

Carlow County Council
Preliminary Report for Visual/Carlow College Part 8 Process

Date: 26/02/2021
Proposing Department: Local Enterprise Office
Circulated Departments: Transportation/Roads
Carlow Municipal District Office
Environment
Water Services
Fire Services/Building Control
Community
Planning

Context

Carlow County Council has recently been granted funding from Fáilte Ireland's Destination Towns Funding Scheme, and as part of this intends to develop a 'Tourism Hub' on the public realm space outside of Visual Centre for Contemporary Art and adjacent to Carlow College, St. Patrick's, Carlow.

According to Fáilte Ireland, key visitor challenges facing Carlow Town are perceived to be:

- Lack of tourism hubs - public spaces are not maximised for tourism and visitor engagement
- Lack of visitor orientation plan - no marked trails throughout the town integrating key attractions, and core stories of the town not identified and articulated
- Derelict and unattractive buildings in prominent positions including key visitor corridors

Destination Town Development Guidelines indicate having a central public space or area with pleasant surrounds, which can act as a 'tourism hub', is central to attracting visitors and increasing dwell time within the town centre. Lack of such suitable spaces in Carlow Town Centre, which can act as a focal/orientation points for visitors, is a distinct challenge in developing a 'hub of activity'. When developed this space can provide opportunities for visitors to rest while sightseeing and soak up the town's atmosphere and culture, thus fostering increased dwell time.

The Situation Analysis completed by Future Analytics as part of the broader County Carlow Tourism Strategy makes the following comments in relation to the potential of Carlow as a tourism hub:

"Carlow Town as the county town is a retail, services, accommodation and education hub. However, the town lacks visual appeal in places, in comparison to other destinations, and the visitor core lacks definition. In recent years there is talk of developing a Cultural Quarter in the town which would include Carlow Castle, Carlow County Museum, VISUAL Centre for Contemporary Art and George Bernard Shaw Theatre, the Cathedral and Carlow College, St. Patrick's, a hub for the popular Arts Festival. Further work to define this area through improvements to the public realm would help to define the Cultural Quarter,

encourage more visitors to this part of the town and help to denote a cohesive set of attractions. There is scope for a new attraction of regional scale in this area that can attract significant numbers of visitors i.e. over 100,000 annually.”

The Development Guidelines for Tourism Destination Towns speaks about storytelling and animation and this is another challenge for Carlow Town, as many people are not aware of what Carlow Town has to offer, either at a local level or indeed Nationally or Internationally. Development of an associated orientation and interpretative visitor experience project, linked to key visitor focal points, will focus on communicating the wider offering of Carlow Town and ensuring that visitors can explore the town on foot with confidence, to local attractions, the Town Park, River Barrow or just for a stroll around town with stories communicated through effective interpretation. The space outside Visual would serve as a starting point for this orientation experience.

Carlow County Council in consultation with stakeholder groups such as the Carlow Town Development Forum and with reference to the Destination Towns guidelines, has identified the solution to the challenges listed above, as follows:

1. Development of a tourist hub or ‘linger space’ – an open-air event and tourist hub at Carlow College/Visual Centre for Contemporary Art, to animate the area and encourage local festivals & events, and to draw visitors to the ‘Cultural Quarter’ and increase dwell time with an interactive story board and Public Realm improvements
2. A Day and Night Visitor Orientation Experience to connect the tourist attractions within the Town Centre with interpretation boards at each site, telling the story of each area and linking them together in a cohesive way, beginning at Visual
3. A Visitor Orientation Plan, welcome signage and directional signage to the tourist hub from all entry points to Town, including Train/Bus Stations
4. Public Art Project along the Orientation Experience to improve the look of vacant/derelict buildings

The subject of this Preliminary Report is Item No. 1 – Carlow County Council wish to develop the Visual/Carlow College area as a tourism hub and linger space for both visitors and locals. The intention is to focus on the space around Visual/Carlow College first and foremost, to create a space where visitors can linger and enjoy the beautiful surroundings and enable them to use this as a launchpad for further exploring throughout the Town.

The specific works will include proposed new elements including directional signage, signage totem, movable feature bench, visitor information point, upgrading the existing pedestrian access, surfacing, natural stone paving, curved concrete walling, natural stone benches, a retaining wall and public lighting. An Environmental Impact Assessment Screening, an Appropriate Assessment Screening, an Archaeological Impact Appraisal, and an Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment, for the proposed development have been completed and are available for inspection.

