

## 2012 LIVCOM AWARDS

Whole City Section  
(pop up to 20,000)

### Abbeyleix, Co. Laois



Submitted by the people of Abbeyleix in association with  
Abbeyleix Business & Community Forum and Abbeyleix Tidy Towns



[www.abbeyleix.ie](http://www.abbeyleix.ie)

## INTRODUCTION

**Abbeyleix** is an award-winning heritage town, situated in south Co. Laois. With a population of just over 1,800 people, the town has a strong architectural heritage, married with a huge tradition of community engagement, celebrating Abbeyleix as a wonderful place to live, work and visit. The town can boast an award win in the Irish All-Island National Pride of Place Competition in 2011 and was recently shortlisted as one of the Irish Times newspaper's 25 "Best Places to Live" in Ireland.

Once described as "The Gem of the Midlands", Abbeyleix is a planned town, founded in the 19th century by the De Vesce family and thankfully remains intact to this day.

Abbeyleix is a very active community, boasting over 40 business, community and voluntary groups, all working towards enhancing all the aspects of life for people living and working in the town.

Having always been located on the main Dublin to Cork Road, the town was by-passed on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2010 and with this so imminent, this community felt it important to make a plan for our shared future, which it has done and continues to do successfully.

**Abbeyleix Business & Community Development Forum (ABC)** was established in 2010 as an umbrella organisation to represent the many varied local groups and clubs in our community.

## ENHANCEMENT OF THE NATURAL & BUILT LANDSCAPE

### **Abbeyleix Library**

Formerly the Market House for the town, this 19<sup>th</sup> Century building is a 5 bay, 2-storey building which was until 2005 used as a Fire Station. It was renovated by Laois County Council in conjunction with the local community and in 2009, reopened as Abbeyleix Library, for which it was awarded the Best Conservation/Restoration Project by the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland. The building is a three storey library, including a dedicated public art exhibition space and much used as a hub for the local community in relation to education, meeting space, and local history and events.



***Abbeyleix Library***

## Town streetscape



*2012 St. Patrick's Day,  
Parade on Main  
Street, Abbeylax*

A [study](#) was commissioned in 2011 by our Tidy Towns Committee to record the historical importance of street furniture, post boxes, forge gates and iron pumps around Abbeylax.

The town is also well known and admired for the beautiful lime trees that adorn both sides of the Main Street, creating a wonderful vista upon entering the town. The particular type of lime tree used in the strategic planting of the town and maintenance, is for their suitability as an urban tree and ability to withstand aerial pollution from traffic.

## Abbeylax Bog

The Bog spans 500 acres and after 10 years of negotiations with Bord na Móna, was handed over to the community to be developed. It is the biggest amenity to be handed to the Abbeylax people in nearly 100 years. Developing the bog involved establishing numerous projects including; physical restoration, conservation of the associated flora and fauna, research and education, amenity projects, all of which will benefit the whole community.

The community has developed a [Strategic Plan](#) for the development and the promotion of the Bog as a local resource. Work to date includes a commissioned study recording of over 557 species of wildlife, development of a website [www.abbeylaxbog.ie](http://www.abbeylaxbog.ie), awareness events engaging children in local schools and ultimately the development of a signposted walk in association with Irish Tourist Board and Laois Rural Recreation Officer.



*Launch of Abbeylax Bog Walk  
15<sup>th</sup> April 2012*



## **Sensory Gardens**

As part of the Sisters of Charity of Jesus & Mary services at Dove House, providing a day service for people with an intellectual disability, the Sensory Gardens appeals to all by the stimulation of the senses - vision, smell, touch, taste and sound. Set in the walled gardens of the Brigidine Convent, the Sensory Garden is the first of its kind in Ireland, whose aim is to create a nursery specialising in fragrant plants. The garden provides a peaceful haven of spiritual and sensory nourishment and ultimately contemplation for the visitor.

In addition to the Sensory Gardens, two further gardens are maintained by the local community in Abbeyleix. One such garden sites the community composter, for use by local people and the other garden is maintained and harvested by the local Grow IT Yourself (GIY) Group.



