefore offers additional potential for Offaly and the Midlands.
- ▶ Years of development by expert venue managers – and technical staff, programmers, marketers and front-of-house staff – have changed the game in terms of the welcome created by arts centres, the leadership role they play in cultural development and the enabling role they play in terms of broader wellbeing, social, community and economic development agendas.
- ▶ COVID-19 and the uncertainty that sustains around its impact on arts centres, on where people live and on how people gather and socialise.
- ▶ The context of Offaly has been altered in terms of the nature of employment and the socio-economic and cultural confidence in play when an arts centre was first considered.

In Offaly, the changing nature of the county's relationship with the land/landscape, local resonances of global climate action, international resonances of post-industrial experience, the opportunity within a just transition, a more diverse local population and the richness that needs to be unearthed from these historic changes requires an arts centre opening in 2022 to think and act beyond service provision; an arts centre that can help to reflect, connect and harness the renewed energy in Offaly.

The arts centre needs to be a place where people go to enjoy themselves, but it also needs to be proactive in providing a space for dialogue and debate, for cultural exploration, expression and exchange. If the centre is to be proactive in the developmental role it can play, its brand will need to reflect that.

On an operational level, it is helpful that the centre has appointed a director and commenced operations with staffing in place to develop relationships with programme partners – be they visiting artists and companies that can tour work to Offaly, local arts professionals,

voluntary, amateur and community groups as well as youth groups and those working in education. In addition, linkages to other agencies and organisations working in areas of wellbeing, economic development and social cohesion need to be developed.



## 3.4 Lough Boora - Lough Boora Sculpture Park

Sculpture in the Parklands has been operating in Lough Boora since 2002. The project initially took the form of a sculpture symposium (Lough Boora International Sculpture Symposium) and from this a sculpture park was developed in co-operation with Bord na Móna and Lough Boora Parklands Group, as part of integrated land use programme for the cutaway bogs of Ireland.

While no new sculptures have been commissioned since 2010, over twenty-five temporary and permanent sculptures/artworks are part of the fifty-hectare sculpture park. The sculpture park sits within Lough Boora Discovery Park, which is one of Offaly's signature tourist attractions, receiving over 100,000 visitors annually. The land currently afforded to the sculpture park is limited in size, which may impact on expansion or new commissions, albeit there may be the potential to expand the area for LBSP, given the scale of Lough Boora Discovery Park.

In addition to the broader policy context outlined at the beginning of this document, a report entitled **Art in the Landscape** (2020; Terre Duffy Consulting) was co-commissioned by Offaly County Council and Mayo County Council to consider the current standing and potential of large-scale sculpture initiatives in the respective counties. In Offaly's case, the initiative in question is Lough Boora Sculpture Park.

Art in the Landscape (AITL) recognises Lough Boora as the most significant sculpture park in Ireland, the most important collection of public sculpture in Ireland, and also recognises its wider significance as an environmental art initiative. AITL estimates that the replacement value of the works in Lough Boora is in excess of €2m and likens it to international initiatives such as Grizedale Forest Sculpture Park. The AITL report identifies the 'potency', 'problems' and 'potential' for Lough Boora.

Art in the Landscape (AITL) recognises Lough Boora as the most significant sculpture park in Ireland, the most important collection of public sculpture in Ireland, and also recognises its wider significance as an environmental art initiative.

Taking these three headings, summary findings include:

- ▶ **Potency:** The sculptures within Lough Boora Sculpture Park (LBSP) reveal stories of the Irish bogs, of energy and environment, of human endeavour, and of the Midlands. This is a hugely important collection of work and a powerful legacy asset for Bord na Móna.
- ▶ **Problems:** No new sculptures have been commissioned since 2010, existing works require attention and – in some cases – possibly decommissioning, and mediation and marketing are weak. Individuals who previously championed the project have moved on and there is no clear owner, driver or funder.
- ▶ **Potential:** The importance of the sculpture park and its collection warrants consideration of Government support. The 21st century is about a new relationship with nature. A new commissioning series at Lough Boora Sculpture Park is required and has the potential to communicate these issues

in a very powerful and positive way, in complement to Bord na Móna's "Brown to Green" Strategy. A new commissioning series at the Sculpture Park can also work to address the growing awareness of the uniqueness of the Irish Bog, its industrial past, the important function of arts and heritage in the cultural identity of the Midlands. There is significant potential in the relationship between LBSP and Fáilte Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand, and the potential of LBSP being bundled with other offerings. The LBSP arts and education programme is strong in content and design. There are proposals in place for the development of an Eden Life Project, a Peatlands Centre for Excellence, a Peatlands Visitors Centre, and a 'Boora Works Events Centre' at the Discovery Park.