The proposed tourist hub/linger space at VISUAL/Carlow College can transform this area, immersing visitors in a cultural experience. This project would leverage enhanced visitor numbers, which could reasonably be expected to grow considerably beyond the 40,000 currently secured for VISUAL and 25,000 for Carlow County Museum in 2018.

Enhanced visitor hubs and event spaces will not only encourage more festivals and events but also encourage visitors to use the Town Centre as a place to sit and chat, thereby increasing dwell time in the Town. As outlined in the Tourism Destination Towns guidelines public realm supports public interaction, contributes to place making and can transform towns into high-quality places to live, visit and invest - encouraging day and evening economies. It has socio-economic, environmental and cultural benefits.

Status of Project

An Appropriate Assessment Screening Report of the Public Realm Space at Visual Arts Centre, Carlow has been completed by Lisa Dowling MCIEEM, Ecological Consultant, on 15th September 2020, and an Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment has been completed by Margaret Quinlan Architects on 23rd September 2020 and are part of this report. Detail drawings/maps of the area have been completed by Conor Moriarty, Senior Executive Architect with Carlow County Council, and are also included as part of this report.

Responses from Circulated Departments

The Circulated Departments above were asked by the Proposing Department to outline any issues or lack of issues regarding this project. The responses are below:

Planning Department:

Internal Memo

Carlow County Council

Re.: Pre-part 8 comments – Proposed public realm project to develop a tourist hub/‘linger space’ at Carlow College/Visual Centre for Contemporary Art

From: Pádraig O’Shea (Senior Executive Planner)

To: Pierce Kavanagh (Economic Development Officer)

CC: Anita Sweeney (Senior Planner)

Date: 19th November 2020

Proposed Development

Carlow County Council wish to develop the Visual/Carlow College area as a ‘Tourism Hub’ or linger space for both visitors and locals. To develop same, it is proposed to carry out a public realm improvement scheme in front of the Visual Centre for Contemporary Art, and adjacent to Carlow College, that will form part of the tourism strategy for the town. The proposal has been granted funding under Fáilte Ireland’s Destination Towns Funding Scheme.

Preliminary Drawings/sketches of the proposed public realm improvement works have been referred to the Planning Department for comment as a Pre-Part 8 proposal.

The specific works shown on the provisional drawings include new directional signage, new signage totem, movable corten steel visitor information points, upgrading the existing pedestrian access surfacing and lighting facilities, new granite paving, curved concrete walling, natural stone benches, a retaining wall and new public lighting.

Initial Planning Appraisal

Joint Spatial Plan for the Greater Carlow-Graiguecullen Urban Area 2012-2018 (As Extended)

- The site is zoned 'Town Centre' in the Joint Spatial Plan for the Greater Carlow-Graiguecullen Urban Area 2012-2018 as extended. The zoning objective is '*To protect the vitality and vibrancy of the town centre and provide for town centre activities*'. The purpose of this zone is to protect and enhance the vitality and vibrancy of the town centre and to provide for and improve retailing, residential, commercial, office, cultural tourism, public facilities, amenity and other uses appropriate to the centre of developing urban core.
- The proposed public realm improvement works at this town centre location would be 'acceptable in principle' under the zoning and would be broadly welcomed by the Planning Authority as a proposal that would enhance the visitor experience in the area.

The following policies and objectives in the Joint Spatial Plan would also be favourable towards this proposed development:

Core Strategy Objective

CO3 Infrastructure Enabling Economic Development

Harness the economic development potential associated with infrastructure including IT Carlow, Carlow College, Teagasc Agricultural Research Centre, the VISUAL and George Bernard Shaw Theatre, broadband fibre network, other utilities, the railway network connecting Waterford, Carlow and Dublin, the N80, the M9 and road improvements within the Greater Urban Area. Dependent upon clear demonstration that there will be no impact on the integrity of a Natura 2000 site in accordance with Article 6 of the Habitats Directive or significant adverse effects on other environmental receptors.

CO12 A Vibrant Culture

Encourage appreciation of and participation in the arts, recreational and leisure activities in order to enrich the lives of local people; in particular develop the concept of a cultural quarter within the town centre focused around VISUAL and the County Museum for residents and visitors and support the clustering of arts and culture-related businesses within this area.

ECN P18: *Promote the marketing of the Cultural Quarter within Carlow Town Centre.*

ECN P19: *Support and enhance the use of the exhibition and performance spaces at the VISUAL and the George Bernard Shaw Theatre in order to enrich the lives of local people as well as provide a high-quality cultural experience for visitors.*

Cultural Quarter

Part 4 of the Joint Spatial Plan indicates that it is a policy of the Joint Spatial Plan to advance and market the concept of the Cultural Quarter.

