

# 5 Town Centre

**Aim:** To develop a compact urban form and to improve the vitality and viability of the town centre area of Athy through the provision of a high level and broad range of uses for residents, workers and visitors to the town; to provide greater opportunities for town centre living; to facilitate high quality urban design and through the provision of high quality public realm to promote the town centre as an attractive place for all to enjoy.

## 5.1 Background

The growth in population since the 2006 Census has increased pressures on the existing services and facilities within the town. Athy town centre acts as a focus for the wider community and should be an attractive, inviting, safe and secure environment for visitors, business, shoppers and residents. The area zoned “Town Centre” in Athy comprises approximately 38ha hectares (Refer to Map 5.1).

Shops and services are located primarily in and around Duke Street and Leinster Street. The narrow plot sizes and street widths within the town centre area have limited the ability of the town centre to accommodate large individual building footprints, but a considerable number of vacant premises, backland, infill and brownfield sites exist which could accommodate further town centre development appropriate to the existing footprint of the town. The character of the town centre has been established by its historical layout and rich and varied architectural heritage. It is important that the design of future development within the town centre builds on its character to enhance its appearance and attractiveness as a place to visit and do business.

## 5.2 Strategy

A key principle of the core strategy is to promote Athy town centre as a vibrant centre offering a wide range of services and opportunities within a high quality urban environment. Consolidation of the existing town centre, utilisation of backlands and appropriate development of brownfield sites is of primary importance. New development should be connected to, and complement the existing town centre and surrounding area. New development should be of a high quality and proposals should be developed in accordance with the zoning objectives set out in Chapter 16 of this Plan.

The following principles underpin the Councils’ town centre strategy:

- Increase the critical mass of population, employment, retail and associated uses to facilitate the consolidation of the town centre and its expansion, while maintaining the integrity of the town’s heritage status.
- Rejuvenate the existing town centre area and promote the appropriate reuse of vacant premises.
- Maintain the viability of the town centre by promoting the centre as the primary location for retail and other commercial development i.e. the development of a vibrant retail core supported by a mix of complementary uses.
- Encourage increased town centre residential development to enhance the vitality and vibrancy of the town centre with safe and attractive spaces to promote the town centre as a desirable place to work, live

- and visit Identify and secure the redevelopment and regeneration of areas in need of renewal.
- Promote the appropriate re-use of buildings and development of under-utilised backland and brownfield sites to successfully integrate with the town centre area.
- Promote high quality urban design which responds positively to the town's historic character and architectural heritage and ensures all users are catered for.
- Reduce traffic congestion and improve the public realm.

### 5.3 Town Centre Uses

The promotion of a variety of uses such as residential, retail, commercial, employment and cultural within the town centre is encouraged. The increase of population within the town centre with a range of employment, recreation, educational, commercial, residential and retail uses can help to curtail travel demand. Town centres have the greatest potential for the creation of sustainable patterns of development. A healthy retail environment is an essential pre-requisite for a vibrant and viable town centre. Increasing the retail sector within the town centre and promoting Athy as an important shopping destination will assist the town in maintaining its role as a Moderate Sustainable Growth Town.

Residential use in the town centre is currently limited. A more substantial presence would add to the vitality and viability of the town centre and as such, proposals for the residential conversion of the upper floors of retail and commercial premises will be favourably considered. Any proposed residential use must respect the historic fabric, whilst also providing adequate

residential amenity. This plan seeks to ensure that new residential developments within the town centre area and also to incorporate a non-residential, preferably retail/commercial use at the ground floor level. All applications for residential development will be assessed having regard to the policies outlined in Chapter 15 Development Management Standards. In exceptional circumstances these standards may be relaxed in the town centre.

The development of a vibrant town centre, evening and night time uses, will be encouraged, subject to development management criteria including access, visual amenity, parking and protection of residential amenity.

There has been an emergence of non-retail developments such as betting offices, and take-aways in the town centre in recent years. The cumulative impact of non-retail uses in any particular area will be considered in the assessment of planning applications for non-retail uses.