***Members of the GIY Group cultivating the Community Gardern***

## **ARTS, CULTURE AND HERITAGE**

### ***Abbeyfest***

Abbeyleix has a very vibrant and active arts community. Home to a substantial body of visual artists, craft makers, writers and musicians Abbeyleix has always contributed significantly to both the Laois and wider cultural landscape.



***Street Activities during Abbeyfest weekend 2012***

Whilst there is year round activity on the Abbeyleix arts scene, for the last four years the central focus has been on *Abbeyfest*, the town's weekend long Music and Arts Festival. Funded by Laois Partnership and Laois Tourism Board, with a generous investment from the local business

community, *Abbeyfest* is a community arts festival that celebrates the town, its heritage, culture and its inhabitants.

Over the June bank holiday weekend the town comes very much alive with a dynamic and exciting programme of music, theatre, dance, film, literary readings, visual arts and lots of children and family focused events. The programme of events is of the highest calibre and whilst the festival very actively promotes the work of local artists, craft and theatre makers and musicians there is also a strong focus on bringing professionals artists and companies to the festival. The festival works closely with the local secondary and primary schools to create a stronger awareness and to ensure an active engagement and appreciation of the festival. Full details are available on [www.Abbeyfest.ie](http://www.Abbeyfest.ie).

### **Abbeyleix Further Education Centre**

The town and its cultural pedigree is also well promoted in that the only dedicated Art and Design courses in the county are run by the Abbeyleix Further Education Centre. The centre runs two year long FETAC level 5 and 6 courses. Many students go on to study art and design at degree level.

### **Open Door Theatre Group**

The town boasts a very prolific Amateur dramatic group called Open Door Theatre Company. Active since the early 1980's and with 40 members, they have always been a very prominent feature on the amateur dramatic circuit.



***Open Door Theatre Group***

### **Visual Arts**

A number of visual artists live in the community and their work is displayed at various intervals throughout the year. Our library houses a visual arts gallery supporting local and community arts, which after Dunamaise Arts Centre in Portlaoise, is the most impressive visual arts gallery in the county.



***Abbeyleix Library – public art gallery***

A new addition to the Abbeyleix arts scene is Abbeyleix Film Society. The society, through practical training, aims to foster a new generation of active film makers in the town who work at creating short films with schools, the heritage centre, theatre group and *Abbeyfest*.



Music plays a large part of community life in Abbeyleix also. **The Parish Choir** comprise 25 members, who enhance the church liturgy at all religious ceremonies in the town. They perform a Christmas Carol Service annually and recently raised funds for a local charity by producing a CD.

Our local **Comhaltas group** recently secured funding to invest in an instrument bank and is currently running a training course to develop musicians.



### ***A Heritage Town***

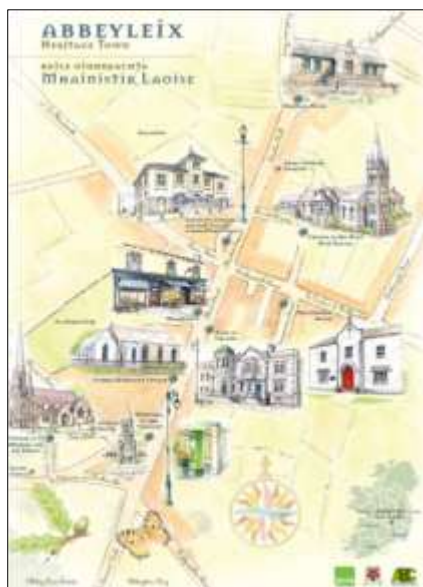
Abbeyleix was designated as a heritage town in 1982, in recognition of the town's unique character as an early planned town. The town has been the focus of an [architectural conservation area study](#) which has largely protected the town from inappropriate planning decisions during the recent boom.

Our heritage centre, Heritage House, provides a professional interpretation of Abbeyleix's Heritage and we are in the process of developing and upgrading the centre with support from Laois' local development company.