AITL takes the view that LBSP is at the risk of dying as has happened with other outdoor sculpture collections nationally and internationally.

The report calls for a company limited by guarantee to be established for LBSP and for Bord na Móna to commission a new work for the 21st anniversary of Lough Boora Sculpture Park. For their part, Bord na Móna proposes to develop a business case for investment in Lough Boora. Bord na Móna also notes the importance of the industrial heritage on the site. The company has an interest in seeing LBSP develop and retains an openness around its potential. Some investment in new commissioning could be forthcoming, but such a proposal would require detailed consideration. While the brand value of Lough Boora to Bord na Móna is acknowledged, costs also need to be offset.

## Lough Boora Sculpture Park (LBSP)

Ownership of site/land	The land is owned by Bord na Móna. An MoU is in place between Offaly Co and Bord na Móna relating to LBSP.
Infrastructure Readiness (and available Spaces)	LBSP was established in 2002. Many of the sculptures developed over the years are in good condition but some require attention. If the sculpture park is to be developed, clarity needs to be achieved in relation to maintenance of LBSP and its artworks and space for the development of LBSP (be that new permanent/ temporary commissions or space for developmental programmes).
Governance Structure	Offaly Co and Bord na Móna are working towards an enhanced governance structure for Lough Boora Sculpture Park.
Paid Executive	No.
Strategy	No strategy in place. An extensive review has been carried out ('Art in the Landscape') which provides the basis of potency, potential and problems to be addressed, and from which a strategy could be developed. Bord na Móna has also commissioned a strategic report for Lough Boora Discovery Park, which includes 'extending the park's art and nature sculpture provision'.
Clear Programme Priorities	No.
Partnerships/ Collaborations	None – outside of the partnerships between Bord na Móna and Offaly County Council.
Revenue Funding	No.



# Lough Boora Sculpture Park – SWOT

## STRENGTHS

- ▶ The project has been identified as the most important public art collection in Ireland.
- ▶ This project is unique in an Irish context, if it can be sustained to an appropriate standard.
- ▶ The collection has real purpose and meaning at this time, in terms of the tangible and intangible heritage it reflects and in relation to the context of just transition and climate action.
- ▶ Lough Boora already attracts over 100,000 visitors annually.
- ▶ Offaly County Council has a clear understanding of the potential of Lough Boora and is committed to partnering in its development.
- ▶ Bord na Móna is committed to partnering with the local authority in relation to the sculpture park and in relation to supporting a managed and just transition.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ Tours offered by Lough Boora Discovery Park include engagement with the Sculpture Park (apart from specific requested school tours on ecology and biodiversity) and LBSP therefore continues to be valued and an ongoing and current part of provision within the park.

## CHALLENGES/WEAKNESSES

- ▶ Ongoing funding streams have never been established for LBSP, albeit the project was never more relevant than it is now.
- ▶ Although it is a signature project, with significant international potential to highlight the integrity with which Ireland is seeking to deliver a just transition, there is no owner or driver of the cultural programme. There is no voice in place to re-energise the project or leverage its potential/opportunities.
- ▶ No new sculptures have been commissioned since 2010 and the condition of some existing works needs to be addressed. The works are a depreciating asset, which currently marks time when investment ceased, rather than reflecting a place which is vibrant or looking to the future.
- ▶ Interpretive and marketing information Lough Boora Sculpture Park is not up-to-date and requires management.
- ▶ The tours of LBSP are an element of wider Discovery Park tours. Without continuing engagement from artists or curators, the tours may not demonstrate a relationship to a living cultural context and energy, and may not capitalise on the potential for connectivity between LBSP and the wider cultural landscape or offering within the Midlands.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.bordnamona.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Bord-na-Mona-Annual-Report-2019\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.bordnamona.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Bord-na-Mona-Annual-Report-2019_FINAL.pdf)