It is the policy of the Council:

- TC 1: To promote the vitality and viability of the town centre area so that it becomes a high quality environment for shopping, working and visiting the town.
- TC 2: To encourage and promote development within the town centre which is of a high standard of design, has an appropriate mix of uses, enhances the built environment and delivers a high quality public realm.
- TC 3: To reinforce Athy Town Centre as the priority location for new retail and services development, with quality of design and integration /linkage with the existing urban form/

layout being fundamental prerequisites.

TC 4: To promote appropriate residential development within the town centre and encourage the concept of 'Living Over the Shop' in the town centre.

## 5.4 Town Centre Design

The significance of built and architectural heritage particularly with regard to the numerous Protected Structures in the town centre and to the designated Architectural Conservation Area (ACA) is recognised in Chapter 12 of this Plan. Proposals for new development in the town centre should adhere to the character of the area and to the principles of good practice, as set out in Architectural Heritage Guidelines issued by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (2004).

The Council will consider proposals for modern, contemporary architecture, where it respects the character and scale of the surrounding development. In general, innovative modern development using high quality materials will be favoured over pastiche or reproduction of existing buildings.

Development proposals (including new build and proposals for alteration, conversion, renovation of historic structures) should support the role of Athy town centre as a primary location for commercial, retail and cultural activities with a good mix of uses, particularly at ground floor level.

Athy contains a number of traditional shopfronts, which contribute to the distinctive character of the town. The Council will encourage the preservation and refurbishment of existing traditional shopfronts and name plates. New non-traditional design shopfronts will be

considered. However these should be designed to the highest standards.

It is the policy of the Council:

TCD 1: To ensure that new development in the town centre will only be permitted where it conserves or enhances its character thereby promoting high quality urban change and improvement.

TCD 2: To continue to enhance the streetscape and heritage assets of the town centre, to continue environmental improvements, to sustain and improve its attraction for living, working, visiting and investment.

TCD 3: To ensure the retention of older shop fronts and other significant elements of the streetscape, which enhance the visual amenity and distinctiveness of the town centre.

TCD 4: To seek to improve existing shopfronts and to ensure that new shopfronts reflect the scale and proportions of the existing streetscape.

TCD 5: To restrict unnecessary additional lighting, including intermittent lighting and neon lighting on external elevations, particularly in or adjacent to residential properties.

TCD 6: To place underground new service cables and ducting such as electrical, telephone, broadband and cable television.

TCD 7: To insist upon the use of high quality materials and traditional hand painted signs, as opposed to uPVC, plastic or other materials. Internally illuminated plastic signage will generally not be permitted.

TCD 8: To restrict the use of external security grilles/shutters on shop fronts.

TCD 9: To restrict advertising signs/ banners/ stickers on the inside of shop front/ commercial business windows.

### 5.5 Urban Renewal / Regeneration and Opportunity Sites

There is a need to reduce the high vacancy rates in the town centre and develop a town centre typified by a variety of high quality shops and services and good design. A series of connected public spaces that respect and enhance the setting of the architectural heritage of the town will also be encouraged.

There are considerable undeveloped backland areas to the rear of buildings on Duke Street and Leinster Street, with significant development potential. The potential for the re-use and regeneration of derelict and vacant buildings and brownfield sites in the town centre and at the edge of centre locations should be considered in the formulation of development proposals.

In addition to Leinster and Duke Street, there is a hierarchy of “side” streets and laneways which are an under-utilised resource as they offer development potential for the expansion of retail and service outlets. The development of laneways can offer potential benefits in terms of enhancing the permeability of the town centre, and in the development of attractive, unique and pedestrian friendly urban spaces.

A number of opportunity sites are located within the town centre and adjoining area. These sites are capable of accommodating a mix of uses. The development and overall improvement of these opportunity sites should comprise a high quality of urban

design and innovative architectural design solutions. Chapter 14 Urban Design and Opportunity Areas highlight a number of these sites and provide guidance for the future development of these areas. In assessing proposals for opportunity sites, the Council shall have regard to the development standards and guidelines outlined in Chapters 14 and 15.

