

# BIRR CREATIVE COURT

A SCOPING  
REPORT ON THE  
POTENTIAL OF  
BIRR  
COURTHOUSE

DRAFT

Birr 20:20 Vision

05 19



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland

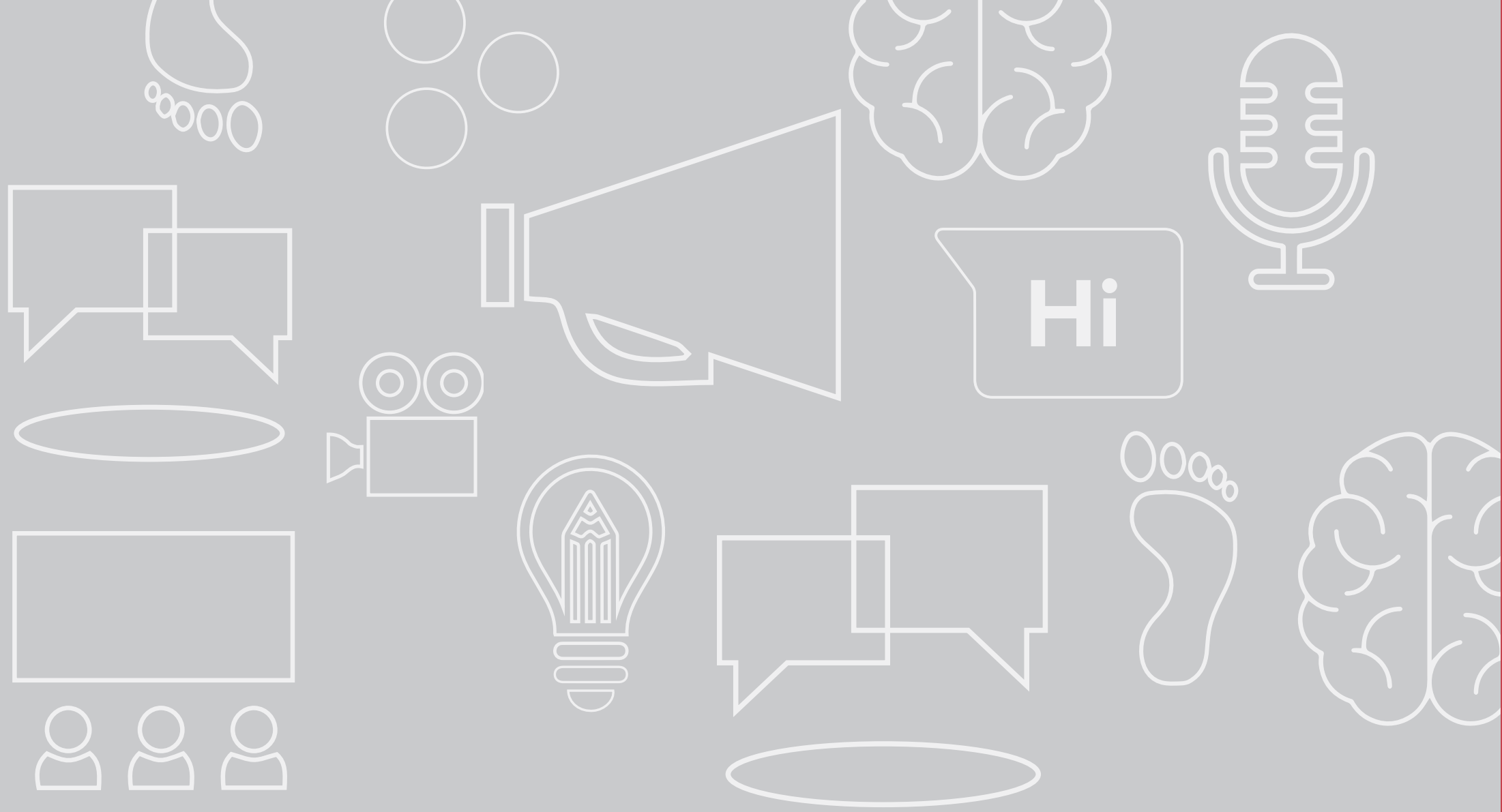
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OUR VISION

**Birr Creative Court is an exciting opportunity to provide accessible creative space in a heritage town and to facilitate sustainable collaboration between local and visiting professional practitioners, and the wider community, in the pursuit of creative excellence.**





## THANK YOU

*We would like to thank the very many contributors, listed below, who gave generously of their time, expertise and information.*

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Hazel Green, Bramber Studio	Therry Rudin, Damer House Gallery

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Birr Creative Court is the name assigned to a project to refurbish and re-purpose the Birr Courthouse on Emmet Street into a centre for creative professional practitioners in the visual, performing and digital arts to live and work, striving for excellence, with peer and community support.

