

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Context

### 1.1.1 Location of Birr

The town of Birr and village of Crinkill are located close to the border between County Offaly and County Tipperary, and are approximately 37 kilometres from the county town of Tullamore, 43 kilometres from Athlone, County Westmeath and 20 kilometres from Roscrea, County Tipperary. The N52 (Dundalk-Nenagh) and N62 (Athlone-Roscrea) National Secondary Routes run through the settlement and provide direct access to Tullamore and Athlone respectively. The Camcor River flows through the centre of Birr joining the Little Brosna River, a tributary of the River Shannon, which flows along the western boundary of the town. The highly scenic Slieve Bloom Mountains and Clonmacnoise monastic site are located in proximity to the east and north of Birr, respectively.

The village of Crinkill lies some 2.2 kilometres south of the centre of Birr (Emmet Square). Crinkill village is a relatively new settlement and the town map of 1822 indicates the general layout being in place at that time. More recent development has been mainly linear in form along Barrack Street, Military Road and School Street. Crinkill has a distinct character and separate identity to Birr. This is viewed as a positive element in the promotion and development of the area and it is the Council's intention that this situation shall be maintained and reinforced. To this end, Crinkill shall be planned and managed as a village complementing but separate from Birr Town.

### 1.1.2 Historical Development

Birr town is an early monastic site situated on the River Camcor. The first recorded indication for a settlement in Birr dates to the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD when a monastery was founded by Brendan the Elder. The present Birr Castle Demesne, started its evolution as an Anglo-Norman structure built in 1170 and has been significantly amended and extended since then. Birr experienced significant growth from the mid-18th century onwards. Emmet Square (1747) represented the earliest phase of Georgian Birr with later phases including Oxmanstown Mall (c. 1816), Wilmer Road (c. 1817) and John's Mall (c. 1833). A monumental column, formerly known as the Cumberland Column, is an important historic landmark that adorns Emmet Square at the centre of the town. Erected in 1747 as a Pillar of Victory to commemorate the military successes of the Duke of Cumberland, it is the oldest monumental column constructed in Ireland. Birr Barracks was built in Crinkill between 1809 – 1812 followed by Birr Courthouse (c. 1830). Birr Workhouse opened in 1842. In the early 1840's, the Third Earl of Rosse designed and built a great telescope on the grounds of Birr Castle Demesne. This telescope remained the largest in the world for over 70 years. Birr also gained fame as the venue for the first ever All-Ireland Hurling Final between Tipperary and Galway held in 1888.

Birr was designated a 'Georgian Heritage Town' by Bord Fáilte (now Fáilte Ireland), in 1994. The history of Birr town and its environs, is still represented today in its buildings and structures that have been preserved and protected under previous development plans. The protection of this proud history, through the protection of the character of these buildings, is important to the culture of the people of Birr and the related tourism industry.

### 1.1.3 Socio-Economic Profile

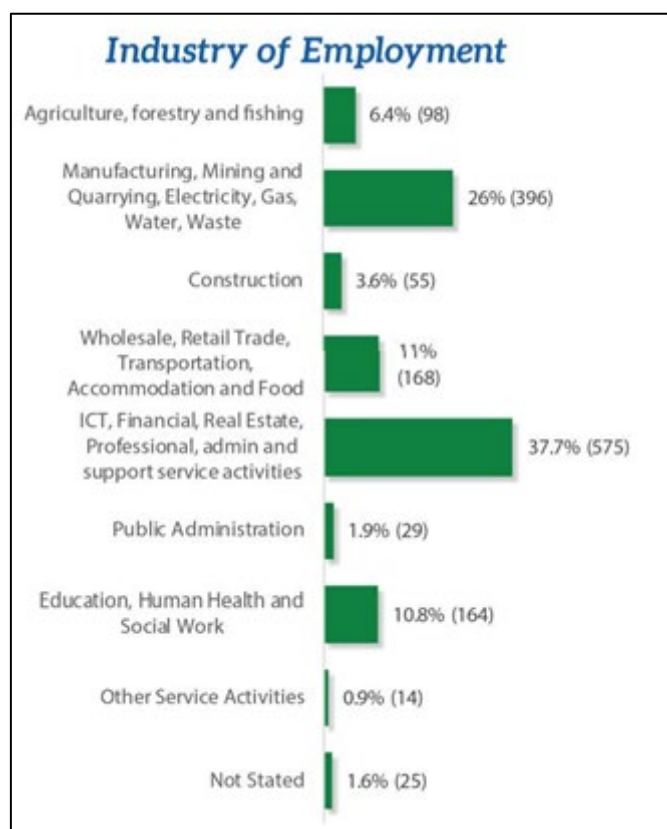
Birr and Crinkill together has a population of 5052 (2016 Census). It has experienced growth throughout recent census periods.

	2006	2011	2016
Population	4053	5000	5052
% Increase	-	23.3%	1.0%

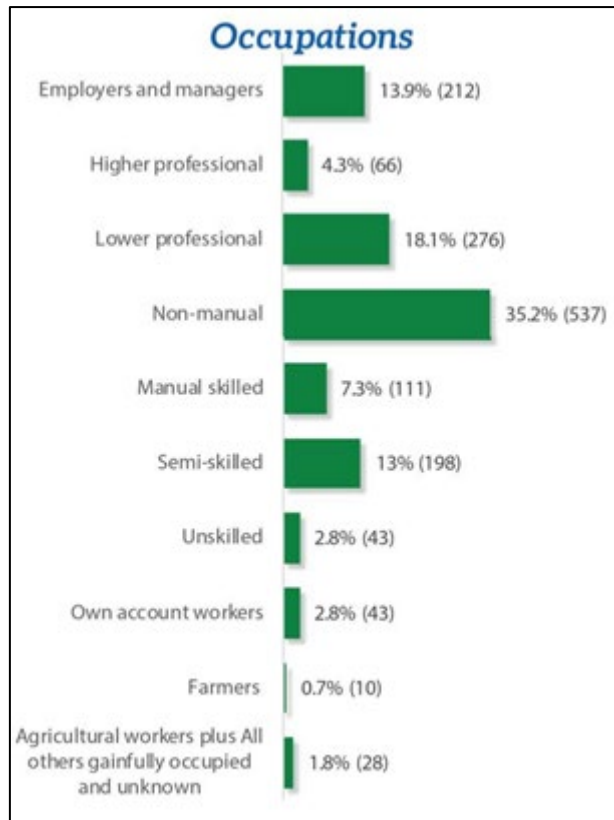
*(Note there has been changes to the Census boundary between census periods)*