Athy Town Council has been proactive in the identification of derelict sites which negatively affect the townscape and will continue to address the issue of dereliction under the provisions of the Derelict Sites Act 1990. Re-use and regeneration of derelict/obsolete land and buildings will help achieve the preservation of the character and quality of the town, particularly in terms of vernacular/ historical architecture.

It is the policy of the Council:

UR 1: To encourage a greater usage of backland areas and to promote the re-development of brownfield sites in the town centre area where new development will positively contribute to the commercial vitality of the town centre.

UR 2: To encourage and promote the re-utilisation and revitalisation of derelict or obsolete structures or land in the town centre and encourage the renewal/repair and maintenance of structures on the Council’s Derelict Sites Register. The Council will use its statutory powers, where appropriate and consider such sites for inclusion on the Register of Derelict Sites.

UR 3: To encourage the use of upper floors of existing buildings and the development of mixed-use schemes, particularly for residential uses.

- UR 4: To encourage the creation of new public spaces within the fabric of the town centre, provided they are passively supervised and surrounded by active ground floor use.
- UR 5: To require that any new development creates or positively contributes towards a connected network of streets and spaces, which prioritises pedestrians and cyclists.
- UR 6: To ensure that town centre environmental improvements including improved paving, street furniture and tree planting are designed and implemented to a high design standard.

## 5.6 Movement, Access and the Public Realm

Vehicular traffic in the town centre and the proximity of vehicular traffic to pedestrian movement on narrow pavements diminishes the quality of the environment for shopping, visitors, pedestrians etc. This Plan proposes the reduction in vehicular traffic in the town centre and promotes streets as “living spaces” which are a functional part of the community and the focus of activities. The Plan seeks to link commercial areas, employment areas and public spaces through a network of quality pedestrian and cycling routes in an enhanced public realm. An improved pedestrian environment will encourage higher levels of footfall on the main thoroughfares with associated higher levels of economic activity.

It is an aim of the Council to facilitate public realm improvements, both in terms of regeneration, building fabric, street materials and furniture and connectivity. In general, any urban renewal or environmental improvement scheme should retain historic

features, street furniture and features of interest. In exceptional cases where any of these features need to be removed, their reuse where appropriate within the town centre will be encouraged. This Plan also seeks to encourage the full or part pedestrianisation of parts of the town centre such as Emily Square during the plan period and the development of a pedestrian crossing over the River Barrow to the North of Cromaboo Bridge.

It is the policy of the Council:

PR 1: To provide pedestrian links from the nearby schools on the east and west of the River Barrow to recreational facilities and residential areas through the development of safe pedestrian routes and a pedestrian footbridge over the River Barrow.

PR 2: To encourage the improvement of the area surrounding the Dominican Church.

PR 3: To work towards improving the overall visual appearance of Athy by encouraging the following:

- (a) The removal of overhead cables and wires placing them underground within the town centre in conjunction with the various utility companies.
- (b) The control of advertising, including the removal of existing signage which is visually obtrusive or out of character, in particular neon and poor quality plastic signage will be prohibited.

## 5.7 Town Centre Objectives

It is an objective of the Council:

- TC0 1: To maintain the Council's Derelict Sites Register and to exercise its powers under the Derelict Sites Act 1990.
- TC0 2: To seek the removal of unauthorised advertising/ signage through enforcement provisions and to encourage new advertising and signage which is appropriate to the streetscape and positively contributes to the public realm.
- TC0 3: To prepare and implement an Environmental Improvement Scheme within the lifetime of this Plan to visually enhance the streetscape and key urban spaces with an emphasis on promoting a pedestrian and public transport friendly environment.
- TC0 4: To investigate the feasibility of the pedestrianisation of all or part of Emily Square during the Plan period.
- TC0 5: To construct a pedestrian crossing over the River Barrow as appropriate to link schools, parks, playing fields and residential areas on both sides of the river.
- TC0 6: To provide for a pedestrian crossing from the train station to the park/playground in People's Park.