

## Chapter 7: Community

### Strategic Aim:

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.

### 7.1 Introduction

Encouraging vibrant communities in Birr must start with offering residents a quality of life that opens new and different opportunities. Building communities should not retain focus on building homes only but build for the wider needs of the whole community and strive to develop communities that are well balanced, integrated, sustainable and well connected. Community services, facilities and amenities are needed at an early stage within the life of new communities to keep people engaged and invested. Equally important are the less visible types of support that make people feel at home in an area and create a sense of local identity and belonging, like volunteers, local committees or community development workers who by their passion and mobilization encourage involvement in shared community activities.



Figure 7.1 Birr Theatre & Arts Centre, Oxmantown Mall, Birr

### 7.2 Strategy

This plan seeks to assist and facilitate the improvement of existing social, community and cultural facilities, as appropriate within Birr and make adequate provisions for the development of new facilities. The Council provides a number of roles in ensuring adequate provision of social, community and cultural facilities as appropriate.

Suitably located sites will be reserved in existing and newly built-up areas where deficiencies exist. The provision of social facilities including recreational facilities for the youth of the town is essential, and the Councils wish to see the expansion of these types of facilities in Birr.

This strategy, for the purposes of this plan, identifies the needs of the community of Birr in broad terms. However, a collaborative approach by all stakeholders i.e. state, local authority, community groups and the private sector on the identification and provision of community facilities is required on an on-going basis to ensure that appropriate facilities are provided, when necessary. The Council plays an integral role in facilitating and supporting these identified needs.

## **7.3 Social Infrastructure**

### **7.3.1 Assessment of the Existing Situation and Future Demand**

Assessing the existing situation included:

- Establishing a social and demographic profile of the community who live in Birr (Chapter 1)
- Identifying existing community infrastructure features under a number of predefined themes including 'Education & Training', 'Childcare Facilities', 'Health Facilities', 'Sports and Recreational Facilities', 'Playgrounds & Open Spaces', 'Community & Resource Centres, 'Places of Worship', 'Arts and Culture', and 'Libraries'.

Below outlines an assessment of the existing infrastructure provision relative to the existing/planned population and best practice provision.

#### **7.3.1.1 Education & Training**

The Athlone Campus of the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS): Midlands Midwest is located in proximity to Birr Town (circa 40km) and the Thurles campus is located approximately 53km from Birr Town.

There are currently five primary schools and one secondary school within the areas of Birr and Crinkill. With regard to capacity, the Department of Education has confirmed that there is sufficient capacity within the Primary and Post-Primary schools of Birr and Crinkill to facilitate future population projections within the Plan period. In the context of extending the capacity of existing schools if required within the Plan period, the Department notes that it is important to consider the current refugee situation within Ireland and the potential need for extra education provision that increasing numbers of refugees may bring in the short to medium term. It may be possible to add some of this level of accommodation onto existing schools. However, this would be dependent on the size and suitability of the existing sites and school agreements.

The Birr Outdoor Education Centre (OEC) is a non-profit making body affiliated to the Department of Education and Science under the auspices of Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board. Birr OEC offers environmental education courses, adventure sports and team building activities to groups of people from the ages of 8 to 80 years. Courses provided are also part of the curriculum for Junior, Transition Year and Leaving Certificate classes.

Birr Further Education and Training Centre (FET) Centre offers part time unaccredited and accredited courses at QQI Levels 1 to 6 at Townsend Street.

The I-LOFAR Education Centre was officially opened in Birr in May 2019. The Education Centre was funded by the Department of Rural and Community Affairs in conjunction with Offaly County Council, Trinity College Dublin and Birr Scientific & Heritage Foundation Ireland. The I-LOFAR Education Centre

compliments the existing Science Visitor Centre at Birr Castle, which tells the story of past Irish achievements in science. The I-LOFAR Education Centre provides an inspirational location for education workshops, and community-based science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) projects. The I-LOFAR Education Centre provides a home for STEM Education in Offaly.

To support and develop I-LOFAR in Birr, there is a related project called stream BIRR (which stands for Science, Technology, Research, Engineering, Arts and Maths), where research and education connects with businesses, to create jobs. Stream BIRR provides researchers and businesses with hot desks, office space and training in data analytics and related topics. The stream BIRR project is an initiative of Offaly Innovation & Design Centre CLG, and has received funding from Enterprise Ireland and Offaly County Council.