The following images represent statistics derived from the 2016 Census. The total jobs in Birr in 2016 was 1,524, which represented 7.7% of total jobs (19,782) in County Offaly. Birr, with 1,524 local jobs and 1,579 resident workers, results in a high 'jobs to resident worker' ratio of 0.965, which represents a strong economic function.

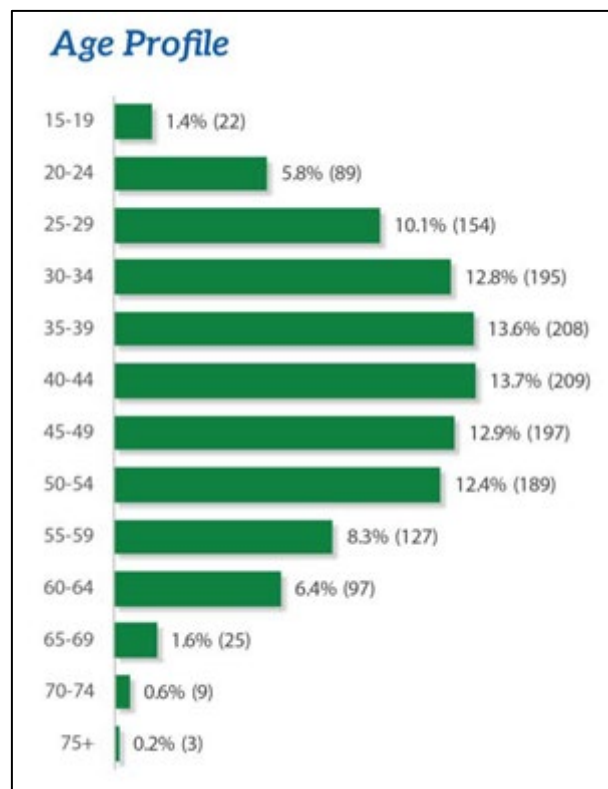
Birr serves as an important employment centre for the county, and in particular has a strong ICT, Financial, Real Estate, Professional, Administration and support service activities sector representing 37.7% of Birr's Employment. Further analysis of the employment sectors of Birr and Crinkill are provided in section 2.1 of Chapter 2 Economic Development Strategy.



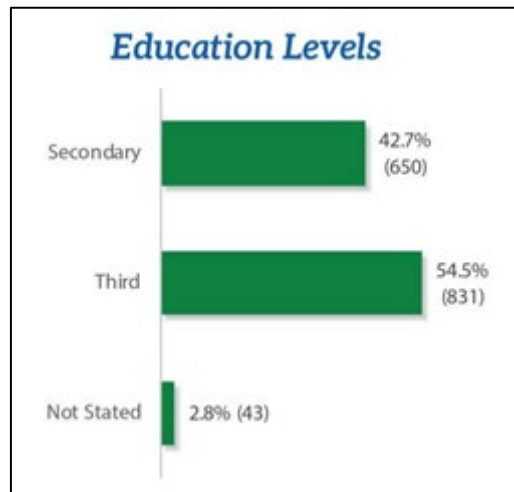
The graph below shows the breakdown of occupations across all sectors of industry in Birr as a percentage of the total workforce. 'Non-manual' (35.2%) represents the largest cohort, followed by 'lower professional' at 18.1%.



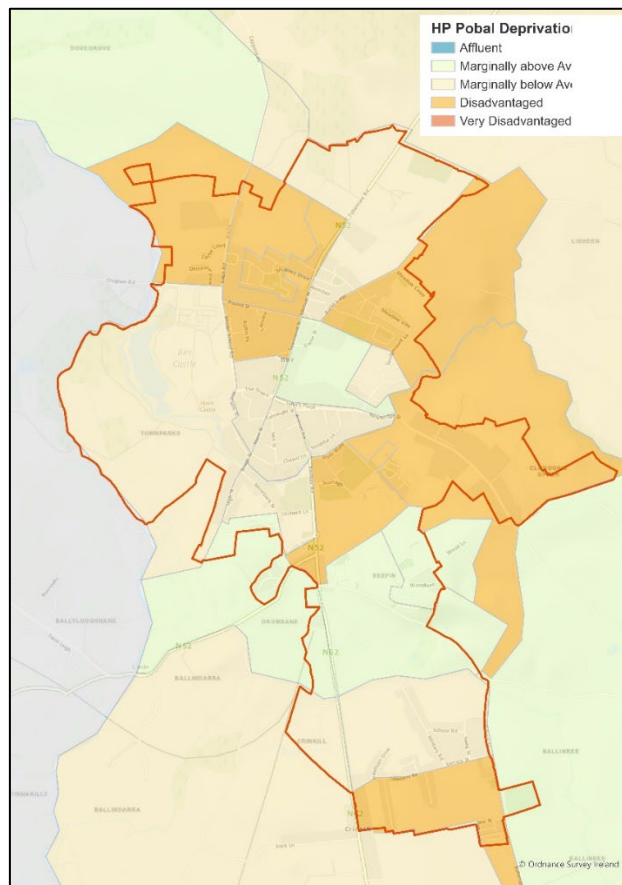
The age profile of Birr is set out below, which demonstrates that the 35-44 age group accounts for 27.3% of the population. 42.4% of the population is aged 45 or older, which is higher than the national figure of 37.2%.