The establishment of a well-known and recognisable area within the Greater Urban Area to be known as the Cultural Quarter will bring significant benefits to the area (Cultural Quarter indicated on Carlow Town Objectives Map). Significant investment in the cultural infrastructure of the Greater Carlow Graiguecullen Urban Area has been made in recent years leading to a concentration of cultural uses in and around College Street in Carlow Town Centre. This presents an opportunity to support and further develop a new role for this part of the Town Centre increasing use of this cultural infrastructure by locals as well as by visitors.

The envisaged cultural quarter encompasses College Street, Court Street, Brown Street, Charlotte Street and a small section of Tullow Street and within that area includes the following institutions associated with the arts and heritage: Carlow College, the VISUAL and the George Bernard Shaw Theatre, Carlow Cathedral, the Carlow County Museum, Carlow Tourism Office, the Carlow Central Library and Glor Ceatherlach.

The tower of the cathedral has been a town landmark since 1833 and the college has played an important role since its establishment in 1789. Carlow College donated lands for the development of the VISUAL and George Bernard Shaw Theatre which together constitute a strong landmark within the cultural quarter. Carlow College retains extensive lands to the east and north of the principal building and opportunities remain for sensitive infill development.

College Street is a narrow attractive street running from Tullow Street to the Courthouse with an urban atmosphere and imposing religious and cultural buildings. Opportunities to increase permeability within the cultural quarter and between the cultural quarter and the rest of the town centre should be utilized to reinforce its role and better integrate the area into the town centre.

Policies

CT P16: *Establish the cultural quarter as a legible quarter within the townscape by way of public realm works.*

CT P17: *Develop a marketing strategy associated with the cultural quarter concept and include the Annual Eigse Festival as a publicity platform.*

CT P18: *Examine opportunities to support the establishment of the cultural quarter by way of the annual development contributions scheme.*

CT P19: *Encourage the development of commercial uses associated or supporting existing cultural uses within the quarter as well as opportunities for Carlow College.*

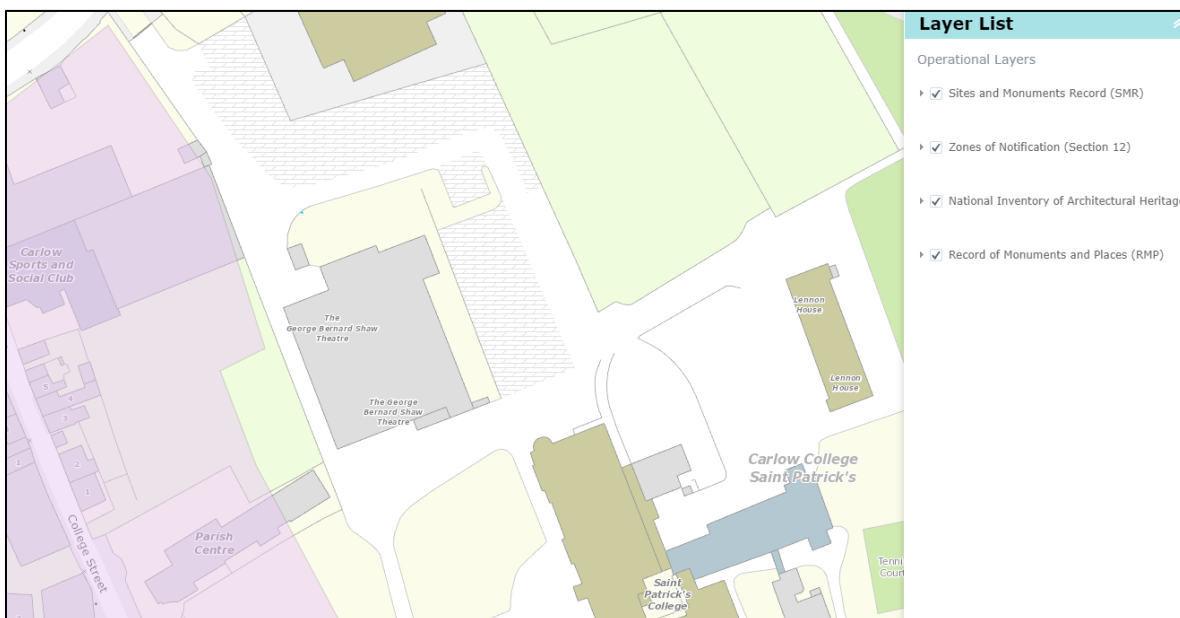
Landmark Building

In addition, The VISUAL and George Bernard Shaw Theatre are identified as a Landmark Building in Carlow Town as identified in the Joint Spatial Plan (Section 9 Built & Natural Heritage). The plan states;