Established in 2010, the Irish Heritage School located at John's Hall is Ireland's leading provider of accredited, site-based heritage research and training. The ethos of the school is to provide an opportunity for students and enthusiasts of the natural, cultural and built heritage, to learn in an outdoor classroom within an established research framework led by a team of highly qualified and experienced heritage experts.

The Local Enterprise Office (LEO) Offaly provides outreach services to businesses in Birr. These include: business clinics, mentoring and enterprise related training and networking events.

#### **7.3.1.2 Childcare**

Childcare facilities are well distributed spatially within the Birr Plan area with 5 facilities, predominantly located close to or within existing residential developments. All future proposed childcare facilities shall be provided in accordance with the Childcare Facilities: Guidelines for Planning Authorities (DEHLG) 2001 or subsequent editions.

#### **7.3.1.3 Healthcare Facilities**

Healthcare facilities in Birr include GPs, health centres, dentists, care and other related facilities. Healthcare facilities are dispersed throughout the town, although there is some clustering within the HSE grounds off St. John's Terrace.

Birr Community Health and Nursing Unit is located at Sandymount, Birr. Facilities cater for a 90 bed-nursing unit providing respite, rehabilitation, palliative and continuing care for older people. There is also a health care/day care centre for non-residents.

The HSE is proposing to construct a primary care centre in Birr subject to obtaining planning permission. The Council will continue to work with healthcare service providers and key stakeholders, including the HSE and private bodies to strengthen healthcare services in Birr.

#### 7.3.1.4 Sport & Recreation

Birr has a colourful image throughout the country as a successful sporting town, and has a number of sports and recreational facilities. Established in 1909, Birr GAA Club is located at St Brendan's Park. It is one of the main grounds for Offaly's Gaelic football and hurling teams. The grounds have capacity to hold 8,800.

Birr town and environs is served well by sports clubs with facilities for athletics, Gaelic Games, rugby, soccer, boxing, handball, tennis, gymnastics, swimming and gyms. Birr town also has a number of playgrounds and outdoor play areas. The public swimming pool and gymnasium is located at Townparks. The Council recognises the importance of this facility and will encourage and facilitate its continued development and enhancement.



Figure 7.2 Tree House at Birr Castle Playground  
(Source: Birr Castle Website)

The Ormand Flying Club located at Birr Airfield, is a club passionate about making aviation fun and accessible to all. The Club specialises in training for the Private Pilot Licence (PPL) and are a registered training facility with the Irish Aviation Authority (IAA).

Birr Equestrian Centre has been catering for riders and horse enthusiasts for over forty-five years. The centre is open 7 days a week and they offer riding lessons; cross country treks and tuition; hourly, half day and full day trekking in the Slieve Bloom Mountains; trekking holidays in conjunction with local accommodation providers and also seasonal pony camps. Other activities also provided at the equestrian centre include Archery and Laser Shooting.

Birr Outdoor Education Centre offers a wide variety of activities and adventure sports including canoeing, kayaking, gorge walking, raft building, orienteering, abseiling, rock climbing, archery, team building games, obstacle course, indoor rock climbing, ropes course and hillwalking. Also, included is hostel accommodation for environmental studies and adventure sports.

#### 7.3.1.5 Libraries

Birr Convent was built between 1846 and 1856 and is considered as one of the gems of Birr's architectural heritage. Part of it now accommodates Birr Civic Offices and Library.

The core library areas are located on two floors of the original Pugin chapel, and this accommodates the adult library. The Children's library is situated on the ground floor with designated spaces for children's activities. Computers are provided on each floor. In addition to the traditional services, the library provides assistive technology facilities, online services including access to over 150 years of Birr's newspapers. It also holds the only facsimile of the Gospel Book of Macregol of Birr (The Book of Birr) and other items of local interest.

### 7.3.1.6 Arts and Culture

Offaly County Council has adopted and published the County Offaly Arts Strategy for the period 2018-2022. The vision statement of the Plan notes the importance of the arts being *'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.'* Birr hosts a number of arts and cultural facilities and events.

Birr Theatre and Arts Centre is a dedicated purpose built theatre, which dates from 1888. Having fallen into disrepair during the eighties and nineties, Birr Stage Guild set about restoring and refurbishing this Victorian theatre building to its original glory with seating capacity for 220 with both public funds and local fundraising. The first performance in the renovated Theatre and Arts Centre was in July 2000. The Centre provides a base for year-round development of the Arts in Birr, its environs and the wider region. The programme of events held in the centre includes theatre, music, film, dance, comedy etc. The centre is involved with a number of festivals, supported by the Birr Festivals Collective, (Birr Festival of Music & Voice, Hullabaloo! Offaly's Children's Arts Festival, OFFline Film Festival, Birr Vintage Week & Arts Festival, Scripts Ireland's Playwriting Festival). The Council acknowledges the valuable contribution of the Birr Theatre and Arts Centre for the people of Birr, its inhabitants and those people in surrounding areas through its continued support.