### **Heritage House**

Housed in the Old North National School, a beautiful cut stone building dating from 1884, our Heritage Centre interprets the Planned Estate Town of the de Vesci Landlords, once home to the Abbeyleix Carpet Factory, where a number of hand-tufted carpets were made for the state rooms of the RMS Olympic and RMS Titanic. The Centre also houses the local Model Railway club, established since 2009. The Heritage Centre also houses an archive of old documents and offers a genealogy research service.

Fig. 1 Heritage Map



The recent unveiling of the town map boards, and the design, printing and distribution of maps is the hard evidence of the work completed so far. The map boards around the town signifying sites on the Heritage Trail of our town, to interpret heritage features for locals and visitors alike.

### **De Vesci Estate**

The De Vesci Estate and Abbeyleix House (built in 1774 by James Wyatt) stands within a mile of the town. It is four storeys in height above the basement, and contains many spacious apartments. The mansion, gardens and demesne are set amidst some of the loveliest scenery in the midlands. The Estate opens to the public a few times per year for charitable causes.



## **ENVIRONMENTAL BEST PRACTICE**

Our community is committed to promoting best practices leading to the development, conservation and preservation of the environment. We place particular emphasis on promoting a more sustainable, less carbon based, local economy, which is not wasteful of resources.

Specific examples of best practice in this area are:

### ***Community Sustainability Training Programme***

In order to fertilise new innovative ideas and to develop our capacity, the ABC Group secured part funding to commission specialist training in [community sustainability](#) in 2010/11. Based on the “[Powerdown](#)” course, the programme demonstrated the sharing of knowledge and expertise through networking and learning. It was very successful; spawning a number of successful projects described below, including development of allotments/community garden and sustainability themed community festivals.

### ***Youth Programmes***

Keen to foster environmental best practice among our youth, we see the Green Schools Programme (GSP) as a key vehicle to achieve this. The GSP is a long-term programme, introducing participants (students, teachers, parents and local community) to the concept of an environmental management system. Our town supports 2 primary schools, both of which are strong performers in this national programme. Our North School has two green flag awards while our South School has one green flag.

### ***Public initiatives***

Over the past two years the remit of [Abbeyfest](#) has been extended to include a significant “buy local” and food sustainability sub theme. We have also developed the [Applefest](#) to celebrate our local apple harvest and to promote local food producers. As with many initiatives in Abbeyleix, the outcome was the combined effort of the community in all aspects, e.g., local children participating, sharing of recipes in a specially prepared book and use of the apple crop to create jams and chutneys, all available at the festival. In keeping with the sustainable ethos, all the apple pulp was composted or distributed for animal feed locally. These events have provided an ideal opportunity to communicate environmental best practice to a wide cross section of our community.

### ***Transport***

Cycling and walking are more environmentally sustainable as they reduce the stress on the environment from mechanised transport and reduce traffic congestion. We have recently worked with the National Road Authority to develop a high quality cycling corridor to our neighbouring village Durrow which is located just over 8.5km to the south. This development has seen a significant increase in bicycle use locally. The Abbeyleix “*High Nelly*” (*Traditional Bicycle*) Club, for example is a regular user of this facility.

### ***Local Food Production***

We have embraced the Grow It Yourself (GIY) movement, which recognises the fact that growing locally, reducing our reliance on imports and transport costs and subsequent CO2 emissions, while at the same time promoting outdoor activities, developing healthier lifestyles and benefiting biodiversity.



Our local GIY group comprises over 200 members and in the past year has overseen some of the most high profile and exciting environmental initiatives. Our first allotment garden located on the grounds of St Michael's Church in the south of the town was opened earlier this year. The GIY is also in the process of developing a [community walled garden](#) in the centre of the town. The garden will be open to all and will showcase sustainable techniques including rainwater harvesting. PHOTO

### ***Buy Local Initiatives***

Our town operated a successful farmers market which operates each Saturday on our central market square. This provides the opportunity to source locally produced vegetables and breads as well as eggs, poultry and organic pork products. We have two small supermarkets in the town, one of which is independently owned and which places a very strong emphasis on sourcing local produce.