'Views of landmark buildings are important within the landscape, whether the views of the structures are panoramic or vistas. Views and vistas aligned with key buildings serve as vital orientation points in a townscape, especially for the visitor. Particular attention should be given to key views because of their importance to the composition of the townscape. Spaces associated with focal buildings contribute to their legibility and status within the landscape. The focal buildings listed below each have a public function which can be strengthened through the definition of their surrounding open space.'

Archaeology

The zone of archaeological notification for Carlow Town is located close to, but not within, the boundaries of the proposed site (see screenshot below from www.archaeology.ie). The notification zone does however extend along College Street. It would be advisable that an archaeological appraisal of the subject works be carried out. Any Part 8 would likely be referred to the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht for comment.



Architectural Heritage

There is no protected structure within the subject site boundaries. However, within the immediate locality there are a number of protected structures associated within the grounds of St. Patrick's College and Carlow Cathedral. These include the following on the Record of Protected Structures;

- Parish Hall (RPS No. CT72)
- St. Patrick's College (RPS No. CT73)
- Rear Extension to St. Patrick's College (RPS No. CT74)
- Entrance Gates St. Patrick's College (RPS No. CT75)
- Carlow Cathedral (RPS No. CT77)
- Railings and Gates, Carlow Cathedral (RPS No. CT78)

It is noted that an Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment Report (AHIA) has been prepared for this project which concludes that the public realm works will have no adverse impacts on the protected structures in the area. This report would be referred to the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht as part of any formal Part 8 process for any comments they may have.

Appropriate Assessment

It is noted that a Stage 1 Appropriate Assessment Screening Report has been prepared for this project. It is advised that this screening report be reviewed by the Environment Section for any issues that may arise.

Environmental Impact Assessment

The proposed development does not fall within any of the categories requiring a mandatory EIA under Schedule 5 of the Planning & Development Regulations 2001 (as amended). However, it is advised that the proposed development be screened for the need for a subthreshold EIA as per the criteria listed under Schedule 7 of the Regulations.

Other comments

- Detailed elevational and plan drawings of the final design, materials and finishes should be referred to the Planning Department for comment prior to the formal part 8 process commencing. These should include longitudinal cross section drawings of the proposed site. The drawings should clearly show how the difference in ground levels (where existing) is being managed, particularly fronting the existing café.
- The existing seating area fronting the café is not shown on the drawings. Is the plan to keep this a customer seating area?
- On the proposed site layout plan there appears to be a new art sculpture or art feature proposed fronting the Visual centre front entrance. Are there elevation drawings for this if it forms part of the Part 8?
- Elevation drawings of the proposed totem pole will be required, including details on lighting, material and finishes.
- The Part 8 documents should also include a report outlining how the proposed development of a tourism hub at this location will form part of a wider strategy for Carlow Town including the development of the Cultural Quarter.
- Reference should also be made to the proposed development supporting one of the 'Intervention Areas' listed in Project Carlow 2040 for the Cultural Quarter in terms of public realm improvement and permeability/enhanced connections.

In addition, the proposing department should also consult with Transportation Section, Municipal District Engineer, Environment Department and Water Services Department with regards to any initial comments they may have on this proposed development.

Padraig O'Shea
Senior Executive Planner
Carlow County Council
19/11/2020

Transportation/Roads/ Carlow Municipal District Office:

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I confirm no objection to the proposal.

Area is served by adequate carparking. There are no issues with sightlines at access, pedestrian facilities are adequate as is public lighting. No specific conditions are required.

Kieran Cullinane,
Senior Engineer – Transportation and Special Project Delivery
Carlow County Council

Environment / Water Services:

There will be no significant environmental impacts resulting from the proposed development.

Pat Connolly SEE
Carlow County Council

Fire Department/Building Control:

Fire comment below on the Visual Public Realm project based on the attached drawings.

1. Access to any existing fire hydrants in the area, including signage of same would need to be maintained.
2. Fire service vehicular access would need to be maintained.
3. All external escape routes from the adjacent building(s) would need to be maintained.

Neal O’Grady CEng | Senior Assistant Chief Fire Officer
Carlow County Fire Service, Fire Station HQ, Green Lane, Carlow, R93 XE72.