# Lough Boora Sculpture Park – SWOT

## OPPORTUNITIES

- ▶ To grow the numbers visiting LBSP, and engaging online, by having structures and support in place to promote a clear, cohesive and well managed programme and offer.
- ▶ There are significant political/relationship opportunities in terms of the commitment of the Irish Government to climate action and just transition, noting stated commitments such as the Centre for Climate Change and Just Transition and the immersive Peoples Discovery Attraction (referenced on p.9 of this strategy) where approaches such as those identified through NESC research, highlight the significant potential of art and culture in these contexts;
- ▶ There are significant political/relationship opportunities in an international context in terms of Lough Boora Sculpture Park's potential to highlight Irish perspectives on just transition, post-industrial heritage, and climate action;
- ▶ That a cohesive programme can be brought to bear which links beyond LBSP to the wider potential within Lough Boora, where it can become a place/site of learning: Post-industrial challenges (being experienced in Midlands regarding Bord na Móna, ESB and related employment losses) are neither new nor finite, and they are not limited to the Midlands. If managed appropriately and respectfully, there are opportunities for Lough Boora Sculpture Park to play an important role in exploring and reflecting the potential of culture in relation to resilience, integrity and contribution of Irish workers and to act as an important touchstone and reference for Irish and European workers/places that may face challenges in the future – whether from increased automation, and/or the EU green and digital transition.
- ▶ There are significant brand opportunities for Bord na Móna through continued cultural engagement at Lough Boora – linking renewables to ongoing renewal, celebrating their heritage, proud of the contribution made, committed to people, committed to landscape and committed to innovation and exploring new possibilities.
- ▶ That Percent for Art Monies link communities around Offaly to projects realised at Lough Boora.
- ▶ The potential as a USP of the 'Hidden Heartlands' brand identity – particularly where LBSP can be bundled with other offerings.

## THREATS

- ▶ That other arts or cultural projects (without the same lineage or context) could move into this space to take 'ownership' of climate action, sustainability and/or post-industrial landscapes.
- ▶ That the project is perceived by locals as a means to pay lip service to just transition, or the industrial heritage and contribution of Offaly.
- ▶ That the project is seen in a closed or reductive historical/museum context; related to a past, but not connected to a present and a future.

## Key Considerations Arising:

The Art in the Landscape report correctly identifies Lough Boora Sculpture Park (LBSP) as a cultural asset of national and potentially international standing.

Whether from the perspective of climate change, just transition, industrial heritage, tourism asset or simply as a unique artistic asset that engages with 100,000 people every year, this project is more relevant than ever despite being rudderless. If it continues to be without direction and management, there is a significant risk that it will become a sculpture graveyard and, of broader concern, a large-scale monument to a past now dormant/lost. If it is sustained as a living art project, it has the potential to reflect and respect history and heritage, engage with the present day social and environmental concerns from local to global, and offer space and focus to look to the future.

While new commissions offer a vitally important energy to the regeneration and continuing development of LBSP, the focus needs to go beyond permanent public art works. From a policy perspective, the potential for a just transition is yet to be realised. The lessons

from the NESC's 'Four Case Studies on Just Transition – Lessons for Ireland' highlight the import and scale of the change and impact being experienced across the Midlands.

Together with the NESC report, the report commissioned by the Government's Creative Ireland Programme on 'Engaging the Public on Climate Change through the Cultural and Creative Sectors' signpost the clear potential within Lough Boora. The Creative Ireland Programme report offers a focus for Lough Boora to follow in terms of climate change and climate action, through:

- ▶ Engaging new audiences;
- ▶ Increasing awareness and understanding;
- ▶ Exploring different values and beliefs;
- ▶ Creating space for constructive discussion; and
- ▶ Leading by example.

The Creative Ireland Programme report also highlights a number of risks, but these risks are ameliorated provided there is a sustained programme of activity and engagement. For Lough Boora, no one project should be

Whether from the perspective of climate change, just transition, industrial heritage, tourism asset or simply as a unique artistic asset that engages with 100,000 people every year, this project is more relevant than ever despite being rudderless.

curated, designed or expected to provide a 'solution' or answer. Each project informs the next project, while all projects build on the legacy and potential of Lough Boora.