This scoping report sets out in nine chapters what the Birr Creative Court project hopes to achieve and why we believe that the conditions exist to make it a sustainable and successful venture. It is the result of an extensive eight month process of consultation and engagement with the project steering committee, Birr 2020 Directors and the wider cultural community of Birr. It includes a study of similar projects in Ireland and England from which key learning has been extracted and applied to the Birr project.

The report has been commissioned by Birr 2020 Vision Company with funding gratefully received from Offaly Local Development Company. It has been authored and produced by Louise Browne and Associates who were appointed by the Steering Committee following a competitive tendering process.

## VISION

Birr Creative Court is an exciting opportunity to provide accessible creative space in a heritage town and to facilitate sustainable collaboration between local and visiting professional practitioners, and the wider community, in the pursuit of creative excellence.

This section also includes acknowledgements of those who have assisted in the content of this report.

## AIMS

The aims of the project scope are set out in five points:

- 1 The Birr Creative Court Scoping Report is the outcome of an eight- month process designed to gather the views of a wide range of people on the potential re-use of Birr Courthouse as a cultural space.
- 2 The project is about the development of a shared creative space in Birr.
- 3 Birr and the wider region is home to a wide mix of artists, creative practitioners, performers, entrepreneurs and innovators who contribute to a vibrant arts and culture scene.
- 4 There is significant demand for a Creative Hub in Birr.
- 5 The project provides an opportunity to re-purpose and care for a significant heritage property in the town.





## INTRODUCTION - 1

The Introduction summarizes the background to the project from its genesis in 2014 and elaborates on its benefits to the town and hinterland of Birr as well as what Birr itself has to offer in terms of its heritage and cultural life.

## OUR APPROACH - 2

The Steering Committee met with Louise Browne shortly after her appointment to provide guidance on the project and on the inclusivity of the consultation process. A visit to the Courthouse was arranged and assistance was offered in terms of names and contact details. There followed a series of one-to-one strategic conversations, focus group sessions, a publicly advertised participative workshop and public presentation of the draft strategy under the auspices of Birr 20:20. Study visits were also made to a number of similar arts centres to find out what learning might be applied to Birr. Following the public presentation, further input was sought from Offaly Local Development Company – in particular those officers working specifically within the Birr area; Offaly Local Enterprise Office; Laois Offaly Education and Training Board as well as St Brendan's Community School, Birr.

## FOUNDATIONS - 3

This chapter provides the policy framework for our proposals, drawing on the Government's Creative Ireland strategic programme and the role of Offaly County Council in its implementation at county level. The two key pillars are Enabling Creativity in every

Community and Investing in our Creative and Cultural infrastructure. The first will be realised through the ripple effect of resident artists working in, and engaging with, the community and communicating with local schools. The second will turn an unused protected structure into valuable cultural infrastructure that will benefit not just individual creativity, but also the vigorous festival life of the town, currently based in and around the Birr Theatre and Arts Centre which is chronically short of space.

## BIRR – 4

In a novel diagram, the cultural 'ecosystem' of Birr is set out, showing the full range of cultural resources, ideas, people and spaces, and how these interconnect to produce a rich cultural pasture that will nourish the Creative Court and keep it anchored within the community. Birr Castle and Demesne is of defining importance to the town. In recent years its history and beauty have been successfully exploited by the Birr Scientific and Heritage Foundation which recently became the most western station of the European low frequency radio telescope (iLOFAR). The track record of the town is then reviewed showing how both private and public resources have been utilised over the years to foster cultural ventures and re-purpose heritage buildings. This has all built up local knowledge, experience and pride in the town and its heritage, and has fostered a positive attitude to cultural initiatives.

A number of these initiatives have centered on a wide-ranging festival programme based in the Birr Theatre and Arts Centre which is summarized in the remaining section of this





chapter. The performance spaces in the Creative Court, and smaller rooms for workshops, would add much-needed facilities for these festivals.

#### EXPERIENCE FROM ELSEWHERE – 5

This chapter describes a number of successful cultural re-purposing projects that provide case studies for the Creative Court project. One of these, in Bristol, UK, is quite similar to the Birr proposal though larger in scale. It has acted as a magnet to creative practitioners to such an extent that Bristol is now drawing international creative artists to work there, attracted by a lower cost of living and supportive cultural ambience. In a smaller way, Birr, it is argued here, has these same attributes, perhaps to an even richer degree.

We then focus on Birr itself, which recently has presented its own case study of a successful creative digital art initiative based in the Edit Shed, Birr. This scheme, jointly funded by Offaly County Council and the Trench Trust, has secured equipment and recurrent funding for two animation residencies per year for five years. It is now in its second year and already a resident from year one has decided to live in Birr and launch his career from there. The positive experience of year one has more than proved the validity of the concept and has added urgency to finding an appropriate building as soon as possible.

The chapter ends with some comments about funding sources for public and private studios and elaborates on the practical issues that will determine a successful residency. Two of the

most important are the quality of the space and security of tenure for the duration of the residency.

