Naas Local Area Plan 2018-2024

YOUR TOWN, YOUR PLACE, YOUR NAAS

NAAS PLENARY SESSION RE-IMAGINING NAAS & DEFINING OUR FUTURE VISION

WORKSHOP BRIEFING NOTES AND KEY QUESTIONS

MONDAY 22nd JANUARY 2018
LAWLORS HOTEL, POPLAR SQUARE, NAAS

Theme 1. The role of Naas as the County Town

County Towns in Ireland have traditionally enjoyed a specific profile as the acknowledged primary urban centre in the county. Think of examples like Tralee, Sligo, Portlaoise, Mullingar, Carlow or Wexford. The County Town tended to house a range of important institutions, ranging across health, education, religion, culture, legal, and was also the centre for county administration. Economic life revolved around its role as a market town for its hinterland, providing employment across retail, services and industry. The status of each County Town was frequently boosted by a range of key streets, urban spaces, parks and by an architectural character of high quality, unique to each town.

With the advent of on-line services and the emergence of a complex regional economy it could be argued that the profile of the County Town is diminishing and its role is under threat. Looking across the country however, the stature of County Towns still retain a powerful legacy of place. New collaborations are driving creative searches for innovative economic bases and for new investment in cultural and recreational infrastructure, forging exciting links with hinterland landscapes, and helping to re-invent the role of the County Town.

Questions:

How can the town of Naas rise to the challenge of being a dynamic and contemporary County Town of Kildare in the 21st Century:

- Are there achievements and positive platforms that we can work on?

- What should we be focusing on and what are the big issues and challenges?

- What might the shape of future success look like? Have you ideas on how we might get there?

Theme 2. Economic Development and Enterprise.

The search for a sustainable economic base exists across all human societies and is fundamental to human livelihood and livability. While the external perception of Naas may be that of a commuter town serving Dublin, the reality is that Naas has circa 12,000 jobs and has a net-inward flow of 4,000 commuters. That said, one third of the Naas workforce commutes daily to Dublin for work.

The geographical spread of jobs in Naas has changed over the decades with many of those 12,000 workplaces located on the periphery of Naas, and a worrying low ratio of jobs now located in the central Naas area. While the new workplaces on the periphery constitutes success for Naas [circa 3000 jobs in Millennium Park] and the arrival of Kerry plc represents a powerful statement of intent in terms of knowledge economy direction, one senses a growing disconnection between the peripheral economy and the economy of the town centre. The physical separation of the periphery from the town centre creates little appetite for moving outside an introverted high-quality office workplace.

While it is obvious that the work landscape of Naas has greatly changed over recent decades, we can be also sure that it will continue to change to 2040 and beyond. Innovation, automation, the internet, national and global investment patterns and not least Government policy, are all powerful forces that will affect the future of this town, and prospects for sustainable jobs.

Most successful urban places encourage an ecology of support for economy and enterprise, where a range of scales support each other, extending from the small start-up firms, to the medium sized firms seeking to consolidate, through to the big firms, the Kerry's and the Intel's of this world.

Questions:

In reflecting on Naas's economy, on the sectors that are already embedded, and on the patterns of location:

- What are the achievements and the good things that we can note?

- What are the critical issues and challenges?

- In thinking about the future shape of success, what are the sectors we should be

  encouraging? Are there gap areas? How can we ensure that the greater economy of Naas

  underpins and sustains the urban core and the great 'Legacy of Place' that is Naas Town

  Centre?

Theme 3. Social and Community Infrastructure

When we think of the term 'Social and Community' it generally conjures up some collective sense of the community working together to achieve some recognizable and beneficial social objectives. We can identify infrastructure as that which enables and supports the achievement of those social and community objectives. There are multiple strands to this particular theme. It can include sectors like education, health, culture, recreation and sport, and the hard infrastructure of schools, hospitals/clinics, and sports facilities necessary for these sectors to operate. While these hard community type infrastructures are frequently delivered from 'top-down' they are complemented by both top-down and bottom-up 'soft infrastructure' those formal, informal and voluntary systems, permanent and temporary, which underpin much of the culture of the social and community activity.

In Naas there are literally hundreds of groups which can come under the umbrella of 'social and community'. Many are there to respond to a perceived need in the community, or to organize a collective response to sporting or recreational need, or enjoy intellectual/mental pursuits such as a book club, or a bridge club. Getting involved in the community, in one form or another is good for our mental health, and when too many people retreat into social isolation, or the vigour and spirit of community life falls below a certain critical level, the livability of place becomes a lot less positive. We are perhaps lucky that Irish people have a great appetite for social life and are very good at volunteering. Ireland has one of the world's best exemplars in terms of volunteerism, the GAA. Our key challenge is to nurture these community and social instincts, and create institutional frameworks within which they can prosper.

