



02 April 2024

Administrative Officer,
Planning Department,
Wicklow County Council,
County Buildings,
Station Road,
Wicklow Town,
A67 FW96

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Arklow and Environs LAP

The Heritage Council was established in 1995 as a statutory body under the Heritage Act 1995 with a Council (the Board of the body) appointed by the Minister. The Heritage Council is a prescribed body under the provisions of the Planning and Development Acts 2000-2010 and S.I. No. 600/2001 of the Planning and Development Regulations, section 28 inter alia, in accordance with its functions under Section 6 of the Heritage Act, 1995.

We seek to provide submissions on forward planning, development control and strategic infrastructure developments as they relate to Ireland's heritage, namely built, cultural and natural heritage. We welcome the opportunity to comment on the Pre-Draft Arklow Town and Environs Local Area Plan (LAP). We have considered the questions provided under each section provided on the online consult page, and our comments are a response to these questions, where they were relevant. Our comments will deal with both built heritage and natural heritage, as the matters appear. Ireland's national heritage is defined in the Heritage Act, 1995 as including: 'monuments, archaeological objects, heritage objects, architectural heritage, flora, fauna, wildlife habitats, landscapes, seascapes, wrecks, geology, heritage gardens, and parks and inland waterways'.

National and Local Policy Context

It is important to state from the onset that the **National Planning Framework – Project Ireland 2040**, identifies “*Enhanced Amenities and Heritage*” as one of our national strategic outcomes. Within this, the NPF correctly notes that built, cultural and natural heritage has intrinsic value in defining the character of urban and rural areas, adding to their attractiveness and sense of place. National policy objectives 16, 17 and 52 in the NPF give further support to this ambition and there is a need to reflect this in LAPs.

Development Plans – Guidelines for Local Planning Authorities was prepared for county and city councils in June 2022. Within these guidelines, there are detailed requirements for local forward planning objectives. Features of special architectural, historical, or natural value are our heritage assets, and mandatory objectives under the themes of ‘heritage and landscape’ have been identified throughout these guidelines. There is an obligation on local authorities to ensure the inclusion of such objectives in their statutory plans.

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The 4th edition of Ireland's **National Biodiversity Action Plan (NBAP) 2023 – 2030** was published in January 2024. The NBAP states that “local authorities play a key role in biodiversity conservation through the planning system”. There are several targets identified under Outcome 2A (*The protection of existing designated areas and protected species is strengthened and conservation and restoration within the existing protected area network are enhanced, regarding designated areas and protected species*) that are relevant for local authorities in their plan making functions. However, of key importance is Outcome 3C (*Planning and development will facilitate and secure biodiversity's contributions to People*). Action Numbers 3C2 and 3C3 are especially important, whereby the objectives of the NBAP are to be aligned and integrated within the statutory land use plans. In addition, actions 1B9, 1C5 should also be key considerations for all plans.

Heritage Ireland 2030 was published in February 2022, and details a number of action points relevant for local authorities and these should be included in local area plans. Most importantly are Action 22 - *Introduce policies on supports for urban biodiversity and tree planting*; Action 26 - *Support nature-based solutions for land-use management*; and Action 37 - *Integrate heritage considerations into urban and rural regeneration to ensure that built and natural heritage objectives underpin the planning and development process and inform the 'Town Centres First' policy approach*.

The **Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Architectural Heritage Protection** were developed in 2004 and give expression to the provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2000, with regards to built heritage. Chapter 2 and 3 give detailed guidance on the role of statutory county level plans with regards to the Record of Protected Structures and Architectural Conservation Areas. The Office of the Planning Regulator has also provided guidance on **Archaeology in the Planning Process** through **Planning Leaflet 13**.