The consortium of the Birr Festivals Collective was formed in 2020 with the coming together of Birr Vintage Week & Arts Festival, Birr Festival of Music, OFFline Film Festival, Hullabaloo! Offaly's Children's Arts Festival and Scripts Ireland's Playwriting Festival to reflect, to imagine and to create possibilities for the future of Birr's festivals. Birr 20:20 sought to reflect, reshape and plan for the future of festivals in Birr and accordingly in 2020 commissioned a Birr festival development strategy titled 'Seeing the Beyond: Birr Festivals Planning for a Shared Future'.

Offaly County Council Arts Office has developed an Arts Infrastructure Strategy, with a focus on a coordinated approach to Place-Making through Arts Infrastructure. Of relevance to the Council are the potential synergies that can be co-ordinated between the primary infrastructural hubs throughout the county and how these can work together for the making of Creative and Cultural Places for artists and audiences across the county. Birr Theatre and Arts Centre therefore have an important role within this strategic approach, which will at once demonstrate how they can work collaboratively with other arts infrastructure, while identifying and growing their own unique selling proposition. The Arts Infrastructure Strategy will explore the potential to enhance, add value and provide multiple benefits through connectivity and complimentary programming, across the county and in collaboration with existing and new arts infrastructure.

Established in 2016, Birr Festival of Music is an annual four-day classical music festival in Birr. It represents the pursuit of excellence in the making of music in the castle, townhouse, farmhouse and cottage that has characterised Birr and its neighbourhood over centuries. The programme includes a vibrant range of events; concerts (indoors and outdoors), workshops, street performances, pop-up and online events featuring singers and musicians of national and international acclaim.

Hullabaloo! Offaly's Children's Arts Festival is coordinated by the Offaly County Council Arts Office and Birr Theatre & Arts Centre for the county of Offaly. It celebrates the creative and imaginative intelligence of children and young people. Festival workshops and family performances take place in Birr, Clara and Edenderry and Offaly Libraries during the Festival dates. The festival includes quality

workshops and performances that see children engaged in arts activity and showcase theatre for young audiences and develop their arts interest.

OFFline Film Festival is a five-day event that is run annually in a quirky array of venues around Birr town. It is a contemporary celebration of pioneering adventure into photography associated with Mary, Countess of Rosse, wife of the Astronomer Earl. The festival also includes workshops on different aspects of filmmaking given by industry professionals. LEO Offaly also provides mentoring for the winners of the OFFline Film Festival Animation Residency, and in the last couple of years has funded a Film Industry Day as part of the OFFline Film Festival. This is to encourage development of Creative Industries in Offaly.

The Birr Vintage Week & Arts Festival is one of the oldest town festivals in the country. It features professional national and international artists bringing visual arts, theatre, music, street theatre, pop up performers, workshops, exhibitions and lots more, together with a variety of community events.

Scripts Ireland's Playwriting Festival was established in 2013 and is an annual four-day festival held in Birr. It is a testimony to the long traditions of drama, publishing and printing in which Birr has excelled for more than two centuries. The festival is dedicated to new Irish plays—the writing of them, the development and nurturing of them. The playwriting festival features a host of exciting events for lovers of theatre - those who want to create, perform and watch live in beautiful surroundings.

In addition, there is the regular Annual Hot Air Balloon Event organised in Birr Castle Demesne.

In 2021 Birr Courthouse was transferred into the County Council's ownership from the Office of Public Works. A conservation plan was drawn up and under the 2021 Historic Towns Initiative and Historic Structures Fund, emergency repair conservation works have been carried out on Birr's nineteenth century Courthouse with a view to re-use it as a multi-purpose community space, a digital/connected hub, as well as for arts and culture purposes. Offaly County Council and community group Birr 20:20 are working together on this ambitious project.