***Abbeyleix Weekly Farmers' and Local Food producers' Market***

### ***Tidy Towns***

Abbeyleix is a strong performer in the national Tidy Towns Competition which provides a formal mechanism for towns and villages looking to improve their local environment and help make their communities better places to live, work and visit. Our Tidy Towns group has embraced the new direction of this competition which has moved away from just assessing tidiness and visual appearance, to focusing on overall sustainability. Our planting schemes, for example, now focus on the use of native species trees and shrub as well as perennials which provide year round colour.



***Abbeyleix Tidy Towns and local young helpers***

### ***Recycling***

Abbeyleix is served with a number of recycling centres/bring banks, providing our community with the option to recycle bottles, cardboard and clothing. The town is also served with a door to door recycling collection service (cardboard, plastics etc.). This service has recently been expanded to include a brown bin collection, for the collection of compostable waste. This additional service marks a significant improvement to the environmental performance of the town.

Our local Community Employment (CE) Scheme runs a scheme to collect newspapers and form them into compressed briquettes which are distributed to our senior citizens. We have maintained a community composter since 2010 which we use to compost grass cutting, weeds and other compostable materials which we take from local public spaces.



***Making Eco Fuel for local use***

### ***Energy and Lighting***

We recently applied for and secured funding to invest in energy efficient LED Christmas lighting. This has reduced our spend on electricity over the Christmas period and is a significant carbon saving.

Our local farmers and foresters have also embarked on an exciting initiative to establish a cooperative which will oversee a biomass supply chain based on forestry thinnings and woodchip. Locally sourced biomass is a renewable energy source which will create strong local employment while also reducing our reliance on imported oil and gas. This initiative is already supplying woodchip to our local library, which is heated using a biomass boiler.

## **COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION**

Abbeyleix would not prosper if not for the wealth of community participation and cooperation by local groups and people. Over 40 groups operate in the town under the umbrella of a larger representative group, ABC Group was established as an umbrella organisation to represent the many existing varied local groups, e.g.,

- Sports & Social
- Local Business
- Community Employment
- Tidy Towns
- Environmental Sustainability
- Arts
- Childcare & Young People
- Women

### **Fr. Breen Memorial Park / Park Development Association**

An 11-acre park area off the town's main thoroughfare dates back to 1909, and was known locally as Jelly's pit. The Jelly family operated a sand & gravel pit from the site. The pit became exhausted in 1924 and the de Vesci family donated land to the local community to be used as a Town park and general sporting facility. Under the guidance of the local Parish Priest, various sporting organisations and townspeople worked voluntarily to develop the facility. The park now is home to the GAA, Soccer, Hockey and Tennis clubs of Abbeyleix and operates under the collaborative efforts of Park Development Association.

The committee is made up of 2 members from each participating club that use the facilities at Fr. Breen Memorial Park. Among our activities, we host tennis with four Savannah floodlit courts, hockey on our all weather pitch, soccer with up to 14 teams from 6 years old upwards, and G.A.A. catering for all ages. The park is open at all times to the general public and the walkways around the perimeter are in constant use.



***Abbeyleix Hockey Club playing at Fr. Breen Park***



***Abbeyleix Youth Café***



***Abbeyleix ICA members performing line dancing in the Community Hall***

The meeting rooms in the Park house our **Youth Café**, catering for the young people and managed by adult volunteers. The community hall at the other end of the park caters for snooker, badminton, boxing training and dance classes for young and old.

Our community crèche & playschool is also located in the hall, established by the Women's Development Group in September 2000. They have provided first class childcare to facilitate local people returning to education or work, making a major contribution to the local economy. The crèche currently employs 12 staff, 7 on a Community Employment Scheme, with 36 children attending daily.