#### THE COURTHOUSE PROPOSITION – 6

Chapter 6 sets out in detail what we are calling the Courthouse Proposition or “the proposition”, beginning with the concept and the location and then moving on to a detailed description of the spaces and their possible use in a re-purposed building. In keeping with the requirements of a protected structure, it is not intended to alter the existing spaces, it is more a question of ensuring the fabric of the existing structure, providing adequate services and re-decorating. The cells will lend themselves for use as studios, particularly digital studios, but also for the visual arts. Larger rooms can serve as meeting rooms and workshops.

Four broad categories of activity are envisaged: Visual Arts, Performing Arts, Digital Arts and what we have called Curious Minds. This refers particularly to the use of the courtroom as a forum for debate and discussion, for lectures, and community activities. It will be shared with the creative residents who will use it for presentation of their work for criticism and review, or, in the case of performing artists, for recitals of music and poetry.

We attach particular importance to creating an attractive recreational area where residents can meet and relax and exchange ideas. Such areas are essential for cross-fertilising creativity.

### THE BOXING CLUB – 7

The Birr Boxing Club is an initiative of the Birr Traveller and Settled People's Group. The club has been successfully established but needs a permanent home in fit-for-purpose space. It is proposed to build a stand-alone structure in the Courthouse yard that will provide this home and at the same time be available to other community groups for hire when not in use by the Boxing Club. Separate funding streams will be sought. It may however overlap with the Creative Court by providing a flat-floor area for dance at certain times of the week.

### CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS – 8

Having set out the proposal, it is pertinent to state the range of conditions that will have to be considered if the project is to succeed. We have set these out in a number of bi-modal paragraphs, each beginning with a statement of the condition and ending with a statement as to how we believe the proposition will fulfil that condition. The conditions are: a clear vision, an avoidance of duplication; a unique draw; ensuring sufficient capacity; developing critical mass; embracing diverse disciplines; securing key partners; promoting community engagement; demonstrating strong governance and making the most of the location.

### NEXT STEPS – 9

The report ends with a diagram setting out the next steps using standard project management principles. We have identified five broad phases and the steps and inputs to each: Project Initiation; Project Scoping; Project Preparation; Project Implementation; Occupation and Management.





# Aims

1

**The Birr Creative Court Scoping Report is the outcome of an eight-month process designed to gather the views of a wide range of people on the potential re-use of Birr Courthouse as a cultural space.**

It builds on earlier work done by the creative community locally and presents the case for the development of a creative hub to support young artists to establish themselves in their chosen field. The project team reported at regular intervals to the study steering group - arts, culture, sporting and heritage interests drawn from the wider membership of the Birr 20:20 Vision Company - who provided insights, feedback, direction and advice. The report was funded through assistance from Offaly Local Development Company.

2

**The project aims to develop a shared creative space in Birr.**

The ambition is to create a dynamic, flexible and affordable space to serve the town and to expand the wider region's diverse community of artists and creative practitioners. The building will support the cross pollination of ideas, sectors and projects under one roof thereby nurturing further collaboration and innovation. It will also become a dynamic space for the community to gather, learn and be inspired. With support from public and private sectors, the community at large and the energy and enthusiasm of the creative community in particular, Birr Creative Court will position itself to meet a growing need for creative space while at the same time breath new life and purpose into a significant heritage building in much need of looking after.

3

**The project will draw upon a wide mix of creative artists, performers and innovators in and around Birr to draw creative practitioners from Ireland and abroad into a vibrant arts and culture scene.**

It is just such a creative milieu that can provide the supportive and stimulating environment needed to draw in creative practitioners from Ireland and abroad to pursue excellence in their chosen medium.

## 4

**The project will meet a significant demand for a Creative Hub in Birr.**

During the engagement process the number one priority expressed by the community was the need for affordable and accessible cultural spaces for a range of creative and artistic practices. A creative hub would address a number of challenges Birr faces in terms of growing its cultural infrastructure and nurturing its creative potential. Particular needs include the lack of affordable and available rehearsal, performance and tuition space; the lack of studio and creation space and limited opportunities for cross-disciplinary creative practice. In scoping the strategic feasibility of a shared creative hub the report concludes that there is significant interest, demand and need for such a facility.

## 5

**The project will provide a sustainable future for a significant heritage property in the town.**

In addressing both the heritage property and its immediate setting, including the ancillary structures within its curtilage, the project will also provide the impetus to develop a permanent home for Birr Boxing Club as a separate project (see chapter 7). More generally it will focus attention on this particular part of the town and animate a key approach road to Birr.