The **Wicklow County Development Plan 2022 – 2028** has a comprehensive chapter on built heritage. Objectives CPO 8.1 through CPO 8.28 place strong emphasis on the protection and enhancement of the county's built, historical, and cultural heritage. The county's architectural conservation areas are also listed in this chapter. In chapter 17, Objectives CPO 17.1 to 17.3 have overarching objectives for natural heritage and ecosystem services, whilst also seeking the protection of ecological networks and corridors. While objective CPO 17.12 seeks to protect non-designated assets from inappropriate development, and Objective 17.14 places strong importance on biodiversity and ecological connectivity, particularly in relation to linear features such as hedgerows and watercourses. There are several other specific objectives in, what is, a very comprehensive chapter on natural heritage in this county development plan.

Specific comments on the Issues Paper

HOUSING – POPULATION – COMPACT GROWTH

While sustainable settlement patterns and compact growth ambitions are supported, there is a need to ensure there is not a conflation between high buildings and high density.

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High density does not necessarily mean high buildings. High coverage low height can achieve relatively high density in urban locations.

There are two concerns regarding taller buildings when it comes to heritage:

1. Potential impact on historic landmarks and church spires. Taller buildings have the potential to alter their setting while detracting from the historic character of the town. Wicklow County Council could consider some views analysis to establish protected views and prospects in the LAP.
2. Taller buildings tend to accommodate smaller units (1 and 2 bed flats). This inevitably leads to displaced demand for family homes which will lead to greenfield expansion, where low density development is too quickly accepted, therefore resulting in sprawl that inevitably puts pressure on the country's natural and cultural heritage.

Where high density is needed, this should be achieved by well-designed townscape/perimeter blocks/terraced housing as opposed to single landmark tall buildings. The LAP needs to carefully consider and understand how it achieves high density (which is needed). This does not necessarily mean taller buildings.

There is also a need for the LAP to identify opportunity sites/ brownfield sites to maximise brownfield potential. This is the specificity that is needed from local areas plans. Therefore, we encourage the LAP to exhaust the potential for brownfield site locations before any greenfield expansion is considered. A proactive effort is required in this regard. Within opportunity sites, it is key to identify natural and built heritage constraints/assets; these should then inform the design/development approach to the site. With regards to vacant or underutilised sites in the centre of Arklow, it is essential that CDP policies in terms of residential amenity and parking standards are not automatically assumed for core inner town sites. It is more than likely that some of these standards are excessive, unsuited to an inner urban location and not conducive to compact growth or regeneration, particularly for the reuse of buildings of heritage value.

In addition, one of the key fundamentals of proper planning, identified in the *development plan guidelines* for local authorities, is the integration of land use (patterns of development) and transport (mobility). We strongly recommend that Wicklow County Council consult in detail, the *Sustainable Residential Development and Compact Settlements – Guidelines for Planning Authorities*, published in January 2024, with specific concentration on the relevant sections for the settlement size of Arklow. This guidance should then inform and be incorporated into the LAP. These guidelines relate to density, placemaking, and development management standards insofar as how they should be applied in specific contexts.

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**REGENERATION OF COMMUNITIES & PLACES - HEALTHY PLACEMAKING -
URBAN DESIGN – OPPORTUNITY SITES –**

The most successful public realm proposals anchor off the heritage assets that exist, using them as the centrepiece in new public realm projects. This should be actively pursued in this LAP. There are examples throughout the country where this exists, including some efforts in Arklow in the vicinity of St. Mary's and Peters Church and the Ormond Cinema. We also strongly recommend that the LAP maximises opportunities for public realm/pedestrianisation in the town. This can successfully contribute to the perception and experience of the built historic environment, which is all too often car dominated. Good examples exist (e.g. Tramore) that can be replicated elsewhere. There are opportunities along the quays of the Avoca River where this would bring enormous benefit to the liveability of the town and the experience of the town's historic environment.

In this regard we believe it necessary that any vision for Arklow capture the importance of heritage in the definition of place. The traditional [Irish townscape](#) of linear townhouse development along arterial routes is an important part of our heritage. Good examples of this exist in Arklow i.e. Lower Main Street. Therefore, efforts to achieve a more consolidated urban form that amplifies this 'townscape' character should be pursued. We also encourage the planning department to ensure collaboration with other departments in the council, insofar as supporting the repurposing of vacant/ derelict buildings particularly for residential uses.