In terms of educational attainment for those aged 15 years or older, the majority have third level education at 54.5%.



As set out below, a range of deprivation / affluence designations fall within the development boundary of Birr, ranging from marginally above average to disadvantaged.



#### 1.1.4 Plan Preparation

This Birr Local Area Plan (LAP) 2023-2029 has been prepared in accordance with the requirements and provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended).

Under the provisions of the Local Government Reform Act 2014, Birr Town Council was abolished and its functions, including those relating to planning and development were fully subsumed into Offaly County Council. Accordingly, this LAP has been prepared to replace the Birr Town and Environs Development Plan 2010 – 2016 (as extended) as the key strategic planning document, which will guide the overall development of the town in the period to 2029.

The Local Area Plan has been prepared in accordance with the requirements and provisions of Sections 18-20 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the 'Act'). Section 19(1) (b) of the Act requires a local area plan to be made in respect of an area, which:

- Is designated as a town in the most recent census of population, other than a town designated as a suburb or environs in that census;
- Has a population in excess of 5,000; and
- Is situated within the functional area of a planning authority, which is a County Council.

Census 2016 recorded a population of 5,052 persons for Birr and Crinkill. A Local Area Plan is therefore a mandatory requirement.

This LAP sets out an overall strategy for the proper planning and sustainable development of Birr in the context of Project Ireland 2040, the National Planning Framework, the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region and the Offaly County Development Plan (CDP). It is informed by Ministerial Guidelines issued pursuant to Section 28 of the Act together with EU requirements regarding Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Appropriate Assessment (AA).

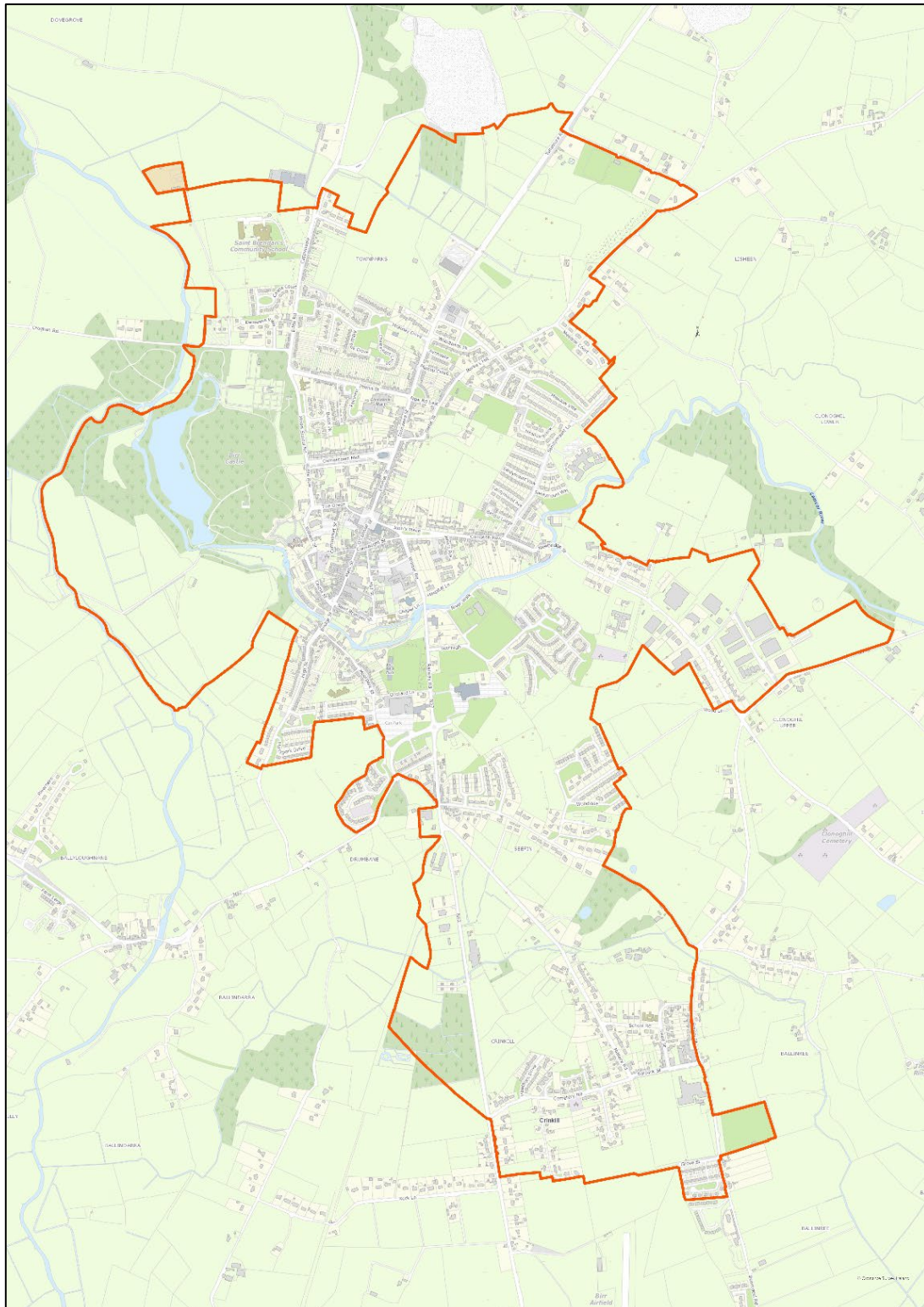


Figure 1.1 Birr Local Area Plan boundary

### 1.1.5 Life of the Plan

The Birr LAP shall remain in effect for a period of 6 years from when it was made or until such time as the LAP may be extended, revoked or replaced by a new LAP.

### 1.1.6 The Plan Making Process

The strategic vision for Birr has been informed through public consultation with residents and stakeholders.

