



20 May 2024

Senior Executive Officer
Planning Department,
Kildare County Council
Áras Chill Dara,
Naas,
Co. Kildare
W91 X77F

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Pre-draft Consultation Monasterevin Local Area Plan 2025 - 2031

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 Monasterevin LAP Issues Paper. We have considered the questions in the Issues Paper, and our comments below are a response to these questions, where they were relevant. Our comments will deal with both built heritage and natural heritage. 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 outset 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 Acton 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. Chapters 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 Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly's **Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy 2019-2031** is the current regional plan for County Kildare. Whilst the RSES primarily deals with spatial planning matters at the regional level, there are several sections within the RSES that are relevant for local area plans. We would bring particular attention to Objective RPO 7.21, which aims to ensure that local authorities promote an ecosystem services approach to statutory land use plans, while Objective RPO 9.30 supports the sensitive reuse of protected structures.

The **Kildare County Development Plan 2023 – 2029** has comprehensive chapters on Built and Cultural Heritage (Chapter 11), and Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure (Chapter 12). Policy AH P1 of the CDP explicitly seeks to recognise the value and opportunity of Kildare's unique heritage resource with the view to manage, conserve, promote and protect it, for present and future generations. Objectives AH O2 through to AH A25 provide further detailed objectives/ policies/ actions for the management of this heritage resource in terms of national monuments, protected structures, architectural conservation areas, as well as other heritage assets. Policy BI P1 of the CDP seeks to ensure that biodiversity is a strong consideration in the development management

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process, with further objectives, policies and actions identified for designated sites. While Policy B1 P5 seeks to identify and conserve locally important biodiversity sites in the county which contribute to the overall ecological network of County Kildare.

These pertinent national and local policies are emphasised to provide context to our comments. Additional guidelines and policies are identified for specific thematic sections below in response to the questions provided in the Issues Paper.

Specific comments on the Issues Paper

Overall Vision

The vision should capture the importance of balancing future development with the protection of the town's natural and built heritage. We recommend that there be a heritage emphasis in the new plan. The existing heritage of towns such as Monasterevin cannot be replicated and should be the point off which future development pivots. In this regard, the traditional [Irish townscape](#) of linear townhouse development along arterial routes is an important part of our heritage. Parts of Drogheda Street and Dublin Street are good examples of this, with many attractive heritage buildings present. While Main Street is a particularly attractive ensemble of buildings.

The LAP could assist this heritage led vision, by ensuring infill development which mirrors this linear townscape. A consolidated urban form that amplifies this 'townscape' character should be pursued. Collaboration with other departments in the council, insofar as supporting the repurposing of vacant/ derelict buildings, particularly for residential uses, is needed in this regard. This should be pursued with the same rigour that regeneration/consolidation sites are pursued during the lifetime of the plan. This design approach can simultaneously achieve a relatively high density/compact urban grain while respecting heritage.

The Heritage Council would recommend the LAP emphasise the need for compact growth. In this regard, 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. Whilst we recognise that it is unlikely that all the housing need of a local authority would be met on brownfield sites only, we do encourage the LAP to exhaust the potential for brownfield site locations before any greenfield expansion is pursued.

In this regard, the issues paper rightly identifies the importance of the trainline, and the access it provides to Dublin and other towns. It is important to note that 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). Like other towns in Ireland, there is a greater need to identify development locations next to existing large scale public transport infrastructure. Monasterevin does benefit from a mainline train station on the Cork - Dublin route. Unless there are

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showstopping constraints (e.g. flood risk, natura 2000 sites etc), there are sites adjacent to the station that could be assessed for their development potential as part of the LAP.

The town also benefits from the River Barrow and the Grand Canal; designated a Special Area of Conservation and a proposed Natural Heritage Area respectively. These are important natural heritage features for the town. We would recommend that these positive elements be strongly protected and be fully appreciated in the vision for Monasterevin.

Built Heritage and Town Centre

As alluded to in the previous section, work on identifying sites in the town should be pursued based on a sequential town centre first approach. Within regeneration/consolidation sites, it is key to identify natural and built heritage constraints/assets; and these should then inform the design/development approach to the site. In the first instance, development should not negatively impact the integrity or the setting of important features of natural, archaeological, and architectural interest. High quality design will be essential in this regard.

In terms of streetscape quality, the most successful public realm proposals anchor off the heritage assets that exist, using them as the centrepiece in new public realm projects. An initial view of the town gives the impression that Monasterevin has not been dominated by large surface car parking and has a relatively attractive townscape (particularly evident on Main Street), with attractive amenity areas adjacent to the canal also evident. We note that parts of the town have been designated an Architectural Conservation Area and we commend this. We would however strongly recommend that the LAP maximise opportunities for further public realm improvements/ pedestrian infrastructure in the town. This can successfully contribute to the positive perception and experience of the built historic environment, which is all too often car dominated. In this regard we would recommend that public realm and landscaping proposals do not only concentrate on hard landscaping (paving, stonework). Greater emphasis on soft landscaping, that incorporates native plant species, will not just make the built environment more pleasant, but will also aid local biodiversity ambitions. Furthermore, heritage trails/walks for everyday amenity should be retained as public rights of way or expanded public rights of way, where necessary.