This curatorial approach aligns well with the findings of the NESC on Just Transition Lessons for Ireland, which notes the importance of an inclusive, place-based approach; the need to build trusting relationships, and the importance of iterative dialogue. The NESC report also highlights the importance of recognising and celebrating the past in a manner which can also foreground the continued viability of a place and community, noting that '*a heritage or museum approach is not necessarily the best approach*'. The conclusion and recommendations of the final report of the Just Transition Commissioner (December 2021) also places significant emphasis on the importance of dialogue.

Trust and engagement are also stronger if they are curated, designed and mediated to be open, and ongoing – connecting the past to the future. Curatorially, LBSP provides space for ideas of hope, and skill and labour, of land and landscape, nature and environment, of climate action and community action, of energy and potential, of a shared past and a shared future.

Culture can therefore be a driver for Bord na Móna, Offaly County Council and other local and national partners committed to climate action and sustainable development. Such an approach may also create opportunities to foreground Bord na Móna's ongoing commitment to the future of the places and communities that sustained the company. In pursuing a 'Brown to Green' agenda, Lough Boora Sculpture Park already has the core elements in place to become Ireland's signature site – and a site of international importance – for the relationship between

culture, community, climate action and sustainability. Lough Boora Sculpture Park offers Ireland a unique opportunity to bring together communities, artists, enterprise and other stakeholders in progressive dialogue and the development of projects which celebrate the past, energise locals and visitors alike, and represent a shared commitment to innovation, landscape and ambition for the future.

Curatorially, LBSP provides space for ideas of hope, and skill and labour, of land and landscape, nature and environment, of climate action and community action, of energy and potential, of a shared past and a shared future.

As the NESC report suggests, embracing the post-industrial/just transition context could be challenging at times. This is not because arts projects are inherently challenging – where they should equally be celebratory, educational, inspiring, entertaining, curious etc. – but because the context of just transition is challenging for people and communities, and dialogue and collaboration are not always easy. People see the world in different ways, just as they see art in different ways, and it is in this way that LBSP has enormous potential to create space for positive dialogue.

One of the NESC case studies highlights the Emscher Park/Zollverein developments in the Ruhr region of Germany. This approach partially demonstrates the role that culture can play when industrial heritage is recognised and leveraged in a post-industrial context.

The NESC report also notes how *'On Thursday, 20 December 2018, coal workers started their final shift in Prosper-Haniel, the last pit in Germany (Steinmeier, 2018). Germany held a public celebration of the contribution of hard-coal miners to the nation, with many*

*communities holding ceremonies as a thank you for decades of often dangerous work to provide Lichtbeidernacht ('sharing the light at night') (WDR, 2018)'.*

The MRTT report also highlights a German comparator project in Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord on the site of an old ironworks which has been developed as an open recreational space for the population, which presents a range of arts and cultural activities.

While the size of the German population, the scale of its economy and the scale of the initiatives mentioned might be considered to dwarf potential in Ireland, it is important not to lose sight of the relative scale and contribution at play in Offaly.

- a) **Scale:** One fifth of Offaly is peatlands;
- b) **Contribution:** At its peak, peat-power generated 40% of Irish electricity in the 1960s. The Midlands literally fuelled Ireland's industrial renaissance. Its resources are now required to underpin a new national and global agenda. Its experience represents historic changes and reflects global concerns.

Whether from a cultural perspective, or from an economic perspective in terms of brand value, the place in history occupied by Bord na Móna, the Midlands and the people of the Midlands cannot be bought, but it can be lost. These stories – past, present and future – are embodied in Lough Boora Sculpture Park. Their resonances go beyond Lough Boora. They are central to the Midlands, and to Ireland.

A sustained approach is required to:

- ▶ Manage and maintain LBSP;
- ▶ Curate LBSP and programme relevant activities;
- ▶ Connect LBSP to wider networks and potential partners;
- ▶ Chart a path for LBSP's strategic role and focus, as well as its development; and
- ▶ Promote LBSP and leverage its value.

## 4. Strategic Recommendations

These five recommendations build on the analysis and key considerations arising within this report. They are intended as a set of integrated recommendations that can act in concert to leverage the potential and standing of signature arts infrastructure in Offaly.