In addition, public realm and landscaping proposals can too often concentrate on hard landscaping (paving, stonework). Greater emphasis on soft landscaping and the creation of connected landscape corridors, that incorporate native plant species, will not just make the built environment more pleasant, but will aid local biodiversity ambitions. This opportunity is particularly obvious in a town like Arklow which benefits from significant blue infrastructure i.e. the river and the coast.

**– HERITAGE - BIODIVERSITY - GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE - CLIMATE ACTION –
ENERGY –**

We strongly believe that conservation through use, and the refurbishment of existing historic buildings (designated and non-designated) should be a significant part of every settlement's local area plan. Heritage led regeneration can build on the existing character, which is unique, and cannot be replicated or recreated. Again, we would emphasise that regeneration and the need to bring life back into inner towns respond in a positive way to the established pattern of development. Moreover, the reuse of buildings and their embodied energy is one of the most climatically sustainable actions we can take in accommodating our population.

Having studied the Historic Environment Viewer, and the Record of Protected Structures as part of the Wicklow CDP 2022-2028, there does appear that there is scope for identifying further heritage assets for designation in Arklow. There does not appear to be

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any Architectural Conservation Area designation in the town. There are several properties located along St. Mary's Road that are certainly worthy of consideration. We would also recommend that the LAP seeks to identify any ensemble of linear townhouses that portray well the character of the typical Irish town in Arklow which could also be considered for an ACA designation. The Council's Heritage Officer/ Conservation Architect could be consulted on this endeavour. It is important to note in this context that heritage protection is essential for a viable tourism product. Furthermore, significant progress has been made recently by Wicklow County Council on conservation focused repairs to the remains of the Anglo-Norman castle (RMP WI040-029002) on Main Street and we suggest that further efforts should be made to incorporate this monument into the public realm. As the castle backs on to open green space and the river walk, consideration should be given to tying the castle and associated interpretation firmly with this.

In terms of natural heritage, the new NBAP 2023-2030 has a list of targets that are relevant for planning authorities regarding their statutory plan making functions. We would strongly recommend that all local authorities, through their biodiversity officers, audit this document to identify the relevant actions/ targets for land use statutory plans, and subsequently reflect them in their LAPs.

The *Development Plans Guidelines* detail mandatory heritage and landscape objectives in Chapter 9. Whilst these may be more relevant for CDPs, there is a need to ensure that the Arklow LAP encourages compliance with these objectives. These guidelines also rightly note that the majority of the country "lies outside of the network of protected sites, and that there are many other sites which are of local importance for flora and fauna". Local authorities have an important role to play in preventing the loss of such sites. Features such as hedgerows, river corridors, ponds and small stands of trees etc. provide important habitats, and land use plans can play an important role in protecting these assets.

It is therefore essential that the Arklow Marsh proposed Natural Heritage Area (pNHA) receives statutory land use planning protection in this LAP. Given the gap in statutory provision for pNHAs in the Wildlife Act, this is essential. Furthermore, the Arklow Duck Ponds, an area of semi-natural wetlands north of the town should be highlighted in the LAP, as well as any other important local nature sites. There is also a need to protect existing hedgerows/ trees when new development is proposed. There is often needless removal of mature trees and hedgerows, of considerable character and ecological value, as part of site works to 'tidy' the site before construction commences. From an ecological view these linear features are often one of few ecological corridors/hotspots in and around settlements. Opportunity sites within the town or any phased greenfield release should have stringent design standards for retention of natural features.

We would remind Wicklow County Council that this is a requirement of National Policy Objective 58 of the NPF, insofar "*as integrated planning for Green Infrastructure and ecosystem services will be incorporated into the preparation of statutory land use plans*";

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while National Policy Objective 60 (*Conserve and enhance the rich qualities of natural and cultural heritage of Ireland in a manner appropriate to their significance*) is also a requirement. In addition, policies noted previously in the Wicklow CDP 2022-2028 re-enforce this ambition.