***Abbeyleix Community Crèche & Playschool***



***Abbeyleix Special Olympics Club***

The annual **senior citizens party** takes place in the hall and this year we celebrated our 52<sup>nd</sup> party with over 200 guests seated for a 4-course meal, music and dancing. The hall is also used by **Special Olympics Committee** for training.

How did we provide all this? Through all the local community & voluntary groups working together - we have drawn down grants of up to half million euro from Central Government, Laois County Council and Laois' local development company, with whom we have a great working relationship, indeed we have plans to extend our activities into the future.



Formed in 1999, **Abbeyleix Women's Development Group** is a socially inclusive group promoting the benefits of women becoming pro-active in their community.

The Group was one of the first to receive funding under the Department of Justice's Childcare programme, allowing the group to establish our aforementioned community crèche. More examples of the Women's Group's work include:

- The undertaking of an ambitious charity project to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Abbeyleix Carpet Factory. The production of the longest piece of hand-tufted carpet in the world grabbed the imagination of diverse groups in the community and a wide circle of enthusiastic individual efforts that combined to complete this project.
- The group published a book in 2008 entitled "Abbeyleix Our Town Our Lives" with reflections from various townspeople over the years.

As a community, we are committed to fairness and social inclusion. As an example, a recent multi-generational effort from our community, led by the Women's Development Group, resulted in the **Wonderbag** (heat retention slow cookers) Project. This innovative project united the community, promoting sustainable development and raising funds for African communities. The bags were demonstrated, displayed and sold as part of the *Abbeyfest*. The group sewed the bags, from materials donated by the local community and businesses. The Abbeyleix community donated enough to fund 40 bags for households in Alexandra, one of Johannesburg's largest townships.



***Abbeyleix Womens' Development Group – Wonderbag fundraiser project.***

The **Hospital Action Group** is a good example of our respect and solidarity with less advantaged members of our community. With the threat looming of closure by the national Health Services Executive of Abbeyleix Hospital for the Elderly, the town mobilised to show not only its solidarity to stop the closure, but also to meet with Government officials and present constructive, alternative solutions to not only retain the facility but extending the building also. The Action Group is actively pursuing these solutions at national level.



***Public March to in solidarity against the closure of Abbeyleix Hospital May 2012***

**Abbeyleix Parish Development Committee** is made up of local volunteers with a common aim of local development and sponsors/manages the local Community Employment Scheme.

Under the Community Youth Training Programme, **Knocknamoe House** was restored, while training young people in construction skills. This building is now houses the local CE office, meeting rooms and Citizens Information Centre.

Currently we have 18 participants on the scheme providing staff for Crèche and Playschool, Citizens Information Centre and publication of a weekly news-sheet with local town information, advertisements for local business, etc.

We work for all non-profit organisations in town - Tidy Towns, GAA, Soccer, Tennis, Park Development, *Abbeyfest*, Lions Club, Local Churches. We build stone walls, put up Christmas lights, help with the Senior Citizens Christmas party. We cut grass, dig flower beds, landscape, paint, tile, build up and knock down - in fact we do just about anything we can when needed by a local group.



***Abbeyleix Parish Employment CE Workers***

What makes our scheme different from others is that we are not a specific project, however we work with all local organisations. We support each other and if there is a special event in the town we all help each other with great support from our local County Council overseer.

**Older People in Abbeyleix** meet regularly in an active retirement setting, in a local Community building provided by RESPOND! Voluntary Housing Association. The Group of over 60 women and men aims to promote the physical, mental and social well-being of older people living locally through a range of activities, thus promoting social inclusion and preventing isolation, e.g., bowls, dancing, cards, social gatherings.

### **Business and E-commerce**

Abbeyleix has a vibrant and diverse business community. Of course, we haven't escaped the ravages of recession. The major change to the town in its being by-passed in recent years presented a challenge for the business community, but they quickly turned this into an opportunity rather than a loss. Abbeyleix was once a difficult town to shop in with constant traffic and impossible parking. It is now a more peaceful town with a slightly slower pace, where shoppers can move between shops and businesses, all with their own unique character.