**BIRR CREATIVE COURT:  
Key imperatives**

- a focus on excellence
- clarity of concept
- strong social engagement
- affordability
- clear income streams
- strong collaboration
- a dedicated manager







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01

# Introduction



## 01 INTRODUCTION

*The Birr Creative Court Project had its genesis in a public meeting on 27 April 2015 sponsored by Birr 2020, organised by Offaly Co. Council Arts Office and addressed by Jenny Haughton on support for the creative arts in Birr. A Steering Group was established in 2017 when Jenny Haughton again attended to advise the group on how to progress the project. Following that meeting, discussions commenced with Offaly Local Development Company on a scoping report.*

As specified in the brief for the study, a key purpose in undertaking the work was to continue to promote Birr as a Midlands focus for socially engaged creative arts. Re-using the old Courthouse would not only add to the heritage infrastructure of Birr as one of Ireland's foremost heritage towns, but would support visual art, film and media, photography, design, music and dance, poetry and literature, as

well as developing links between the arts and future science and technology activities located in Birr Castle. It would attract artists from the Midlands and nearby urban centres, including Dublin and Limerick, to develop their creative imagination in a supportive and stimulating environment, harnessing Birr's vibrant festival programme, and drawing inspiration from its rich historic heritage, nearby bogs and lakelands and local traditions. One of the benefits of the project would be to create opportunities for recent graduates to work in Birr, addressing a significant deficit in the Midlands generally and in Co Offaly in particular. Facilities in the refurbished Courthouse would be available at reasonable rates to local community groups for occasional, periodic or regular use depending on their needs. This would help to ensure broadly based and socially inclusive use of the facility on a sustainable basis.

Following a competitive tender process Louise Browne Associates was commissioned in July 2018 to undertake the scoping study.



02

## Our Approach



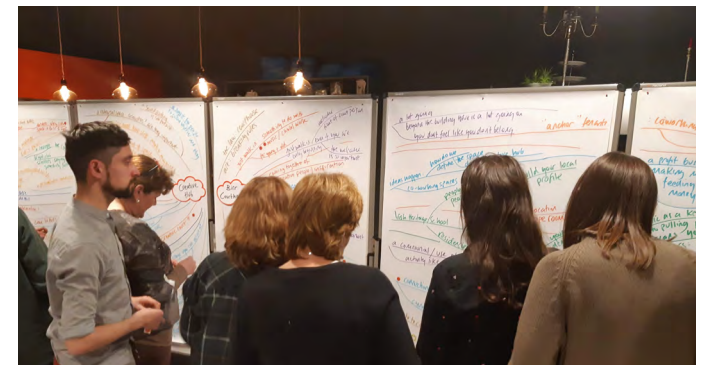
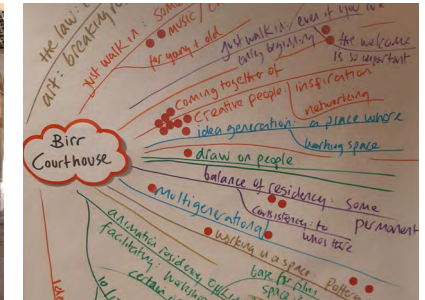
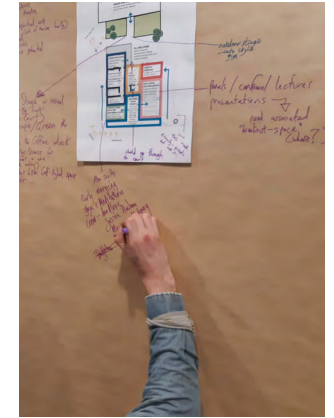
## 02 OUR APPROACH

*Two avenues of research were pursued during the preparation of this report.*

One avenue of research investigated a range of case studies to better understand, from the experience of others, the conditions for success in the development and operation of creative hub-type initiatives. Not all the case studies shared the same characteristics but where possible attention was focused on those which involved the re-purposing of heritage buildings whether privately and publicly owned; those who included the specific provision of live/work spaces for artists as well as those which catered for a range of artistic practices. Key initiatives included the Laois Arthouse Studios and Library, a former courthouse; the Island, Bristol, a former police station with basement cells; Callan Workhouse Union, a former workhouse; the Courthouse Arts Centre, Tinahealy, a former courthouse; Belmont Mill, Art & Craft Studios, Belmont, a former water-powered mill complex and Damer House Gallery, Roscrea, a former Georgian residence and subsequently used as an army barracks, a sanatorium and a local library.

The other avenue of research focused on the geography, policy context, disposition, stakeholders and cultural and creative assets in the study area of Birr as well as within its wider regional and national context. The methodology for the report was guided by the study brief and was informed at key stages by members of the

study steering group and the Birr 20:20 board members. It relied hugely on the input from a wide range of contributors, listed on page 3, whose ideas, experience and expertise was sourced through a series of one-to-one strategic conversations, focus group sessions, a publicly advertised participative workshop as well as a presentation, under the auspices of Birr 20:20, of the draft strategy to members of the public. Following the public presentation, further input was sought from Offaly Local Development Company – in particular those officers working specifically within the Birr area; Offaly Local Enterprise Office; Laois Offaly Education and Training Board as well as St Brendan's Community School, Birr.