Conclusion and Responses from the Proposing Department to the Above

While it is noted that the Transportation Department and Environment Department have no issues, there are a number of issues highlighted by the Planning Department:

As noted, an archaeological appraisal of the subject works will be carried out by the Proposing Department, and included as part of this report, and the proposed development will be screened for the need for a subthreshold EIA as per the criteria listed under Schedule 7 of the Regulations.

Detailed elevational and plan drawings of the final design, materials and finishes will be referred to the Planning Department for comment prior to the formal part 8 process commencing. These will include longitudinal cross section drawings of the proposed site. The drawings will clearly show how the difference in ground levels (where existing) is being managed, particularly fronting the existing café.

“The existing seating area fronting the café is not shown on the drawings.” The plan is to keep this as a customer seating area, and this area is part of the café/restaurant currently run by Lennon’s Restaurant. The Proposing Department will endeavour to show this on the updated drawings.

“On the proposed site layout plan there appears to be a new art sculpture or art feature proposed fronting the Visual centre front entrance.” This is not an art sculpture/feature, it is an interactive touchscreen history board with seating which is the first point in a twelve-point Visitor Orientation Trail around Carlow Town. The

Proposing Department will provide elevation drawings for this item. The Proposing Department will also provide elevation drawings for the proposed totem pole, including details on lighting, material and finishes.

All comments from the Fire Department/Building Control will be duly noted.

Wider Strategy for Carlow Town

The creation of a Tourism Hub/Linger Space is part of a much wider strategy for the development of Carlow Town, firstly as part of the Fáilte Ireland's Destination Towns Programme as detailed on pages 1 and 2 of this report, but also as part of Project Carlow 2040 – A Vision for Regeneration which is a 20-year Masterplan for Carlow Town and was approved by Council in December 2020. The creation of a Cultural Quarter in Carlow Town is a strategic goal of the Joint Spatial Plan for the Greater Carlow Graiguecullen Urban Area and is an aspiration also of the Project Carlow 2040 Plan, and creating a tourism hub at Visual in the centre of the Cultural Quarter will further enhance this area and lead to greater awareness of the Cultural Quarter and increase linger time within the grounds of Visual/Carlow College. Furthermore, the fact that this area is the starting point to a 12-point Visitor Orientation Heritage Trail around Carlow Town will draw visitors here, further enriching the experience.

Project Carlow 2040 – A Vision for Regeneration outlines a number of intervention areas within Carlow Town, and one such area is the journey from Carlow Railway Station to the centre of Town, and it is proposed that Carlow County Council will create a pedestrian walkway from St. Joseph's Road to College Street through the grounds of Carlow College which will take pedestrians past the new Tourism Hub. This walkway through the beautiful grounds of the College will further enhance the space and improve pedestrianisation simultaneously, drawing people into the Cultural Quarter. The 'Totem Pole' which is part of the development will simultaneously draw people's attention from both the car park at Visual and the walkway from the Train Station towards the Tourist Hub and beginning of the Orientation Trail. The combination of the new Train Station walkway, the Tourism Hub at Visual, and the beginning of the Visitor Orientation Trail will combine to make the Cultural Quarter a reality instead of an aspiration.

The proposed development at Visual will therefore support one of the 'Intervention Areas' listed in Project Carlow 2040 for the Cultural Quarter in terms of public realm improvement and permeability/enhanced connections within Carlow Town, and will also link into the proposed Civic Spine contained within the Strategy, which links Carlow College with the River Barrow and the Barrow Track pedestrian and cycling route.

The aforementioned strategic vision has been central to the development of this Regeneration Strategy and the objectives and Interventions outlined within it. Each Intervention incorporates key ideas locally within each area, while being aware of the part each Intervention will play in the broader Regeneration Strategy for the Town. There are six Interventions identified in this Strategy. The Intervention Areas were informed by extensive public consultation and consist of:

- *Town Centre - Potato Market and Barrack Street*
- *Cultural Quarter (including links to the Railway Station)*
- *The Barrow Track / Civic Spine*
- *The Pembroke District*
- *The Burrin Riverfront*
- *Link Streets (Dublin Street and Tullow Street)*

Project Carlow 2040 – A Vision for Regeneration

The development at Visual/Carlow College is therefore part of a wider strategy for the economic, tourist, social, and pedestrian development of Carlow Town.

Pierce Kavanagh
Economic Development Officer
Local Enterprise Office
Carlow County Council