The business population of Abbeyleix has always had a strong sense of community and since the by-pass, this appreciation of the local businesses has been made more important. We are blessed with a creative and talented community of farmers, food producers and restaurants, chefs and cookery schools.

Fig. 2 – [www.abbeyleix.ie](http://www.abbeyleix.ie) website



ABC group also developed the town's **website** - [www.abbeyleix.ie](http://www.abbeyleix.ie) and Facebook page under its "eTown" initiative, so to:

- Create a community resource where the locals promote and find relevant community news, events and information
- Support the business community in its efforts to promote its services to the local community. A large number of businesses in the town are supporting the initiative and actively advertising their business on the site.

- Promote tourism in the area, letting people from both near and far see what Abbeyleix has to offer.

An example of town business initiative was this year at *Abbeyfest 2012*, when a “pop-up” craft shop was developed for local craftmakers to display and sell their items as part of the event, promoting indigenous local business. A Christmas Fair was held in 2011 was also deemed a huge success.

Another initiative undertaken is the "Buy Local" campaign, with a simple message and relevant to the entire business community. The aim of the initiative is to explain to people in the community about the value of buying local to support the local business community, jobs and community as a whole. The campaign has worked very well as it got the community talking and spreading the message of the importance of buying local.

Fig. 3 Buy Local Leaflet





## HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

Whether young or old, fit or just staying active, the community of Abbeyleix has catered for all activities to promote a healthy and active lifestyle.

In addition to the more strenuous sporting activities of GAA, Soccer, Hockey, Tennis, etc in Fr. Breen Park, other activities include the Angling Club and the newly formed Abbeyleix District Game Club.

The GAA Ball Wall located at Fr. Breen Park is an attraction for both young and old.



***Abbeyleix GAA Juvenile Hurlers***

**The Looped Walk** caters for walkers, with short and long routes alike. The initiative was identified as part of the Abbeyleix Sustainable Community Development Plan and development of the Walking routes was a joint initiative of the ABC and Bog Groups, and the Rural Recreation Officer. The initiative was launched in 2012 and is not only a local activity, but an attraction for walkers visiting Co. Laois also. [Fig. 4 Map of Looped Walk Routes](#)



**Biking** - In June 2011, over 200 children took part in a local event as part of **National Bike Week**.



***Abbeyleix High Nellie Club***



***National Bike Week event***

The **High Nellie Club** is the new social phenomenon which not only makes cycling fun, but promotes an active lifestyle for those who are interested in cycling for fun.

Our **Playground** was developed in association with Heritage House, who provided the site and Laois County Council Sports Office. It is a place of great enjoyment for the younger section of our community, while providing a safe space for children to play and be active. The playground hosts Easter Sunday Egg Hunts for local families; in 2012, over 200 children took part.



Community efforts to plan for emergencies resulted in the purchase of **3 defibrillators** for the town, a very strong ratio for our population of 1800. An active committee provides free training to keep a cohort of trained CPR respondents.