03

# Foundations



## 03 FOUNDATIONS

### POLICY FRAMEWORK

“

Creative Communities provide opportunities for people, who never thought that they might become involved, to benefit from their own creativity, share their talents, enjoy themselves and let their imaginations grow.<sup>1</sup>

The vision of Creative Ireland and the Culture and Creativity Plan for Offaly 2018 – 2022 is that every person living in Ireland will have the opportunity to fully realise his or her creative potential. This vision is being pursued through ‘five pillars’ (Figure 1).

In line with the Arts Council of Ireland’s Strategy 2016 – 2025 ‘Making Great Art Work, Leading the Development of the Arts in Ireland’, participation and access are central to the vision as is connecting artists and other creative producers to communities.

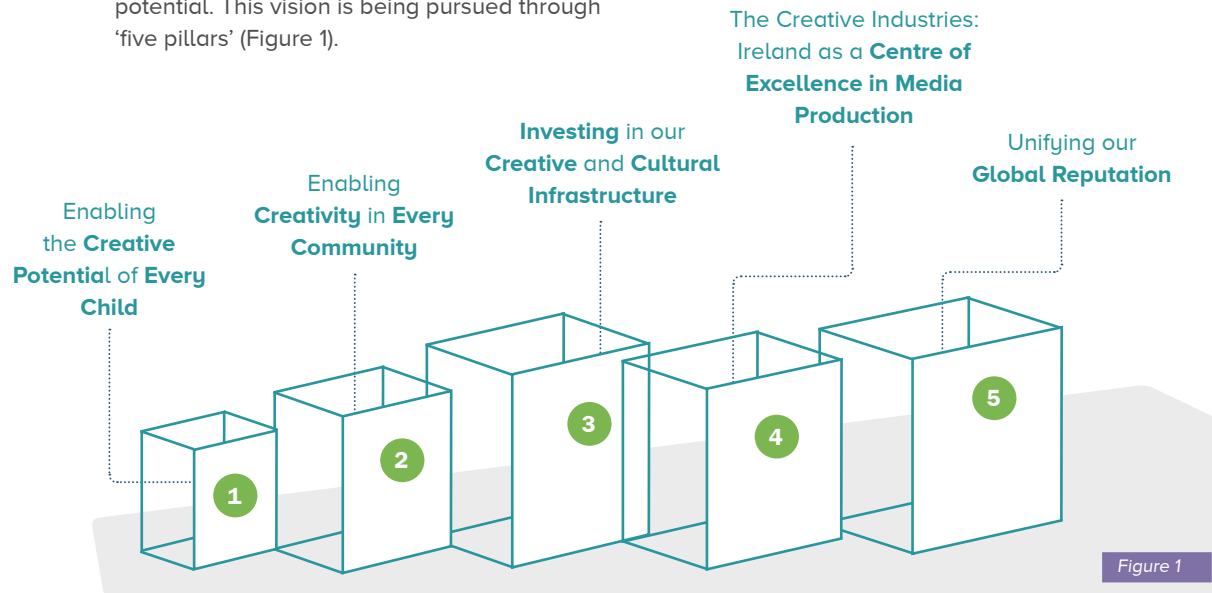
While Offaly County Council’s Culture Team has the mandate to lead on ‘Enabling the Creativity in Every Community’, the local authority is also committed to collaborating with communities, groups and agencies to assist with developing and delivering the other four pillars, including ‘Investing in our Creative and Cultural Infrastructure’.

Within the broader context of culture, “the arts” include visual media (painting, print-making, drawing, sculpture, crafts, and video), performing arts (theatre, music, song, dance, and literary arts such as spoken word). “Cultural industry” is an umbrella term for areas of creative work and cultural production, such as advertising, architecture and interior design, art and antique markets, artisan crafts, fashion design, industrial design, film and video, performing arts, new media, print media and publishing, radio and television and visual media.

#### CREATIVE IRELAND

Creative Ireland is an Irish Government strategic programme designed to promote individual, community and national wellbeing. The core proposition is that participation in cultural activity drives personal and collective creativity, with significant implications for individual and societal wellbeing and achievement.

Cultural resources and assets can include libraries, museums, galleries, natural and cultural heritage sites and activities as well as and intangible heritage.



1 Yvonne Farrell, Architect, Grafton Architects



## CREATIVE AND CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN BIRR

Creative and cultural infrastructure or put more simply 'cultural space' is the space that surrounds art. In assessing both the current availability and future needs of Birr in terms of cultural space, it is important to understand the type and nature of provision. Birr's current and future needs can be summarised under six general categories.

- **Arts presentation spaces:** the lobby of Birr Theatre and Arts Centre is used to host regular visual art displays; Birr Castle courtyard has a room used for occasional art exhibitions and the Castle courtyard itself hosted a son et lumière show during Vintage and Arts Week 2018; the Birr Technology Centre hosted a large Vintage/Arts Week art and photography exhibition in the same year. The Council premises in the old Mercy Convent hosts smaller exhibitions from time to time.
- Spaces dedicated to **artists' creative process** and the **creation of artistic product:** the Edit Shed produces film and animation; the Tin Jug Studio produces art. Various rooms around the town in churches and hotels are currently used for music rehearsal. The Theatre and Arts Centre is used for rehearsals and recitals when not in use for theatre/cinema productions. Local visual artists work mainly from their own homes.



