

Tidy Towns Competition 2017

Adjudication Report

Centre: **Letterkenny** Ref: **704**
County: **Donegal** Mark: **326**
Category: **G** Date(s): **30/06/2017**
02/08/2017

	Maximum Mark	Mark Awarded 2016	Mark Awarded 2017
Community Involvement & Planning	60	48	48
Built Environment and Streetscape	50	40	42
Landscaping and Open Spaces	50	48	49
Wildlife, Habitats and Natural Amenities	50	41	41
Sustainable Waste and Resource Management	50	19	19
Tidiness and Litter Control	90	53	52
Residential Streets & Housing Areas	50	36	37
Approach Roads, Streets & Lanes	50	38	38
TOTAL MARK	450	323	326

Community Involvement & Planning / Rannpháirtíocht an Phobail & Pleanáil:

Letterkenny is very welcome to this year's Tidy Towns competition. Since you have been so recently proud occupants of the winner's enclosure, we were very pleased to find that you have maintained such a high standard. From the outset, before we set a foot in the town, this was reflected in your whole approach, including the presentation of your entry details. Ar fheabhas. It is in places like Letterkenny that we see how the Tidy Towns movement has brought such a great improvement in the surroundings of the Irish people.

Your application booklet was admired and we also studied the related documents such as the community campaign booklet that set out specific strategies for 2017. Your guidance maps proved very useful as we made our way around the perimeter, as well as within the town centre. You give the population at just under 20,000 so you are categorized as a large Urban Centre. We note that you can boast 17 committee members, supported by a further group of about 50 helpers. The list of supporting organisations is extensive and we note you have been engaged with the Tidy Towns for three decades. Well done.

Built Environment and Streetscape / An Timpeallacht Thógtha agus Sráid-dreacha:

Returning to Letterkenny after a gap of some years we were soon struck by the sheer urbanity of the place, and how much it has grown. The road layout helps visitors to reach into the town quite easily. Your array of brightly planted roundabouts helped us to locate the individual sites and projects. Of course, it is also made easier as we related places to the low and high ground - that contrast in topography adds a lot of interest.

There is a notable difference between the mature close-knit commercial streetscape at Main Street, Upper Main Street and Port Road, and the newer commercial quarter running parallel along Pearse Road, and this extends further to the east. Both sections are well connected by a series of streets and lanes, adding another notable feature to the layout. Landmarks such as the hilltop Cathedral and the Polestar sculpture help visitors to find their bearings.

You have a choice of shopping centres and we saw plenty of parking facilities adjacent to them. There was a notable buzz to the town centre on adjudication day, particularly as the sun brought more people out onto the streets.

Along the Main Street many shopfronts benefit from regular refurbishment. These include Peacocks, Ernest Speer, Berry Layne and County Seat. The central library looked well, apart again from the paint on the base of the building that looked a little tired on adjudication day.

Great urbanity is added by the cultural quarter based around An Grianán Theatre and the Regional Cultural Centre.

This new building above An Grianán has a very striking criss-cross finish.

At Ernest Spier's (on the Main Street) we came across a real architectural gem. This is an original shop interior dating from the 1880s, formerly called Magees. It retains long oak counters and pine floorboards all set around a pot-bellied cast iron stove. Overhead, we saw the series of hammerhead timber beams with iron ties. A real heritage treasure that is well cared for. It has a freshly painted shopfront.

At Scally Place the primary care centre is a highly imposing structure, adding substantial urbanity to its surrounds. Unfortunately, the car park close-by had a notable amount of discarded plastic bottles and packaging.

The southern end of the town boasts very good sports and recreational facilities. At the GAA grounds we were impressed by the condition of the fine clubhouse and the stand, all brightly maintained. Close-by, the green contours of Macool Park prove a good place for a stroll.

The Quiet Moment gave us cause to rest awhile and we agreed with previous comments about the ambiance there. It was notable, as well, how two adjoining ground floor areas have been united, connected by a pleasant archway. This may provide a template for other retail units along Main Street as they compete with the scale of commercial units on the east side of the town.

In terms of sheer urban heritage and atmosphere, the Cathedral Quarter drew us in quickly. There are several architectural gems juxtaposed, forming a grand alliance of sober elegance. The quiet interior of the cathedral offered a haven from the busy streets outside, with the light streaming in through the stained glass windows. Such old reliable interiors offer us comfort and solace. Looking around, we noted the unusual use of Gaelic script (for Latin text) on the Way of the Cross. The stonework of the Protestant church reflects its great age and it has a spire-topped tower. The central space, marked out by the large Celtic cross, brings these various religious structures together. It is notable how the cross itself is made of limestone, where all around we saw mudstone. The low profile of the cathedral toilet block deserves great praise. It has been fitted in very discretely.

The ESB group of buildings and facilities were well-presented, as was the extensive Letterkenny Business and Technology Park. The SITA building displays new age architecture that we found engaging.