The *development plan guidelines* also specifically seek the protection of areas of amenities (natural features) namely (i) Special Amenity; (ii) Landscape Conservation Areas; (iii) Tree Preservation Orders; and (iv) Public Rights of Ways. Within an urban area not all such natural features will be relevant, however public rights of way are often essential for not just the experience of the landscape, but also the experience of local heritage, in both towns and rural areas. We would recommend that public rights of way are maintained or expanded where necessary.

The Heritage Council would also encourage active TPO work in the form of a fresh ‘walk about town’ assessment of trees of important ecological and character value with the view to identify further TPOs. We recommend that “*Amenity Trees and Woodlands – A guide to their Management in Ireland*” published by the Tree Council of Ireland, be identified as source in the relevant section of the LAP, which should also consider the inclusion of a green network strategy, or similar.

In relation to climate action several objectives could be pursued. At the level of first principles, together with the reuse of the embedded carbon in vacant buildings, this is the most important role the planning system has in reducing greenhouse gas emissions i.e. the cause of climate change. In this context it is important that the Arklow and Environs LAP:

- Ensures that any greenfield release makes efficient use of land, whilst providing the mix of homes necessary, and being at a density, and with facilities, conducive to public transport roll out and cycling and walking.
- Existing brownfield sites and well-located sites within the urban boundary are preferred in a sequential approach to development.
- Active reuse of existing building stock, which constitutes much of our vernacular and urban heritage building stock.

Achieving this will reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the built environment but it will also ensure that land take is restrained and does not pose undue threats to cultural and natural heritage.

In terms of adaptation there will be naturally occurring flood plains along the Avoca. Development should be avoided in these locations, while we would recommend to Wicklow County Council that any flood defence measures should be considered at the entire catchment level in the first instance. There is opportunity to manage flood risk via nature-based solutions, whereby lands liable to flooding should be avoided in terms of development, while at the same time natural habitats should be allowed to replenish in these flood plains. Flood plains should be the “low hanging fruit” for ecological restoration measures given their unsuitability for development. While it is recognised that in urban

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areas, where building has already occurred, flood relief schemes may be needed; in the first instance, a whole river basin catchment approach to managing flooding should be pursued (as noted under actions 2D6 and 2D7 of the NBAP 2023-2030). Any flood alleviation measures for the town should include an assessment of solutions upstream before moving onto hard physical infrastructure in the built environment.

INFRASTRUCTURE - SUSTAINABLE MOVEMENT – TRANSPORTATION

There is a need to highlight the importance of integrated land use and transport planning in this section. Like other towns in Ireland there are unutilised sites adjacent or near the local train station. Brownfield inventories should seek to identify sites near Arklow Train Station, which benefits from rail services between Dublin and Rosslare. For sustainable movement to be a realised ambition, the pattern and location of development is key.

To meet climate action ambitions by reducing car dependency we would recommend that Wicklow County Council ensure that non-car-based alternatives are viable and considered from the outset of any development, to establish sustainable travel behaviour. On this particular point there is a need for safety during the journey and secure storage at both ends of the journey for cyclists. Cycle parking standards are needed for all development and for all uses, while active route planning for cycle lanes (number of km to be provided) needs to be carried out for the LAP. This is imperative to provide alternatives to the car, reducing GHG emissions, thus reducing climate change impacts on our natural heritage, habitats, and ecosystems.

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

There will be an SEA and Appropriate Assessment required for the LAP. There is a need to ensure that all future policies drafted are individually assessed against the SEA objectives, when the time comes. The Heritage Council recommends that the SEA guidance prepared by the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) be consulted when preparing the SEA for the LAP.

Conclusion

The Heritage Council strongly encourage that Wicklow County Council acknowledge the primacy of Arklow's heritage resource. The built and natural heritage of the town should be the focus for guiding any future strategy. We recommend that this important heritage and character continues to guide a sustainable future development trajectory for the town and its environs.

We trust these comments will be considered carefully as Wicklow County Council progresses the Arklow Local Area Plan. Please also note, that due to time constraints we are unable to provide comments on the Blessington Local Area Plan Issues Paper. However, all the thematic advice we have offered here on the Arklow LAP can also be applied to the Blessington LAP, where appropriate.

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