Animation Residents speaking to local schoolchildren in the Edit Shed, 2018



Jock Nicholl, local artist at work, 2018

- Publicly accessible spaces that supply the **means of creative production**. With the possible exception of the Edit Shed, Birr does not currently have specific outlets for the means of creative production.
- **Arts training and arts education spaces:** Currently, such spaces are found in Birr's schools. The Theatre and Arts Centre is a multifunctional space the provides education and training opportunities as a bi-product of its festivals and performance programme, e.g. master-classes attached to its Music festival, Community Workshops, Mentorships, Show and Tells. The Tin Jug Studio runs art classes. The Edit Shed previews/edits films.
- **Artists live/work spaces:** Birr currently does not have public spaces where artists can live and work.
- Spaces primarily utilised by **cultural heritage organisations:** meetings of the Birr Historical Society and other cultural societies currently take place in hotel rooms and/or church halls, all of which have their limitations.

It is clear from the above that Birr lacks public spaces for creative practitioners and cultural activities. The Courthouse offers a wide range of spaces of different sizes and configurations that would answer this need and allow Birr to develop a vibrant creative hub.







04

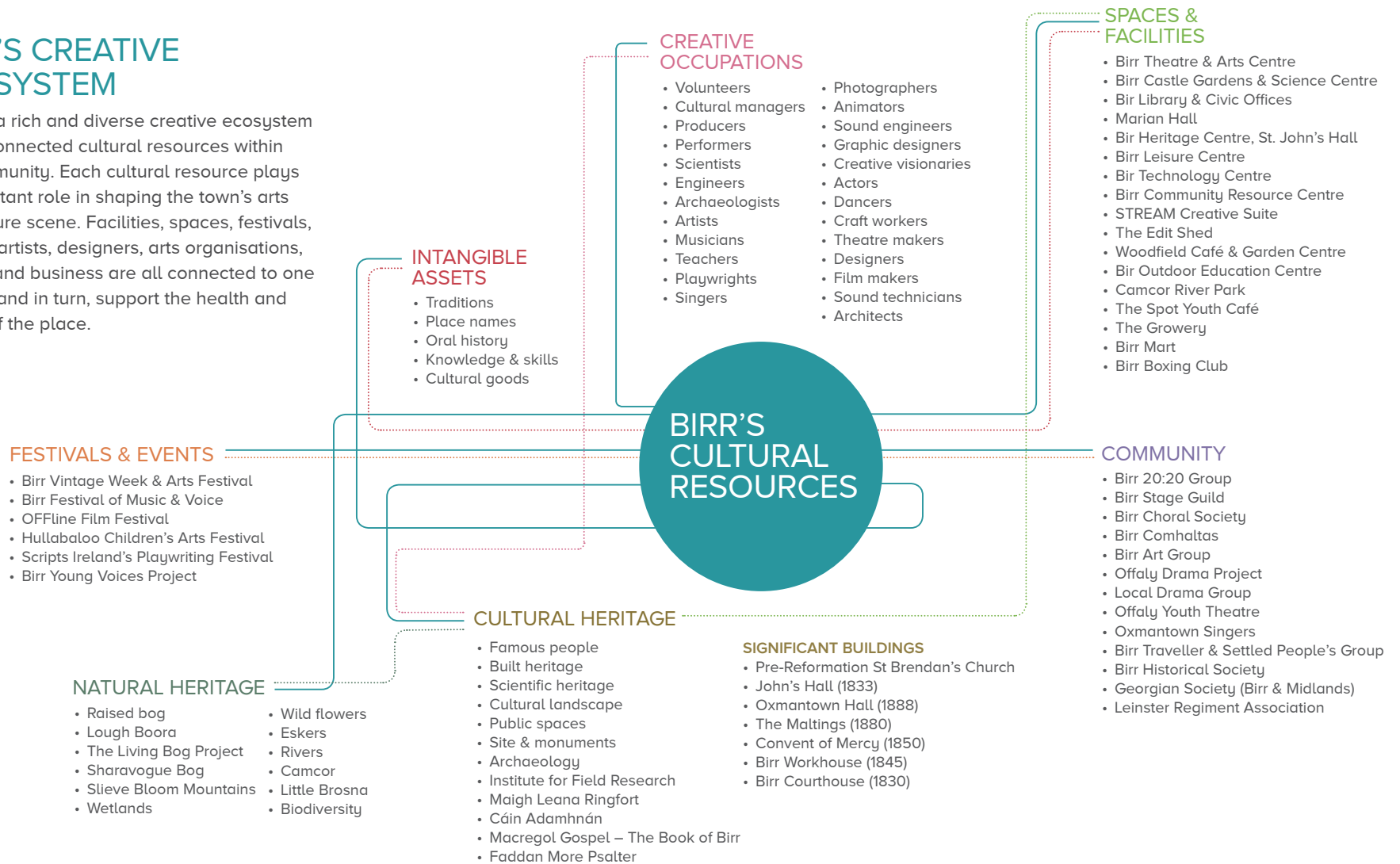
Birr



## 04 BIRR

## BIRR'S CREATIVE ECOSYSTEM

Birr has a rich and diverse creative ecosystem of interconnected cultural resources within the community. Each cultural resource plays an important role in shaping the town's arts and culture scene. Facilities, spaces, festivals, makers, artists, designers, arts organisations, tourism and business are all connected to one another and in turn, support the health and vitality of the place.