### 1 That Offaly County Council focuses investment on the four identified signature arts infrastructure projects, namely:

- ▶ Birr Theatre and Arts Centre;
- ▶ The new Arts Centre, Esker Arts, Tullamore;
- ▶ Lough Boora Sculpture Park;
- ▶ The proposed arts space for Edenderry.

The local authority is facing considerable financial pressures in the coming years and unlocking the potential within these four initiatives will require significant investment from the local authority, from the Arts Council and other cultural partners and capacity – from within the local authority and the four arts projects – to leverage shared agendas with broader programmes.

Culture is likely to be an important asset for the county, demonstrating a 'Living Heartlands' from an economic, environmental and social perspective, and to underpin the well-considered 'Hidden Heartlands' and 'Ancient East'. Investment should be focussed on partnership approaches to addressing the analysis and key considerations outlined for each of the four arts infrastructure projects identified in this report.

While it will be challenging in the context of the commercial rate base available to Offaly County Council, it is reasonable to assume that the increased capital investment from local and national partners would require significant annual investment from the local authority and other funders and partners in the coming years to operate to a reasonable level, such that the identified arts infrastructure can target and leverage other opportunities.

Conservation works at the former courthouse building in Birr are noted and in time, there may be a case for additional capital investment in line with the 'Creative Court' proposal. Any final plans to deliver on the 'Creative Court' would have to demonstrate how the building would address gaps which cannot be addressed within the physical infrastructure of Birr Theatre and Arts Centre, how the 'Creative Court' and Birr Theatre and Arts Centre would work together and how the use of the former courthouse as an arts/cultural space would be operated and sustained.

**2 That the focus of Offaly County Council and its Arts Office would shift to a more strategic and enabling role, less engaged in programme development, and more engaged in supporting signature arts infrastructure to deliver on their potential, and to deliver on Offaly County Council’s strategic priorities. This shift is warranted for two reasons:**

- ▶ Offaly County Council will need to focus revenue investment on the four signature arts infrastructure projects and will not have significant time or resources for investment in other programming; and
- ▶ The signature arts infrastructure projects all require significant and ongoing strategic support and guidance to deliver on their potential.

Each of the four identified arts infrastructure projects have unique opportunities and face differing challenges. Financial support for each centre needs to be structured to ensure that the SWOT and key considerations arising for each organisation, as set out within this report, are embraced and tackled.

The integration of established art office initiatives within the emerging infrastructure will need careful management to ensure that programmes built up over many years are sustained and further developed. Formal partnership structures will be required around each key initiative.

This shift is likely to be most challenging in Edenderry, where the proposed arts space is part of an integrated municipal facility. The Creative Edenderry project offers a vital opportunity to explore and document options and opportunities for arts programming in Edenderry to be managed and sustained post-2024 (where Creative Edenderry is currently supported as a three-year project).

Realising this opportunity requires a structured focus and approach from the outset. It may be that initiatives and programmes developed by the arts centres in Birr or Tullamore/Lough Boora would also be valued in Edenderry where they reflect a shared focus, but such partnerships should be informed by the arts office and by local sensibilities.

The local authority is still likely to make strategic investment in other county-wide initiatives (such as, youth arts and arts in health etc.) but it should be clear how such initiatives can dovetail with the signature arts infrastructure in Offaly. It is envisaged that the local authority would also take a strategic role in relation to supports for artists, although key infrastructure could also have a partnering role in this regard.

### 3 That Offaly County Council's investment in signature arts infrastructure projects supports alignment with current and future Arts Council policy.

The Arts Council is a significant investor in the arts in Ireland. They can also provide expert guidance and learnings from across Ireland. This applies across arts centres, artforms and arts practices.

In terms of arts centres, for example, the Arts Council identifies that a competency-based approach to board membership should include:

- ▶ Artform-specific knowledge or interests;
- ▶ Specific business management or professional experience (e.g., Human Resources, financial management and reporting, information and communications technologies, contract law);
- ▶ Communications and public relations;
- ▶ Marketing and brand management; and
- ▶ Fundraising.

Such competencies are extremely important for the development of the four signature arts infrastructure projects in Offaly.