#### **7.3.1.7 Community & Resource Centres**

Birr encompasses a number of Community and resource centres such as the Marian Hall located at William Street. The Marian Hall, established in 1954, caters for the Birr Community and currently hosts weekly Bingo nights as well as being used for activities such as dance and drama classes. The Alzheimer Society of Ireland provides dementia specific, person centred care to meet the needs of the person with dementia at the Old Day Care Centre at John's Terrace, Birr. The centre offers a wide range of activities including reminiscence therapy, music sessions, gentle exercises, arts and crafts and personal care. St Brendan's Hall on Emmet Street is run by the Church of Ireland Vestry and is available for community rental. John's Hall is owned by Birr Castle Estate and leased to Offaly County Council and is available for public meetings / rental as a lecture hall.

#### **7.3.1.8 Places of Worship**

A total of four faith facilities are located in Birr comprising St. Brendan's Roman Catholic Church, St. Brendan's Church of Ireland, The Methodist Church on Emmet Street and Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses. Most facilities are located within the town centre.

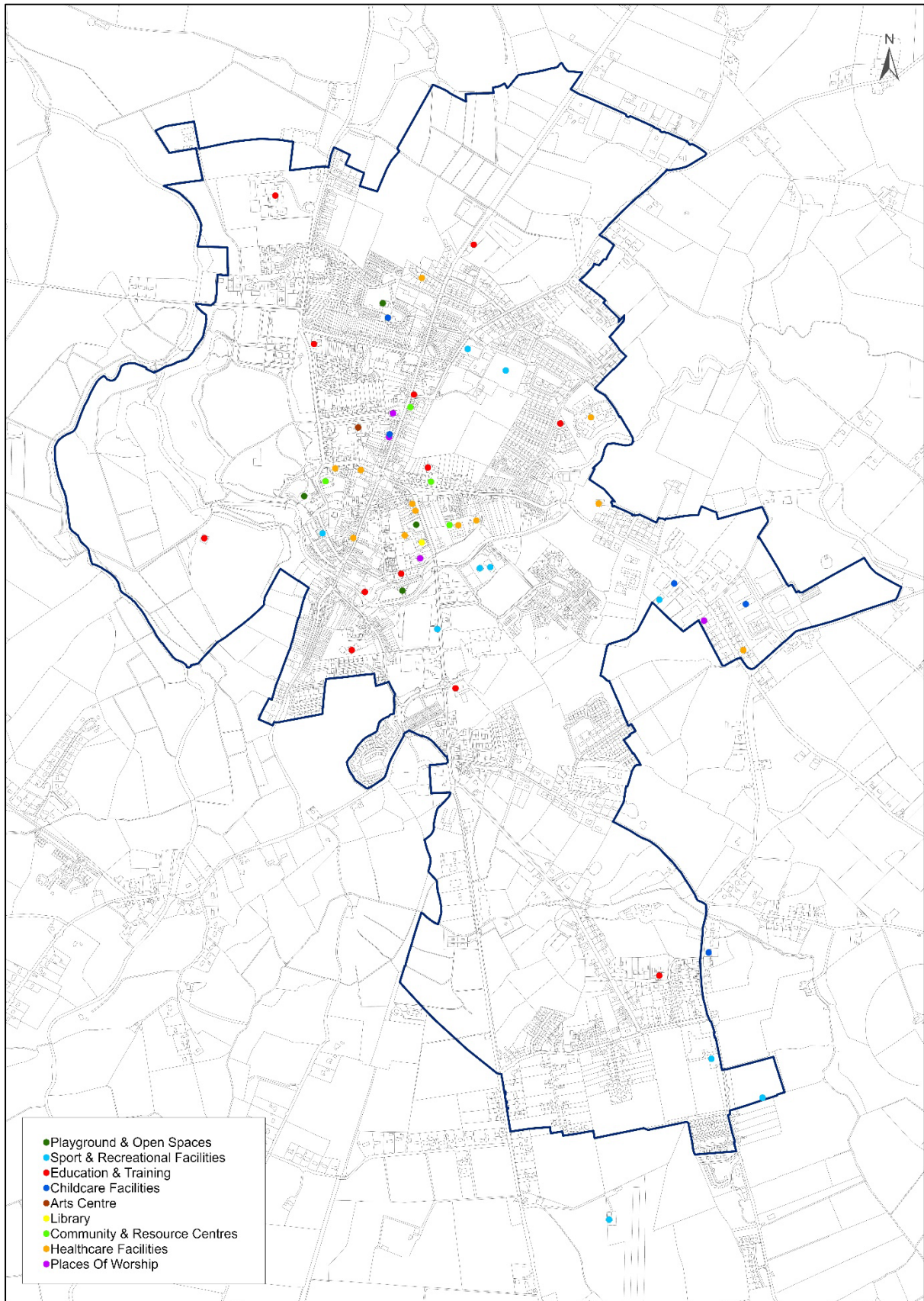


Figure 7.3 Existing Social Infrastructure

Table 7.1 provides a breakdown of the requirements for social infrastructure under relevant themes that are required to provide for the future needs and demands of the projected population.