Letterkenny has a cluster of hospitals/medical facilities, all looking busy on adjudication day. The main hospital was impressively maintained. The bus station, beside the shopping centre, looked lively and clean. In the education sector, St Eunan's stands out on account of the college's castellated profile. The nearby planting adds to its setting, especially the copper beech trees. Errigal College commands a great view and it makes good use of it.

The Swilly Inn uses an attractive colour palette, combining traditional and interesting hues and textures. A very happy note was added to our visit on seeing a wedding in progress at the Church of the Irish Martyrs. Best wishes to all concerned.

Landscaping and Open Spaces / Tírdhreachú agus Spásanna Oscailte:

Letterkenny benefits from the well balanced resource of its public parks. These work together with the notable slopes, ups and downs to present a strong green aspect. Other features such as the judiciously planted roundabout all add to that bright environment.

Your market square encourages the curious passersby and the elevated backdrop of the red brick terrace is imposing. However, you might consider whether a review of your planting programme there would bring better results. The current profile, marked by dense elevated shrubbery, serves to disguise the square's layout. It would benefit from lower plants allowing visitors to see its true scale and the purpose of its layout. This impression was confirmed when we saw the old photograph of the site (from the Lawrence collection) dating back a century ago.

We felt that Letterkenny Community Centre would benefit from a little softening of the large front car park. You might consider planting some trees, say at the end of each aisle. This would serve to break up the scale, making the place more welcoming. Close-by we found the canopies over the pedestrian way (beside the car park at Justice Walsh Road) very appealing, adding a certain intimacy to the pathway.

Your central area is enhanced by the use of well-selected murals. Two of those we came across were by Kyle Maguire. That large one on Main Street is on a musical theme. The wall mosaic on Church Lane also caught our eye. That is the mosaic by Mary Faughnan that identifies the Cathedral quarter. We admired its finesse and dignified restraint.

It is clear that your extensive network of public parks get good regular maintenance. At Macool Park the playground was being put to good use and it is kept well. We found the public toilet very clean and nearby we saw a man cutting the grass with a drive-around mower. Well done to the team involved.

Knocknamona roundabout appealed to us on account of the sustainable planting. At the Polestar roundabout we noted how the lovely plants complement the sculpture. Station roundabout is well planted and this comment extends to the Central Hotel. Is Kiltroy roundabout a work in progress?

Along Main Street we admired the portal installations that make it easier for pedestrians to identify good crossing

points. There is bright planting opposite the Court House. It forms part of a beautiful setting that includes finely placed seats before a lovely white façade.

Wildlife, Habitats and Natural Amenities / Fíadhúlra, Gnáthóga agus Taitneamhachtaí Nádurtha:

This year you are involved in the Wildlife Friendly Garden Competition that is sponsored by An Taisce. This should prove a great introduction for some residents welcoming interesting flora and fauna closer to their livingrooms. You have continued with the tree naming project and we're pleased to see that those names are given in both English and Irish. You may emphasize how revealing the Irish names are, especially the associated placenames, for example Doire (the oak wood).

Your Garden Week ties in with that and we loved how you made progress with the butterfly garden. As we become more urbanized, our wild creatures benefit from the sanctuary of well managed gardens. Well done.

Letterkenny is well aware of the current movement to assist pollinating insects. This ties in with the butterfly garden and it will support local farmers as well. The project on Swift nest boxes will bring those speedy flyers closer also.

Sustainable Waste and Resource Management / Bainistiú Acmhainní agus Dramhaíola Inbhuanaithe:

For a town of your size we expected a well-placed bring bank. We found your facilities good. At the shopping centre, the bring bank was neat and clean. We commend your waste prevention initiatives, especially the one directed to reduce food waste. The recycling centre has a well-organised method of work.

You can bear in mind the waste hierarchy that is graphically illustrated as an inverted pyramid model. It begins with Prevention - if you can't Prevent, then Prepare to Reuse. If you can't Prepare to Reuse, then Recycle. If you can't Recycle, then Recover Other Value (e.g. energy). Ultimately, if you cannot Recover Value, then Disposal. Landfill should only arise where no other alternative is available.

Tidiness and Litter Control / Slachtmhaireacht agus Rialú Bruscair:

At a few points, we were disappointed to come across notable litter. For example, at the Cathedral Quarter, where we sat down on the fine timber-topped bench, there was beside us notable dog dirt and strewn glass shards and splinters apparently the remains of a few beer bottles that detracted from the fine setting you have created there.

Down at Ramelton Road (outside Burrito Loco) and at a few other places we found the litter bins overflowing. Is this an issue that arises during the summer tourism season? We were disappointed at the extent of litter caused by chewing gum. That is an issue along Main Street and the adjacent streets, and it deserves to be addressed. Is this something that could be mentioned in an education programme within the schools, for example explaining the danger to birds if they ingest the gum?

Amongst your items of street furniture some of the post boxes need attention. The letter box close to the Post Office needs refurbishment. So does another at Pearse Road, outside Domino's. The Post Office itself looked well. The notable Oatfield sweets building requires attention and we acknowledge that you are making efforts there.