The Council engaged in an extensive pre-draft public consultation programme as part of the preliminary work stage of the plan preparation process. A Public Consultation Issues Paper set out a summary with background information on a range of key issues to be addressed in the preparation of the LAP. It also framed a number of key questions on each issue to prompt community discussion and help develop and shape their comments and observations. The Public Consultation Issues Paper was placed on display at Council offices, Birr library, and on the Birr LAP webpage. Notification of the Public Consultation Issues Paper and of a public consultation-drop in session in Birr Civic Offices was provided in locally circulating newspapers, to PPN groups, Oireachtas members, elected members, and Strategic Policy Committee members. Written submissions were invited from public sector agencies and non-governmental agencies. A workshop was held with Birr Municipal District elected members for their input into the draft Birr Local Area Plan. Public consultation also takes place on the draft Birr LAP and proposed material alterations.

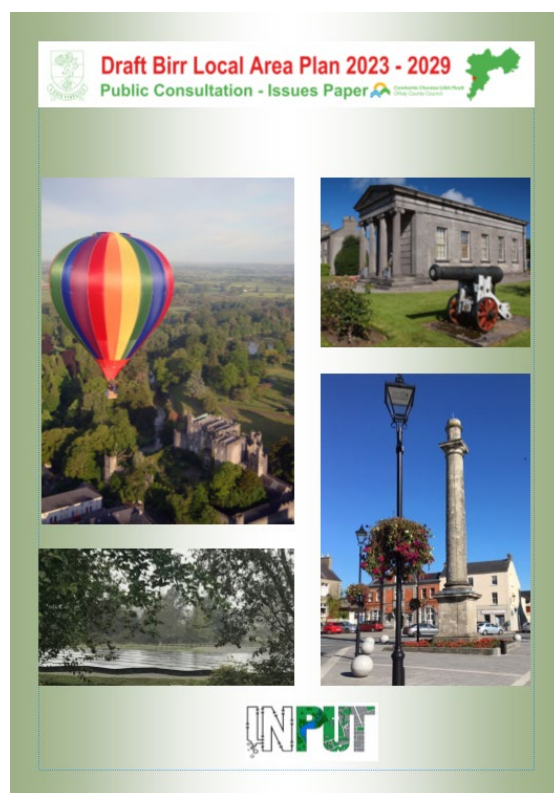


Figure 1.2 Cover Page of Public Consultation Issues Paper

The early engagement of the community and relevant stakeholders in identifying issues, a vision and a strategy for Birr Town improved the plan preparation process by providing, at the right stage, the understanding of community needs and aspirations and important aspects of local knowledge.

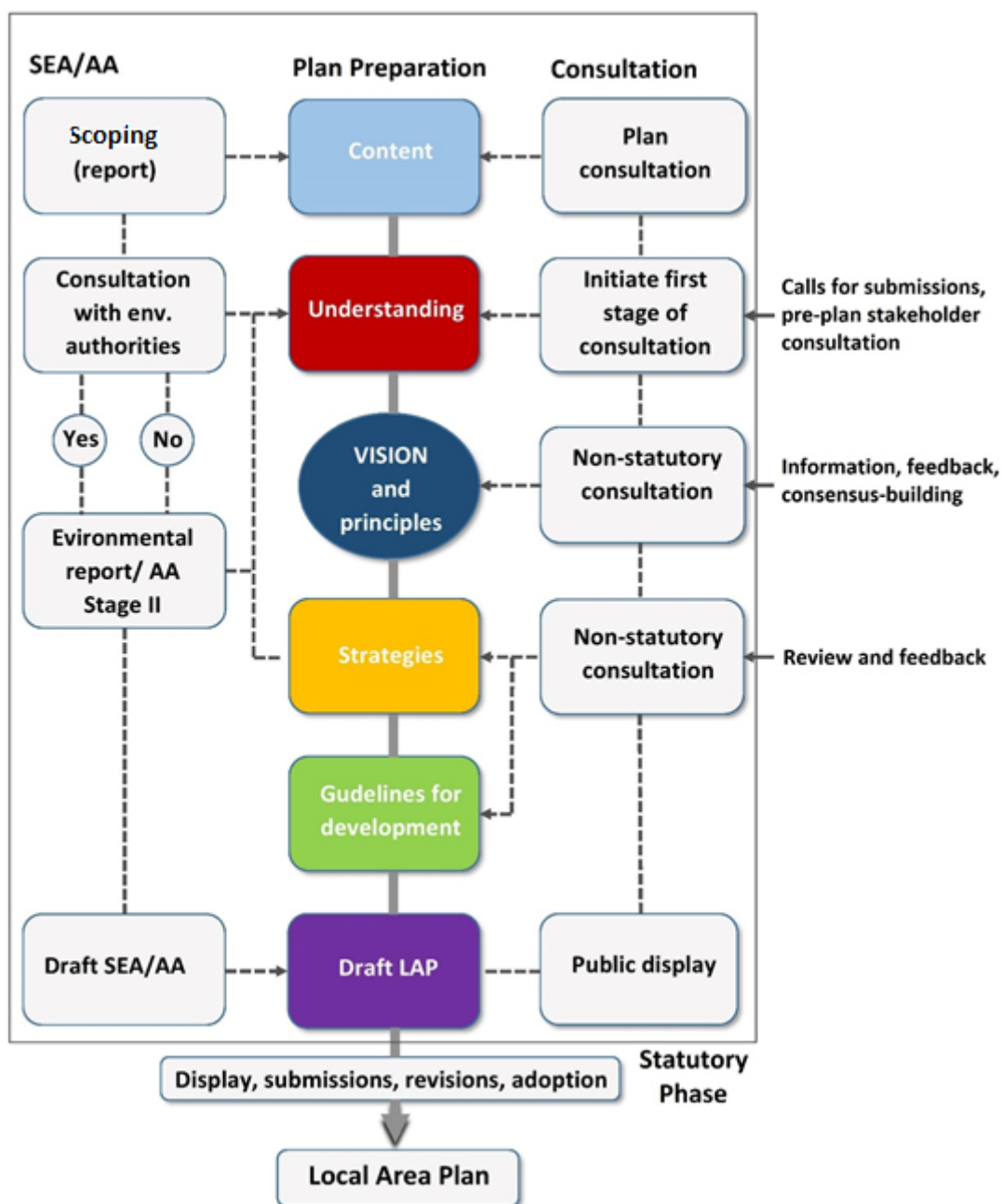


Figure 1.3 Plan Preparation Process

The public consultation process supplemented Offaly County Council’s research and analysis with a more extensive understanding of the main issues of concern affecting the residents and stakeholders in Birr. The consultation exercises helped to establish an overarching common vision for the future development of Birr.