Despite the extent of community activity, society can get locked into particular routines and rigid ways of looking at issues, failing to respond to evolving needs. Even where these needs are acknowledged, institutional and governance systems can stymie good ideas and energy. A feature of the contemporary social and community context is the manner in which energetic bottom-up groups can challenge the status quo, in terms of devising new collaborative and institutional approaches to meeting societal needs.

McAuley Place in the centre of Naas is an example in point, where a radical initiative to place residential accommodation for elders at the heart of a vibrant community, co-existing with an Arts hub, community centre and town café, had to overcome multiple institutional and regulatory hurdles, eventually brokering a successful consensus between top-down and bottom-up stakeholders.

Questions:

In reflecting on the social and community theme in Naas, can you:
- Identify strengths and positive achievements in Naas?

- Outline some issues and challenges facing the social and community sector?

- Reflect on the shape of success in the future and prioritize some ideas on how to get there?

Theme 4. Living in Naas

In this theme we are looking at the topic of residential accommodation, it's pattern, location, quality and diversity. The title of the theme 'Living in Naas' suggests however a wider perspective than the more narrow topic of just residential/housing. 'Living in Naas' prompts a more holistic consideration of the range of advantages, resources, infrastructures, which Naas offers a resident on a daily basis, but also a consideration of those characteristics that are not so great.

While acknowledging that wider perspective, there is a need to focus also on the specific range and character of housing coming to the market, and how well it relates to the developing character of the town.

In most developing areas, the vast majority of the land-use is taken up by commercial and residential development [over 90%]. Best practice suggests the creation of local neighbourhoods as a way of organizing new development in a legible urban structure, where a diverse range of housing types and tenures is attractively laid out and supported by well designed open-space, and services such as schools and local shopping. The local neighbourhood would also incorporate well designed movement, providing access to the town-centre and elsewhere, and prioritizing walking, cycling and public transport. Monread and Lakelands represent good examples of local neighbourhood designs from the relatively recent past.

The bigger picture challenge then is to integrate or knit together the various emerging neighbourhoods into an overall urban structure, which works well for the town as a whole, and which supports a strong and viable town centre. Recent peripheral development along the motorway by-pass has created fragmentation in the spatial character of the town, and generated a rift between the town centre and the edge-of-town. It is critical that a strategy emerges to address this separation, and new residential developments will play a key role in helping to link these areas together. Naas also needs to think about how the limited range of relatively low-density housing types i.e. housing estates, can be expanded on. The consolidation of the town centre also provides an opportunity to consider a more innovative range of high quality and more dense residential accommodation.

Questions

In reflecting on the theme of living in Naas, can you:
- Identify some of the advantages and positive platforms that Naas has to offer a Naas resident?
- Outline some issues and challenges which the town faces in terms of residential accommodation?
- What might the future shape of success look like in terms of residential accommodation/livability, and can you prioritize some ideas on how we might get there?

Theme 5. Shaping a successful town centre

Every town needs a beating heart. One of the great legacies in Ireland is the character of the Irish town. Think of any town in Ireland and immediately comes to mind an image of its central streets, squares and urban character. While you will find a set of consistent urban qualities across the spectrum, each town is totally unique, a product of economic, cultural, and social values and of an urban design mentality working creatively with local skilled craftsmen. This collective, unique, local character is sometimes referred to as the 'Infrastructure of Place'. Sadly, for a whole range of reasons, the legacy of the Irish town has been under threat for some time; the long-standing market function weakened, economic vitality bleached by regional and out-of-town, and the public realm eroded through congestion and aggressive traffic. Yet one can sense a change. Towns are fighting back, and collaborative and innovative strategies in some towns are focused on re-igniting the social, cultural, and economic dimensions offered by the urban core of the Irish town.

The centre of Naas town is also a great legacy from the past, with a street structure going back hundreds of years, and many of its buildings on Main St dating from the early part of the 19th Century. The town today, still offers a rich range of shops, services, restaurants and bars. Despite however a fourfold increase in the overall population over four decades, the town centre has not benefited to any noticeable extent from the significant surge in new residents or from the extensive commercial peripheral development. Indeed the town-centre would seem to have lost economic vitality over recent decades.

The challenge therefore, is to consider why the town centre of Naas is under-performing and how its potential can be realised. Considering its status as a County Town, the physical extent of the town centre is quite limited, when compared to most other County towns. Also there has been little consolidation in the central area in terms of any mixed-use or residential development, despite the existence of large vacant/derelict sites. Like many towns, the environment is also made inhospitable through chronic traffic congestion.