Birr, with its population of 5,741 (CSO 2016) is a designated Irish Heritage Town boasting a carefully preserved Georgian heritage. With its graceful, wide malls and elegant buildings, the town is home to Birr Castle, Gardens and Science Centre which is a significant tourism attraction in the area and displays the Great Telescope, the 'Leviathan', which was completed in 1845.

The Birr Castle Scientific and Heritage Foundation manages the grounds, gardens and Science Centre of Birr Castle. It has worked to make the grounds of Birr Castle a profitable enterprise while investing in their upkeep. It has opened up links with the town and has brought in a professional management team that has made the enterprise profitable. It has transformed the Castle into a real positive asset for the town. One example would be the Castle Yard and café that has become a key festival venue. Another is the i-LOFAR radio telescope which, after a gap of 150 years, again places Birr at the centre of international astronomy research, providing access to Big Data and potentially opening up high speed broadband access for the town. More recently, the establishment of the STREAM - Science, Technology, Research, Engineering, Arts and Maths - Creative Suite in Birr Technology Centre, has sought to maximise the economic opportunities for the Midland Region from the i-LOFAR telescope.

Birr Theatre and Arts Centre - purchased by private philanthropy in partnership with Offaly County Council in the 1990s – was restored by the anchor tenant (Birr Stage Guild) and has been running a self-sustaining cultural performance programme ever since.

## Birr's track record in restoring and re-purposing its heritage assets is well established.

Apart from the significant restoration of Oxmantown Hall, now the Birr Theatre and Arts Centre, some other achievements include;

- the conversion of the Convent of Mercy, a Pugin designed architectural gem on the Wilmer Road, into Birr Civic Offices and Library;
- St Brendan's Market, a unique gable-fronted building on Emmet Street and a former church hall built in 1845 is now in public use;
- The Stables Restaurant at 6 Oxmantown Mall, where the conversion of an exterior outbuilding has enabled a continuity of use which prevents endangerment from dereliction;
- a former Presbyterian church in John's Mall, built in c.1850, used at one point to house the town's public library, is now occupied as a private house;
- the Maltings, Castle Street where hops were malted, has been converted into a restaurant and shop;
- the former coach house on St Brendan's Street which is now home to the Tin Jug Studio - a private residence, gallery, artists' workspace and garden;

- St Brendan's Community School, which was awarded a grant in 2018 from the Getty Foundation's 'Keeping It Modern' scheme, to research its restoration and preservation. A rare example of modernism, it was the first building in Ireland to receive the accolade and stands alongside previous award winners including Frank Lloyd Wright's Price Tower Arts Centre in Oklahoma, USA and Walter Gropius's Bauhaus building in Dessau, Germany.

## Locally based knowledge, experience and pride in their heritage town underpins and sustains voluntary effort.

Birr's cultural resources go well beyond what is portrayed in its achievements to date. Its key strength lies in the disposition of people locally to effect change. This is a characteristic not easily replicated. It has not emerged overnight, but has taken years of experience and know-how to build a local mass body of expertise in the development, management and promotion of the town's cultural ambitions. Birr's cultural strengths and disposition can be summarised as follows;

- **Cultural and sporting vibrancy** – an active and progressive arts, science, culture and sporting scene including the Birr Arts Club, the Birr Photography Club, the Birr Historical Society, the Birr Boxing Club, the Rugby Club, the GAA and the Birr Town soccer club. There is also an airfield and a swimming pool.
- **Cultural assets** – a remarkable built heritage in the town including Birr Castle and Gardens,

a theatre and arts centre, two churches and a Wesleyan chapel, a number of small scale privately owned creative spaces and some vacant heritage properties.

- **Cultural leadership** – a number of experienced people in the arts and sciences willing to give leadership to creative practice and cultural expression.
- **Cultural reputation** – a strong image and identity which is supported by creative programming and showcasing.
- **Cultural participation** – an ambition to enhance access for and outreach to key audiences, in particular a younger cohort.
- **Cultural management** – a clear and strong track record in venue operation and management.
- **Cultural capacity** – a significant reliance on volunteers both at a governance level and at an operational level; good access to highly supportive private sector funding; ongoing requirement for funding support for programming and for particular initiatives.
- **Cultural policy** – a receptive enabling environment in terms of cultural policy at local authority and at national level.