## 1.2 Structure and Content of Birr Local Area Plan

The LAP consists of a written statement setting out the vision for the town and the policies and specific objectives to guide future development along with a zoning and objectives maps, opportunity sites development briefs and visual representations of the development framework of the town. It also consists of separate Environmental Reports prepared in accordance with EU Directives ensuring that environmental considerations are fully integrated into the plan making process.

The written statement shall take precedence over the map should any discrepancy arise. In the full interpretation of all objectives for Birr, it is essential that both the CDP and the LAP are read together. Where conflicting objectives arise between the CDP and the LAP, the objectives of the relevant CDP shall take precedence.

It should be noted that the general development management standards and general policies and objectives in the CDP applicable to settlements can be applied to the LAP boundary area, while additional policies and objectives that are specific to Birr are included in this LAP.

### 1.2.1 Accompanying Strategies

This Local Area Plan is accompanied by a number of separate assessments / strategies. They have been undertaken in parallel with the preparation of the Plan. An iterative process has been followed whereby each revision of the Plan has been informed by the assessments. They constitute;

- *Appropriate Assessment (AA) Screening Report and Natura Impact Report (NIR)*

AA is a focused and detailed impact assessment of the implications of a plan or project on European Sites designated for habitats or species. AA is required by the EU Habitats Directive as transposed into Irish law through the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended). Screening for AA determined that the implementation of this Local Area Plan was likely to have a significant effect on European Sites. Accordingly, a NIR was compiled. The findings of the AA are included in the NIR that accompanies the Plan. That report provides a clear understanding of the likely consequences of the Plan on European Sites. All AA recommendations have been integrated into the Plan. The emerging conclusion of the AA is that the Plan will not affect the integrity of the European Sites, alone or in combination with other plans or projects.<sup>1</sup>

- *Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)*

SEA is the formal, systematic evaluation of the likely significant effects on the environment of implementing a plan or programme before a decision is made to adopt it, in this case the Local Area Plan. SEA is required by the EU SEA Directive as transposed into Irish law through the Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) Regulations 2004 (S.I. No. 436 of 2004) as amended. The findings of the SEA are included in the SEA Environmental Report that accompanies the Plan. That report provides a clear understanding of the likely environmental consequences of

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<sup>1</sup> Except as provided for in Article 6(4) of the Habitats Directive, viz. There must be:

(a) no alternative solution available, (b) imperative reasons of overriding public interest for the Plan to proceed; and (c) adequate compensatory measures in place.

decisions regarding the adoption and implementation of the Plan. All SEA recommendations have been integrated into the Plan.

- *Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA)*

SFRA is an assessment of flood risk and includes mapped boundaries for Flood Risk Zones, taking into account factors including Catchment Flood Risk Management Plan data, site walkovers and flood risk indicators. SFRA is required under 'The Planning System and Flood Risk Management Guidelines for Planning Authorities' (Department of Environment and Office of Public Works, 2009) and associated Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government Circular PL2/2014. All SFRA recommendations have been integrated into the Plan.

### **1.3 Strategic Hierarchy**

The content of this LAP aligns with international, European, national, regional and county policy and legislation, in addition to Ministerial Guidelines / policy Directives.

#### **1.3.1 Sustainability Development Goals**

Since 2015, Ireland has been a signatory for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as outlined in Figure 1.4 below. These goals provide a comprehensive framework for policy development to the year 2030, which collectively outline a roadmap to end poverty, combat climate change and ensure peaceful, just and equal societies for future generations. The 17 SDGs are integrated – that is, they recognise that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability. Achieving the SDGs requires the partnership of governments, private sector, civil society and citizens alike to make sure we leave a better planet for future generations.