**Table 7.1 Assessment of Future Demand & Requirements**

Theme	Land Use	Potential Location	What is required	Delivery Mechanism
<b>Education &amp; Training</b>				
Primary & Post-Primary School Extension	Educational	Dependent on the size and suitability of the existing sites and school agreements.	To consider the current refugee situation within Ireland and the potential need for extra education provision that increasing numbers of refugees may bring in the short to medium term. It may be possible to add some of this level of accommodation onto existing schools.	Department of Education
Primary & Post-Primary School New school	Educational	-	No requirement for new Primary or Post-primary schools within Plan Period	-
New Training Facilities	Educational	-	While no further training facilities are required over the period of the plan appropriate applications would be considered.	Developer / Offaly County Council / Other
<b>Childcare</b>				
20 childcare spaces required per 75 new residential units	Childcare	Adjacent to / within new residential developments over 75 residential units	Additional childcare spaces required per 75 new residential units	Private developer-led alongside new development
<b>Health</b>				
Primary Care Centre	Health	Subject to planning permission.	A new Primary Care Centre	Developer / Offaly County Council / HSE / Other
<b>Community &amp; Resource</b>				
No critical infrastructure required	Community	-	While no further Community Facilities are required over the period of the plan, appropriate applications would be considered.	Developer / Offaly County Council / Other
<b>Arts &amp; Culture</b>				
No critical infrastructure required	Community	-	While no further Arts & Culture Facilities are required over the period of the plan, appropriate applications would be considered. The Council is committed to the on-going works being carried out to the Birr Courthouse facility	Developer / Offaly County Council / Birr 20:20 / Other
<b>Places of Worship</b>				
No critical infrastructure required	Faith	-	While no further Places of Worship are required over the period of the plan, appropriate applications would be considered.	Developer / Other
<b>Sports</b>				
No critical infrastructure required	Sports	-	Provision of an athletics facility on appropriately zoned lands may be required.	Developer / Other
<b>Equipped/Designated Play Space</b>				
Equipped/Designated play spaces	Community	Within new residential developments	Designated play spaces will be encouraged within new residential developments	Developer / Offaly County Council / Other



## 7.4 Best Practice Measures in the Provision of Community Services and Infrastructure

In addition to the above specific community and social infrastructure requirements, the Council recommends the following principles in the provision of social infrastructure consistent with best practice and the sustainable and effective use of resources:

### Co-Location

Co-location and clustering of complementary community services, thus facilitating coordination, climate action, convenience and access for service users.

### Multi-purpose and Multi-function

Facilities and spaces should offer flexible and diverse space and uses over a range of times to maximise efficiency, utilisation and adaptability of physical assets.

### Place-making and Community Identity

Promotion and encouragement of community facilities that create a sense of place and that have a civic quality, and level of amenity that can foster community ownership, and offer a focus to support community engagement in Birr.

### Age-Friendly Town

The creation of an age friendly town means that key destinations within the town should all be easily accessible by foot, particularly within the commercial core. Social and community facilities should be within walking distance of the town centre, key services and public transportation, while also being integrated into a universally accessible and age friendly public realm.

### Partnership

Encourage delivery of infrastructure services and facilities through partnerships between different bodies for maximum efficiency and co-ordination.

## 7.5 Community Policies

It is Council Policy to:

**CP-01** Facilitate and secure the provision of social infrastructure to support existing and new communities within the plan area, in a manner which provides flexibility to respond to varied and changing community needs.

**CP-02** Support and facilitate improvements to existing primary and post-primary schools if necessary to facilitate increased population including the influx of refugees in the short-medium term.

**CP-03** Support and co-operate with promoters or operators of public and private health care facilities by facilitating appropriate health care facilities in suitable locations in Birr.

**CP-04** Support and facilitate the provision of children's play facilities in Birr within existing and proposed green spaces, for children of all ages while also having regard to those with special needs.

**CP-05** Support community-led and cultural projects, which enhance the social and economic well-being of residents of the town and improve the quality of the environment of the town.

**CP-06** Support an extended festival season in Birr.

## 7.6 Community Objectives

It is an objective of this Council to:

**CO-01** Require the provision of appropriately located and purpose-built early learning and childcare facilities to meet the pro-rata childcare needs of new housing developments during the plan period.