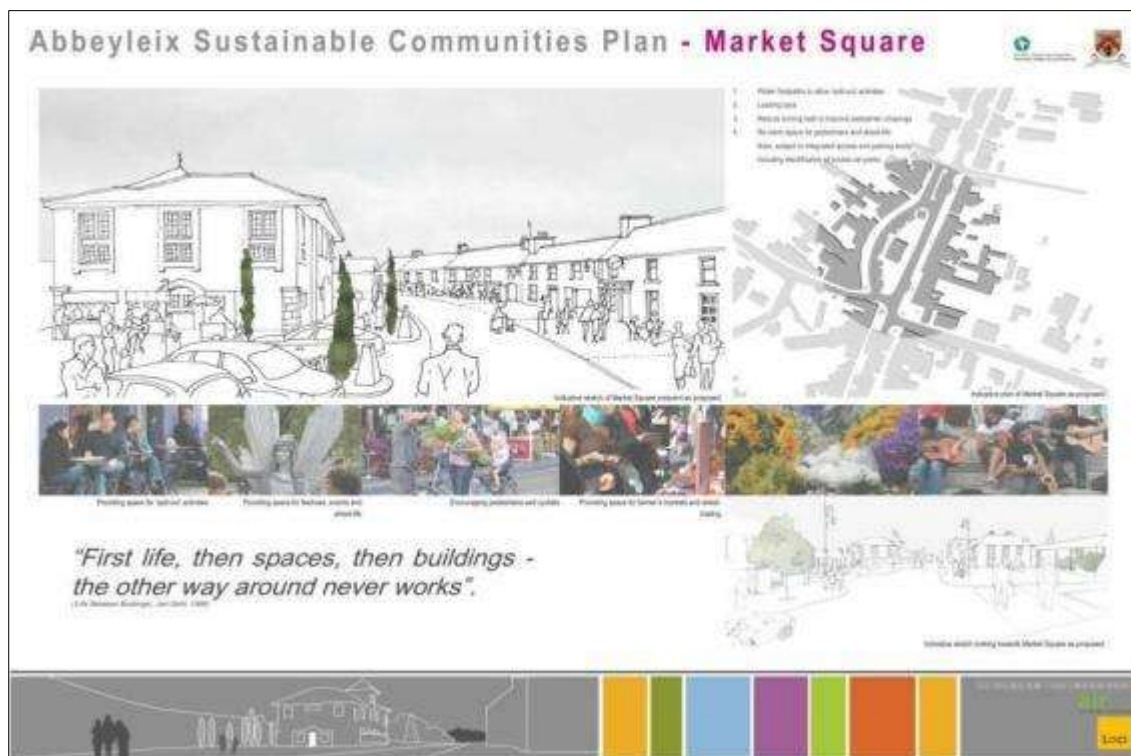
### **STRATEGIC PLANNING**

As a community, we have collaboratively developed plans for the future of Abbeyleix. ABC Group, as a representative body, has been very instrumental in engaging with and progressing plans for the town and the community, where heretofore the engagement and action would only have been on a piecemeal basis.

As a follow-on from our engagement with the local authority on the [Town Development Plan](#), the [Abbeyleix Sustainable Communities Plan \(SCP\)](#) was developed in consultation with the community,

ABC Group, in partnership with Laois County Council.

Fig 5 - Sustainable Communities Plan



The SCP provides the community with a “Road Map” to plan for the future of Abbeylax in every aspect. In the short term, we are working together as a community, with Laois County Council and local development agencies, delivering many projects, e.g.;

- The previously mentioned Looped Walks was a concept actioned in the Sustainable Communities Plan, progressed by ABC and Bog Groups and has since been delivered.
- A [Feasibility Study and Strategic Plan for Abbeylax Bog](#) has been completed, from which the development of walks and a series of biodiversity educational programmes have been delivered, involving the purchase of interpretive equipment, e.g., pond dipping, bat detection. Contact has also been made with a Third level college regarding use of the Bog as a case study by students. Further details can be found on [www.abbeylaxbog.ie](http://www.abbeylaxbog.ie)
- A [Tidy Towns three-year Plan](#) has recently been completed. Actions delivered so far in this plan include the production of interpretative material for wildlife in the area, also the progression of a “planting for pollination” campaign locally.
- Plans for the improvement of Market Square as part of the Sustainable Communities Plan are at early stages.

- A Strategic Plan for the Balladine area of Abbeyleix is currently being developed, to include a community park area with specific planting.

Fig. 5 Map of Balladine Proposals



Other examples of plans for the future of Abbeyleix have been mentioned throughout this submission.

### **CONCLUSION**

Abbeyleix is the place where vibrant community is a term that is never used lightly, but a way of life for its community of all ages, both business and voluntary. The level of community participation has gone from strength to strength, and continues to grow now and into the future.

***A list of documents and reports supporting / giving background detail on the above is available at:***

***<http://www.abbeyleixtidytowns.net/livcom-competition>***