Figure 1.4 United Nations Sustainability Development Goals

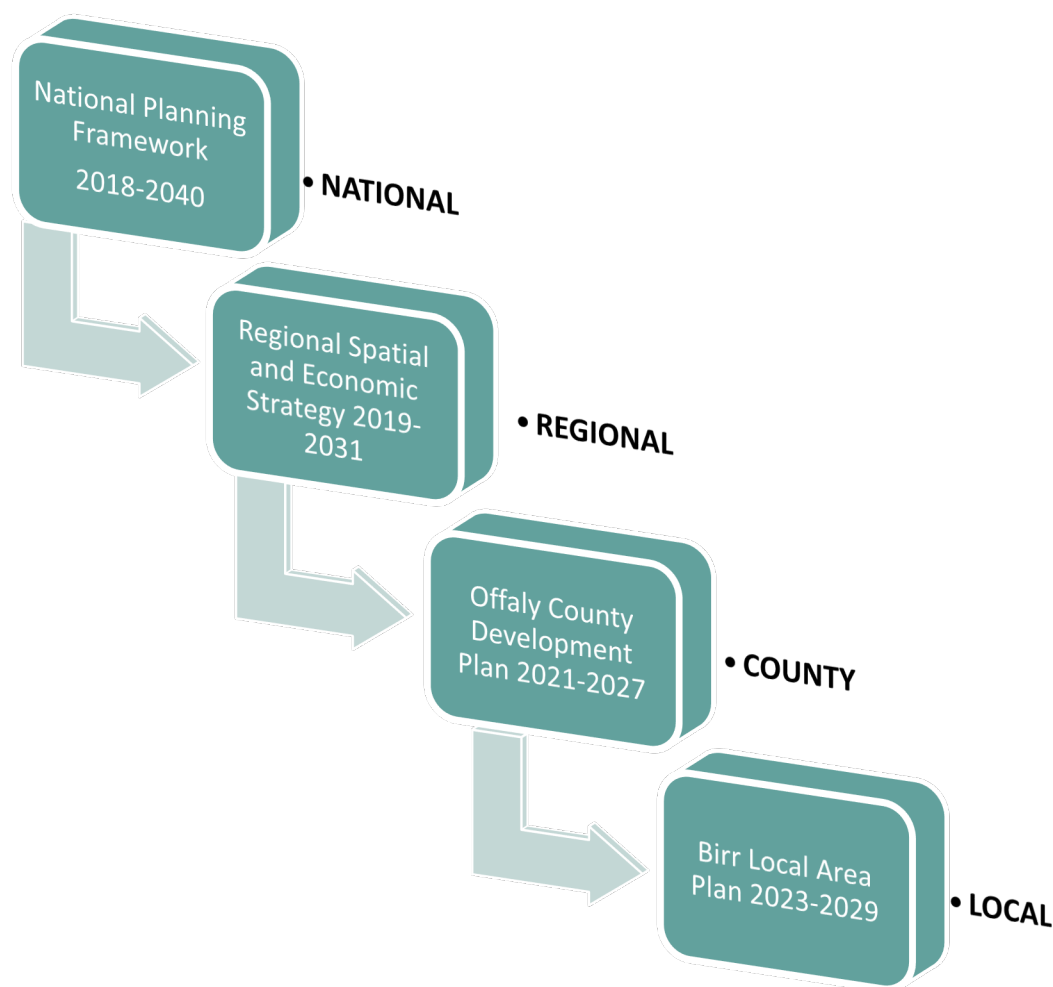


Figure 1.5 Hierarchy of Strategic Plans

### 1.3.2 Project Ireland 2040: National Planning Framework

The National Planning Framework (NPF) was adopted as part of Project Ireland 2040 in February 2018. The NPF sets out a high-level strategic plan for shaping the future growth of Ireland and provides 10 National Strategic Outcomes for realising the vision of the plan. The NPF sits at the highest tier of planning in Ireland, and all regional, county and local planning policy should be consistent with the principles contained within it. Whilst Birr is not referred to directly in the NPF, it is noted that the NPF recognises the important role towns like Birr fulfil as local drivers for their surrounding areas through accommodating local housing and employment growth and that the natural and built heritage of a town, can add distinctiveness to its 'sense of place' which is becoming an important factor in attracting foreign direct investment and individual talent to Ireland.

### 1.3.3 Eastern and Midland Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy 2019-2031

The Eastern and Midland Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy 2019-2031 is a strategic plan and investment framework to shape the future development of the region to 2031 and beyond. The aim of the strategy is to create a sustainable and competitive region that supports the health and well-being of its people and places, with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunities for everyone. The three key principles of the RSES are focused on: Healthy Place-making, Climate Action and Economic Opportunity. Each of these principles are supported by 16 Regional Strategic

Outcomes (RSO's) that promote compact growth and urban regeneration, integrated sustainable transport options, a promotion of enhanced green infrastructure and protection of local biodiversity and heritage. Birr Town is mentioned within the Retail hierarchy, classified as a 'Level 3 Town and/or District Centres & Sub-County Town Centres (Key Service Centre)'. The town is also recognised for its Architectural Heritage and for being a historic planned town and designated Irish Heritage Town.