We came across some rubbish on the Derry road (N13) including drink cans and white plastic. Litter at the car park behind An Grianán Theatre included cardboard and drink cans. Kerbside weeds also detracted there.

Residential Streets & Housing Areas / Sráideanna Cónaithe & Ceantair Tithíochta:

In general, your housing stock is robust and well presented. We saw several people actively engaged in site maintenance. That was the case at Ballymacool where a man was busy spraying kerb weeds.

At Ballymacool Terrace we saw very active participation in the Tidy Towns, with well co-ordinated planting and colour. Ballymacool Respite Care looked well on the day. Glencar has attractive planting although some flowers obscure the name plaque. Good management of planting was also seen at Glenwood Park, Derryveigh Avenue (entrance), Ballyboe Park, Ashlawn, Sylvan Park, Gortlee Road and Orchard Grove. Well done to all those residents for their commitment and effort.

The traditional sign at Tír na nÓg deserves some attention. The roadside area beside the de Valera Road fire station (with the helmet sculpture) was excellently maintained.

Approach Roads, Streets & Lanes / Bóithre Isteach, Sráideanna & Lánaí:

Letterkenny was a busy place on adjudication day. Beside the Business and Technology Park, we saw workers applying white lining to segregate cyclists from the other road users. The Get Active Letterkenny signs (beside Aldi) were noted, as was your Slí na Sláinte (at Port Road). That is a commendable initiative for people of all ages.

Several streets are made more appealing by the prospect they offer. These include Long Lane and Rosemount Lane.

We were impressed by the initiative of St Colmcille's National School for the WOW project (Walk on Wednesday). It is applauded for the health and exercise benefits. On the Ramelton road we saw the bright road markings. In general, the many access routes into Letterkenny were well signed, marked and maintained. Well done to all

concerned.

Concluding Remarks:

Second Round Adjudication:

This adjudicator is pleased to be the second-round adjudicator for Letterkenny. Your comprehensive entry form, complete with 2 street maps, made the job that much easier and resulted in a more efficient use of the time available. Thank you for that. The report of the first adjudicator was specific in detail. The role of the second-round adjudicator is more procedural although this adjudicator would like to use the opportunity to mention a few items that stood out. This adjudicator is a regular swimmer so weather was not a factor in the adjudication.

Having been a visitor to Letterkenny for long enough to have known the town before the boom and its evolution into its current role as the busy business orientated centre of Donegal with all of the pluses and minuses that that role brings. Visually, the town seems released from any planning constraints and an example of this is almost any stretch of road between two roundabouts. The predominant visual feature seems to be advertisements in a variety of formats, not the architectural style of the buildings or the landscaping. As one gets closer to the centre of the town buildings appear from behind the billboards, hoardings, facades, etc. The core of Letterkenny still seems to be the Cathedral and its neighbours – the venerable Church of Ireland, Church Lane, Market Square, Upper and Lower Ard O Donnell. They have been through more ups and downs than the roundabout left below them.

The lanes connecting Upper and Lower Ard O Donnell are tidy, old but tidy. The houses that make up these neighbourhoods were once 'look alike' houses, possibly local authority. Now they are individual residences with their own personality, with or without a front garden, all colourful, neat and tidy. The residents keep their neighbourhood like that because they have pride in their place. A residence on the corner where Upper and Lower meet before going down to the High Road is ground breaking in architectural terms. Ard O Donnell is not just alive and well – it is pushing boundaries.

Last year's adjudicator's report commented on the lack of mention of the Famine Graveyard on your map. This year it is on it and the Famine Graveyard is looking very presentable. Well done Letterkenny Tidy Towns and anyone else involved. The graveyard is part of this greater neighbourhood. Your entry form included an attractive brochure introducing "the inaugural Letterkenny Garden Week". The Tidy Towns ethos promotes engagement with school children and youth. The first event of the Garden Week is "school gardeners of the year 2017". Later this adjudicator saw Ballyraine National School which has allocated a raised corner of its school yard to the school children who have created an imaginative and colourful garden there. Well done to all concerned.

This adjudicator hastens to reassure readers that this Garden Week is not a competition and this is not intended to influence judges. The Ballyraine Road joins the Ramelton Road which has many well-presented gardens with well stocked gardens. This adjudicator looked out for a modern residential neighbourhood to counter balance Ard O Donnell and turned off the Ramelton Road into Orchard Grove. Again, chosen at random and a good choice. What appeared as a short cul-de-sac with residences on one side facing a well-planted bank on the other side, it turned out to be full of surprises. That cul-de-sac opened into another and others – each different.

In the centre of all of these is a well-maintained football pitch. Where did that come from? It is invidious for an adjudicator to single out one cul-de-sac from another but the most modern of these cul-de-sacs had a stone at its entrance "An Garran", all well presented as were the rest of the residences in this complex of cul-de-sacs.