Developing one line of approach is unlikely to uncork the problem. Keeping in mind the 'Infrastructure of Place' we need to think across social, cultural, and economic themes and develop an integrated framework. This kind of integrated approach is very well illustrated in the case of McAuley Place, where the old infrastructure of convent buildings in a town-centre location, houses town-café, Arts hub, and Community Centre, around apartment buildings for older citizens with the aim of placing them in the heart of a vibrant urban community. We can also take inspiration from other towns. The recently completed Round-Tower gardens, museum, and Happy-Pear café in the centre of Clondalkin is an exceptionally creative re-imagining and re-use of fossilized historical infrastructure, which could inspire our approach to St David's Castle in Naas.

Questions
In reflecting on the challenge of the Town-centre in Naas, can you:
- Identify the positive qualities and assets which Naas town-centre has to offer? Outline some of the issues and challenges in moving to exploit the town-centre's potential?
- What might the shape of success look like in the future in terms of a vibrant centre, and can you prioritize some ideas on how we might get there?

Theme 6. Public Spaces and Urban Structure

Included in the public domain or public realm of a town are the streets, urban squares, and hard urban spaces, as well as the parks and water bodies to which citizens have access. A high-quality public realm plays a key role in generating a sense of unity and inter-connection and helps foster pride and nurture a rich public life. When you live in a town for any length of time, you begin to form a mental map of the spatial layout of the town and of how the public realm connects different local areas. The central areas tend to form the backbone of the public realm.

In Naas the central spine of Main St comes easily to mind, which includes Fairgreen, extends to Market Square, and continues on to include Poplar Square. Along this spine different elements which make up the public realm can be observed; paving [including carriageway] street furniture, lighting, planting, and art. Also important is the quality of the enclosing streetscape, with many buildings dating from the early to mid 19th Century. Significant elements outside of this area include the splendid environment of the canal, the amenity lakes by the hospital, and the generously scaled park in Monread, slowly reaching maturity.

The extensive development of Naas over recent decades has produced both significant population increase and dynamic economic development. While jobs and housing are welcome, the overall pattern of development has contributed to fragmentation, and resulted in a public domain which lacks cohesion and legibility. In meeting what is probably the greatest challenge in urban planning in Naas, i.e. to generate creative inter-connection between the arc of peripheral development and the town-centre, there is great scope for a public realm strategy to play a central role.

The challenge here is to generate a public realm vision, made up of strategic routes and key public spaces, which builds on the legacy of the traditional public realm of Naas, incorporates the infrastructure of the canals, and engenders a powerful sense of unity between the heart of Naas and the town's new and emerging neighbourhoods. The public realm can also incorporate a creative response to cycling, by interfacing a town network with the glorious hinterland of Naas, and harnessing the tourist and recreational potential offered by the Dublin-Sallins/Naas Greenway.

Questions
In reflecting on the theme of public space, public realm and urban structure in Naas, can you:

- Identify any existing assets, platforms and achievements?

- Prioritize key issues and challenges?

- Outline what might be the shape of success in a Naas public realm of the future, and present

  some ideas on how we might get there?

Theme 7. Movement and Infrastructure

The philosophy of accommodating vehicular traffic has meant that for most of the 20th Century, towns and cities have bent over backwards to facilitate access for the automobile and commercial traffic. This has had a very negative impact on the quality of urban environments, where the public domain of streets and public spaces have been eroded by car-parking, and building fabric demolished to provide for road-widening. Ever-increasing levels of congestion also handicap local business and create serious health risks from air pollution. The carbon emissions are also driving us ever closer to catastrophic climate change.

In this context there has been much debate about the relationship of the car to urban environments. It is now accepted that the endless provision of road infrastructure to facilitate the car is counterproductive.

The progressive view is that we need more investment in public transport, and that we need to redesign our streets and public spaces to achieve a better balance in favour of walkers, cyclists, and thus enhance the public life and appeal of our towns.

In the context of Naas, we are fortunate to be connected to National Rail, and to enjoy a pivotal position on the motorway network. Like many Irish towns however, we rely on a limited traditional radial road network to facilitate local movement. The fragmentation of uses along the periphery, combined with major residential development, and the need to access schools and services, has put great pressure on this traditional road network leading to chronic and unsustainable congestion.

If we reflect on the qualities that we would wish for Naas in 2040 as a progressive and successful County town, would it be reasonable to assume that movement as a sector is there to serve the town, rather than vice-versa.

Would it be also reasonable to assume a greater alignment between a successful culture of public transport, walking and cycling, and that an integrated and attractive public domain would enable these alignments.

Finally could we also anticipate not the removal of the car, but a more designed and managed strategy of access and restriction, supported by a consensus in public behaviour.

Questions

The challenge therefore is:
- To see what positive achievements and platforms we have to build on?

- To prioritize some issues and challenges we face?, and

- To put forward some key ideas in how we might meet the challenge of designing a movement infrastructure for Naas which sustains economy and underpins quality of life?