All infrastructure projects should also be developed as resource spaces; as sites of cultural production as well as spaces to showcase touring work from elsewhere that inspires or entertains. The Arts Council's policy on arts centres recognises that artists, participants and audiences are served better by the ability to make work in a range of places across Ireland, with regional nuance adding to recognition and ownership of work. The arts centres and infrastructure in Offaly should be supported to play to the strengths of their host communities, hinterland and county.



#### 4 That a unified leadership approach is put in place to support the developmental role required of the new Arts Centre, Esker Arts, Tullamore and Lough Boora Sculpture Park.

There are potential cost-savings within this approach, although this is not the rationale for this recommendation. Lough Boora Sculpture Park and the new arts centre in Tullamore are both in need of strong and visionary leadership. In terms of cultural context, what is relevant for Lough Boora is relevant for Offaly and therefore relevant for the new arts centre in Tullamore. The arts centre project in Tullamore needs to operate beyond a service-provision model and take on a developmental role within the arts and within the county. Lough Boora Sculpture Park is a complex project in terms of ownership, the time since it has last been activated and the histories and just transition concerns it embodies. In line with Arts Council policy, arts centres enable the production of work across artforms and, in a post-COVID context, many arts centres have demonstrated the potential in producing off-site work and events that take place outside of galleries or theatres.

With more than 10 years of relative inactivity in the programming and development of LBSP, the sculpture park and the new arts centre both find themselves sharing a starting point; each has a multi-million euro asset at their disposal and each needs to unlock the potential of that asset. Within their core remit, the Director of the arts centre in Tullamore should also be responsible for the curatorial and developmental direction of Lough Boora Sculpture Park. These two infrastructure projects require their own governance structures (and bank accounts) for clarity and transparency in relation to roles and responsibilities, funding streams and investment.

It is proposed that a company structure would be established as a legal entity between Bord na Móna and Offaly County Council, with Bord na Móna licensing or leasing LBSP lands to the new legal entity. Land for development of LBSP (new commissions / temporary projects) should be included within the lease/licence arrangements along with provisions regarding use and access to LBSP and respective responsibilities for the maintenance of LBSP, the art works within LBSP and processes for decommissioning art works within LBSP.

It is proposed that the new legal entity would act as the shared management vehicle for LBSP, but that it would engage in a partnership with the new arts centre in Tullamore for the day-to-day running of programming and promotion of LBSP. This partnership could take the form of a service-level agreement. For its part, the new arts centre in Tullamore would bring expertise in cultural programming, education and outreach, marketing, event management and other areas to the table. The potential cost savings are in relation to the opportunity to avoid duplication of complete staffing structures for two complementary initiatives curating and delivering projects from a shared cultural context. It is not, however, the case that one organisation can completely provide for the other and the precise resourcing requirements warrant detailed consideration in terms of both staffing and programme.

The partnership and service-level agreement would also have to ensure that the value of LBSP is leveraged in terms of its value to national and international discourse to art, society, climate action and sustainability; social value to surrounding communities; and brand value to Bord na Móna and the Midlands.

**5 That a partnership initiative is established and led by Offaly County Council to support collaboration between the signature arts infrastructure in Birr, Edenderry, Lough Boora and Tullamore.**

With new infrastructure coming on stream, there is a need and opportunity for Offaly County Council to focus on developing strong relationships between the signature infrastructure projects. A Birr-Edenderry-Lough Boora-Tullamore (BELT) initiative should be established to support the development of these relationships.

The BELT initiative should also act as a collaborative forum, meeting quarterly and considering opportunities for joint programming, support for artists, researching initiatives elsewhere, supporting training/mentoring, and joint funding applications. The initial focus here should be with the directors of the arts centres, including the key

programme lead from the Creative Edenderry project. From time-to-time the collaboration could develop collaborations with other arts/cultural personnel, or for other staff or functions within the signature infrastructure projects but the BELT initiative should retain a core focus as a director-level forum for the signature arts infrastructure projects.

Such an initiative requires proactive leadership and management from Offaly County Council. A small budget will also be required for hosting the network, shared mentoring or specialist inputs and shared learnings from arts projects or relevant initiatives elsewhere in Ireland.



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