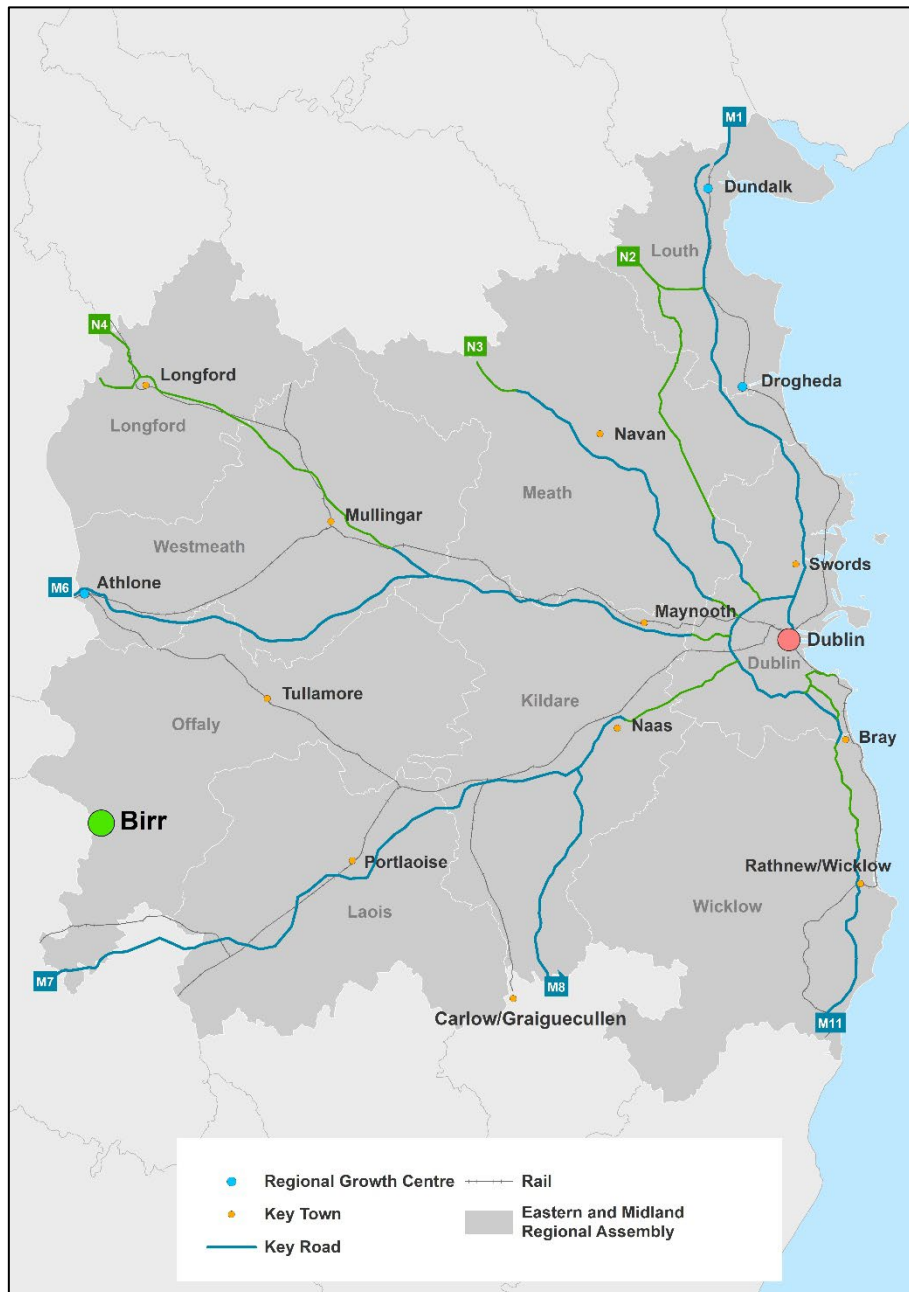


Figure 1.6 Birr within the Eastern and Midland Region

### 1.3.4 Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027

The Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027 is a land use plan and overall strategy for the proper planning and sustainable development of the county over a 6-year period. The Plan is informed by Project Ireland 2040 and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland

Region. Within the Core Strategy, Birr including Crinkill is listed as a ‘Self-Sustaining Growth Town’, with the following function over the lifetime of the Plan;

*“A sub-county market town that has significant employment and service functions relative to its regional and local catchment, has good regional transport links and has the capacity for continued commensurate growth to become more self-sustaining. It supports the regional driver role of Tullamore, and acts as an important local driver providing a range of functions for its resident population and its surrounding catchment including housing, employment, services, retail and leisure opportunities. The town should grow at a sustainable level appropriate to its position in the settlement hierarchy.”*

This LAP is working towards an anticipated population growth of 1263 persons in line with the provisions of the Core Strategy objectives of the County Development Plan. Under the Core Strategy for the county contained in Chapter 2 of the County Development Plan, Birr, including Crinkill Village, is allocated a requirement for 13.9ha for new residential development over the lifetime of the Plan. The 13.9ha of ‘New Residential’ zoned land has been identified within the existing built-up footprint of Birr and Crinkill, with Birr town as the primary focus of the overall settlement. The development strategy of this plan is based around the projected population growth.

## 1.4 Other Relevant Plans and Studies

In addition to national, regional and county strategic plans listed above, this Local Area Plan has been prepared having regard to other documents listed below.

The following Birr specific non-statutory plans and studies were taken into account in the preparation of this LAP;

### **Birr Local Transport Plan (LTP)**

The purpose of the LTP is to place the integration of land use and transport planning at the centre of the plan-making process for Birr. The LTP examined the existing and proposed transport infrastructure and service provision across all modes of transport including sustainable means such as active modes (walking and cycling) in the town. It provides an understanding of the existing constraints and modal share and it also identifies the interventions required within the Plan area and in the wider context, to effectively accommodate the anticipated increase in demand and ensure the optimal transportation interventions can be planned in order to drive a shift towards sustainable movement.

### **Birr Public Realm Study**

The Council adopted the Birr Public Realm Plan in April 2009. The purpose of the study was to identify areas where improvements can be made in all elements of the public realm and to ensure a coordinated approach to any improvements. The addendum to the Public Realm Plan for Birr was written in 2021 to reflect changes in the town since the original plan was launched in 2009. The addendum, which has been informed through consultation with local stakeholder groups, will be used alongside the original plan to further inform planning policy and investment decisions for Birr.

### **Rectory Lands Masterplan**

A concept masterplan is currently under preparation by consultants for the Rectory Lands in Birr (referred to in section 3.3.2 of this LAP as an Opportunity Site). The subject underutilised lands are

located in close proximity to Birr town centre and their development is anticipated to play a major role in the future regeneration of Birr. The concept masterplan is expected to address compact growth, sustainable mobility, permeability, healthy place-making, low carbon output, mix of uses and have regard to relevant section 28 Ministerial Guidelines.

**Birr Interpretive Strategy, A Unique Heritage Vision, 2021, Offaly County Council and Fáilte Ireland**

This document is a community-led Interpretation Strategy for Birr town. It includes a suite of key storylines and actions to convey the story of Birr.

The LAP was also prepared taking account of the following documents at a county, regional and national level.