In relation to achieving compact growth, it is important to note that the Irish terraced townscape can be of a relatively high density-high coverage development form, that also achieved good design. The more sustainable aspects of this historic design should be promoted in new housing design. Properties located adjacent to Saint John's Church in the town are a good example of this terraced house urban grain typology. It is also essential that CDP development management standards, in terms of residential amenity, set back distances, and parking standards are not automatically assumed for inner town sites. It is likely that some of these standards are excessive and not conducive to compact growth or regeneration, particularly with regards to the reuse of buildings of heritage value.

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In addition, 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 villages and towns respond in a positive way to the established pattern of development. It is important to note in this context that heritage protection is essential for a viable tourism product.

The *Sustainable Residential Development and Compact Settlements guidelines* published in January 2024 specifically note the importance of responsive placemaking for existing heritage as well as the expectation for the application of density and development management standards. We strongly recommend that Kildare County Council consult in detail these guidelines with specific concentration on the relevant sections for the settlement size of Monasterevin. This guidance should then inform and be incorporated into this section of the LAP.

Three specific heritage assets have been noted in the Issues Paper – 1). Grand Canal Aqueduct, 2). the Cassidy's Distillery and the nearby 3) Church of Oak Distillery. In terms of the aqueduct, its continued use, and the provision of trails along it, appear sufficient. It is notable that it is also a river crossing infrastructure, that appears free of barriers to fish migration. Accordingly, its retention and maintenance as is, is recommended. It is not clear why the Church of the Oak Distillery is noted as needing consideration, given the recent redevelopment. We do note that its location is some distance away from the town.

The Heritage Council does recognise that the buildings associated with the Cassidy Distillery are challenging. There appears to be several buildings to the rear of the street facing elevation, with another large linear block immediately opposite. It is difficult to consider the building without specific detail. The most obvious course of action is to identify a new use that can guarantee the buildings' integrity in perpetuity. In a rural town, such as Monasterevin, use options are more limited, when compared to a larger urban agglomeration. Commercial use could be considered should the business case be solid, and potentially linked to the Just Transition Fund or other similar schemes. Residential use would be a positive use, and potentially more viable, given the proximity to Dublin via the trainline. Educational use i.e. a department of a large institution with specific space needs, or community/leisure use, would also be worthy of consideration. Similar building complexes i.e. former barracks and warehousing have been successfully repurposed, albeit it is recognised that there would be challenges. Some examples include:

- Clancy Quay Island Bridge, Dublin – residential
- Chatham Dockyard, Kent – residential, and educational

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Sustainable Movement and Infrastructure

To reduce car dependency, we would recommend that Kildare County Council ensure that non-car-based alternatives are viable. On this 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.

Other Comments:

We note that matters of biodiversity and climate change are not explicitly dealt with in any great detail by the questions provided in the draft issues paper. On these two themes we provide the following comments:

Climate Change and the Environment

We encourage Kildare County Council to ensure that this LAP is strongly aligned with the Kildare County Council Climate Action Plan 2024. More specifically the Heritage Council support policies to reduce car reliance, which we believe are essential. We have already noted this under the transport section. The *development plan guidelines* rightly emphasise that objective 10(2)(n) is to promote sustainable settlement and transportation strategies in urban and rural areas, in relation to the location, layout and design of development. 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 Monasterevin LAP:

- Ensures that any greenfield release makes efficient use of land, whilst providing the mix of homes necessary, and having densities and facilities, that are 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 does constitute 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 naturally will be flood plains along the Barrow adjacent to the town. Development should be avoided in these locations, while we would recommend to Kildare 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

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development, while at the same time natural habitats should be allowed to replenish in these flood plains. Flood plains and their riparian zone should be the “low hanging fruit” for ecological restoration measures given their unsuitability for development. While it is recognised that in urban areas where development has 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).

Biodiversity

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. Each local authority will also have its own biodiversity action plan in due course which needs to be incorporated into the LAPs if timelines align.

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 Monasterevin LAP ensures that there is 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. From an ecological view these linear features are one of few ecological corridors/hotspots in and around settlements. These ecological networks should have a level of protection in the LAP, and any forthcoming Biodiversity Action Plan can map and classify these features in order to provide a scientific evidence base for their inclusion in the LAP.

It is with this in mind that The Heritage Council strongly supports measures that enhance biodiversity in Monasterevin. There is 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. While opportunity sites within the town or any phased greenfield release should have stringent design standards for retention of natural features. It is also important to note that some of the older buildings, in advance of refurbishment are likely to need bat surveying.

In Monasterevin, the riparian zone along the River Barrow (Special Area of Conservation) would be particularly important. Specific actions could be taken here to amplify its importance for the town as well as placing obligations on the plan to take actions to protect and enhance its ecological integrity. We recommend that Kildare County Council familiarise itself with the qualifying interests and the site synopsis for this SAC, which is

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available via the NPWS, and to include reference to the relevant guidance documents from Inland Fisheries Ireland, namely “*Planning for Watercourses in the Urban Environment*”, in the LAP.

We would also remind Kildare County Council that such biodiversity policymaking 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*”; 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 Kildare CDP 2023-2029 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. As an example, the mature tree planting associated with Togher House (RPS ref B21-05) on Drogheda Street makes a remarkable contribution to the character of the street. These should be retained and maintained and would be an illustrative case where a TPO would be of considerable benefit. We also 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.

Strategic Environmental Assessment/ Appropriate 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 Kildare County Council to continue to acknowledge the primacy of Monasterevin’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.

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I trust these comments will be considered carefully as Kildare County Council progresses the Monasterevin Local Area Plan.

Yours sincerely,

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