**County level:**

- Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027
- Offaly Digital Strategy 2020-2022
- Irish Water Treatment Capacity Register and 10-year Water Supply Capacity Register, 2022
- Seeing the Beyond, Birr Festivals Planning for a Shared Future, Birr Festival Development Strategy, 2020 by Birr 20:20 Vision CLG
- Birr Creative Court; A Scoping Report on the Potential of Birr Courthouse, 2019 by Birr 20:20 Vision CLG
- Offaly Heritage Plan 2023-2027

*Forthcoming documents:*

- Offaly Economic Development Strategy and Action Plan 2022-2027
- Local Economic and Community Plan 2022-2027
- Offaly Streetscape Project 2023 Tullamore and Birr
- Offaly Tourism Strategy 2022 – 2026
- Age Friendly Strategy for County Offaly 2022-2027
- Offaly Digital Strategy 2023-2025

**Regional level:**

- Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024 Midlands, Government of Ireland; An initiative of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2022
- Midland Regional Food and Drink Strategy 2021-2024, by Midlands Ireland

*Forthcoming document:*

- Regional Tourism Strategy for Ireland's Hidden Heartlands 2022-2026 by Fáilte Ireland

**National level:**

- Documents and Section 28 Guidelines as listed in Chapter 1 of Offaly CDP
- Town Centre First, A Policy Approach for Irish Towns, DRCD, 2022
- Housing for All – A New Housing Plan for Ireland, DHLGH, 2021
- Housing Options for Our Aging Population – Government Policy Statement, 2019
- Age Friendly Principles and Guidelines for the Planning Authority, Age Friendly Ireland, June 2021
- Nature-based Solutions to the Management of Rainwater and Surface Water Runoff in Urban Areas; Water Sensitive Urban Design Best Practice Interim Guidance Document, DHLGH, 2022
- Local Area Plans - Guidelines for Planning Authorities, DECLG, 2013
- Manual for Local Area Plans, DECLG, 2013
- Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets, update 2020.
- Building for Everyone; A Universal Design Approach, Booklet 9 Planning and Policy, by the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design
- National Smart Specialisation Strategy for Innovation 2022-2027
- Ten Universal Design Features to include in a Lifetime Adaptable and Age Friendly Home, by Age Friendly Ireland, 2021
- Climate Action and the Local Authority Development Plan (OPR Case Study Paper CSP05), 2022
- The Need for UN SDGs, Baseline Data and Vacancy Targets in Local Area Plans (LAPs) for Historic Town Centres, A Report by the CTCHC Programme, The Heritage Council, 2022.
- National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland, Dept. of Transport, 2022
- National Sustainable Mobility Policy, Dept. of Transport, 2022
- Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure Strategy 2022-2025

*Forthcoming documents:*

- Places for People – National Policy on Architecture (stated in Town Centre First Policy)
- A National Strategy for People with a Disability (stated in Town Centre First Policy)
- National health check model (stated in Town Centre First Policy)
- Climate Action Plan 2022, Securing Our Future, Government of Ireland, 2022

## 1.5 Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR)

The Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2018 provided for the establishment of an Independent Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR). Under the provisions of the Act, the OPR has assumed the Minister's evaluation and assessment function of all statutory land use plans including local area plans. The OPR provides statutory observations on all draft statutory plans to ensure consistency with relevant national and regional policies. All observations received from the OPR have been taken into consideration.



## 1.6 Strategic Vision and Aims for Birr

This LAP is intended to guide the future growth of Birr in a sustainable manner, in a way that reflects the inherent character of the area and identifies the potential of utilising its existing assets as the base for improving the quality of life and resilience of both the present and future residents of the town.

The following strategic aims in conjunction with each other will assist in delivering the strategic vision for Birr.

### Strategic Aim 1: Economic Development

To successfully fulfil Birr's role as a self-sustaining growth town by embracing the transition to a low carbon and climate resilient model of development while seeking to utilise and invest in the town's existing economic, social and environmental assets to generate sustainable economic development and job creation, thereby enhancing its status as the main business, service, social, cultural, tourism and recreational hub for everyone in south Offaly and ensuring it is an attractive place to live, work and visit.

### Strategic Aim 2: Town Centre and Regeneration

To sensitively and sustainably enhance the historic town centre through the provision of healthy place-making. To facilitate a competitive and healthy retail environment and to support the future vitality, diversity and viability of Birr town centre and Crinkill village. Reinforce Birr town centre as the heart of the town, by avoiding undesirable and inefficient sprawl, achieving critical mass and consolidating new development within the built-up footprint of the town, through targeting a significant proportion of future development on infill/brownfield/under-utilised sites, and extending out sequentially subject to available infrastructure. These aims will improve the attractiveness and functionality of Birr Town as a place in which to live, work and visit while also functioning as the business, service, social, cultural and recreational hub for the local community.

### Strategic Aim 3: Built Heritage

To protect, conserve and manage Birr's buildings, areas, structures, sites and features of special architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, social or technical interest, by promoting the understanding, enhancement and appropriate development of these assets in order to instigate a heritage-led regeneration of the town.

### Strategic Aim 4: Residential

Deliver high quality housing in terms of design, scale, mix, tenure, sequence and density to reasonably match the requirements of the different categories of households, which shall be constructed on the principles of universal design, life-long adaptability and energy efficiency, and developed in a manner which promotes compact growth and healthy place-making and is in line with the Core Strategy in the County Development Plan.

### Strategic Aim 5: Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure

Protect and enhance Birr Town and Crinkill village's natural assets of clean water, biodiversity, landscape, green infrastructure, natural heritage and agricultural land, while maintaining ecosystem services and improving resilience to climate change.

#### **Strategic Aim 6: Community**

Promote Birr as a town where people can live and work, with access to a range of community facilities and events that are vital for social inclusion and quality of life for all.

#### **Strategic Aim 7: Climate Action**

Enhance climate adaptation and mitigation, and accelerate a transition to a low carbon, climate resilient and environmentally sustainable economy in Birr.

#### **Strategic Aim 8: Critical Infrastructure**

Facilitate the timely provision of infrastructure and utilities that will support sustainable socioeconomic growth and protect the quality of the environment of the town in a low carbon manner.

#### **Strategic Aim 9: Planning and Infrastructural Assessment**

To phase new development to ensure that it occurs in a sequential and efficient manner and in tandem with the delivery of supporting physical and social infrastructure.

#### **Strategic Aim 10: Land Use Zoning Objectives**

To adhere to the land use zoning objectives contained in this Plan in the interests of orderly development and eliminating potential conflicts between incompatible land uses.

#### **Strategic Aim 11: Implementation and Monitoring**

To implement in conjunction with key stakeholders, the objectives of this Local Area Plan, with a particular focus on the key strategic objectives, and to monitor same.