## BIRR'S FESTIVAL PROGRAMME

Birr has a well-established festival programme that extends from May to November. These festivals include the longest running festival in Ireland – the Birr Vintage Week and Arts Festival – as well as Hullabaloo! Children's Arts Festival, Birr Festival of Music and Voice, Scripts Ireland's Playwriting Festival and the OFFline Film Festival. These all bring a steady stream of visitors to the town and enliven its cultural life.

However for those festivals that utilise multiple venues, finding suitable locations is an ongoing challenge that is increasing as the festivals themselves grow in numbers and scope.

## BIRR THEATRE AND ARTS CENTRE

A key achievement for Birr was the restoration of Oxmantown Hall. Purpose built as a Theatre and Concert Hall in 1888 and in continual use as a performance space up until the 1980s when it began to lose out to better equipped venues, it fell into disuse and lay derelict for a number of years. With support from a range of partners matched by significant local effort it was fully restored, reopened in 2011 as Birr Theatre and Arts Centre and, in 2017, welcomed its 200,000th customer. Apart from hosting leading national and local theatre, dance and music companies, the Theatre plays a central role in facilitating an expanding festival programme in the town.

The festivals in Birr use the Theatre and Arts Centre as the venue for all major events. The Theatre has collapsible seating so can be configured as a café style venue or an auditorium. However, some events need more and different kinds of space for associated activities like master classes, mentorship sessions, show and tell sessions, exhibitions and workshops. If the Courthouse were available,

it could be used to expand these festivals and host associated workshops at different times of the year, for example, stand-alone vocal master classes associated with the Festival of Music, or choral workshops for Birr Young Voices. With Birr Theatre as the only 'bespoke' arts space in the town, timetabling becomes very difficult, advanced booking of other space depends on goodwill and is subject to the business imperatives of other venues.



## BIRR VINTAGE WEEK & ARTS FESTIVAL

Birr Vintage Week and Arts Festival celebrated its 50th anniversary in August 2018 and the 20th year as a combined Vintage and Arts Festival. It is the main showcase for the visual arts in Birr. In the 2018 festival, the art exhibition extending over two floors of Birr Technology Centre incorporating the work of the Birr Art Club, the Birr Photography Club and established artists nationally. There were art workshops for children and adults throughout the week and a Heritage Trail of Vintage Luminaries captured in visually immersive installations using projection mapping and audio soundscapes in different locations throughout the town.

Birr Vintage Week and Arts Festival is Birr's biggest community festival of the year but it is very short of venues. The courthouse would enable the Committee to programme in advance far more effectively. Space is needed for workshops, exhibitions and performances.



## BIRR FESTIVAL OF MUSIC

Birr Festival of Music presents Irish and International artists in concerts and recitals throughout the four-day May bank holiday festival. The core purpose of the festival is to support young emerging talent. It introduces children to choral singing through the Birr Young Voices project supported by Music Generation Ireland.

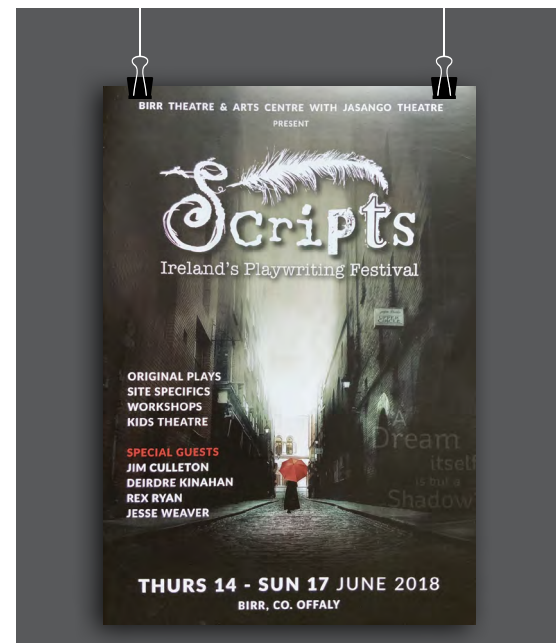
The Courthouse would add another venue to the festival and provide a simultaneous venue for young performers, master classes and a festival office.



## SCRIPTS

Scripts was established as a national playwriting festival in 2013, providing a unique opportunity for young and established playwrights to have their work critically appraised and performed. Seven days of professional mentoring merges into four days of performance of a wide range of works in different venues throughout the town. Each year, its national profile continues to grow within the drama world with links being made with The Abbey Theatre, The Irish Writer's Centre, Listowel Writer's Week and RTE Drama Department.

Scripts would benefit greatly from the rehearsal and performance potential of the Courthouse for small scale productions.





## HULLABALOO!

Offaly's Children's Arts Festival was established in 2007 by Offaly County Council Arts Office and Birr Theatre & Arts Centre. Approximately 1,500 children and their families participate in a host of workshops and live performances in Birr, Clara and Edenderry extending over four days in November, coinciding with the mid-term break. It is specifically designed to stimulate children's imagination and creativity.

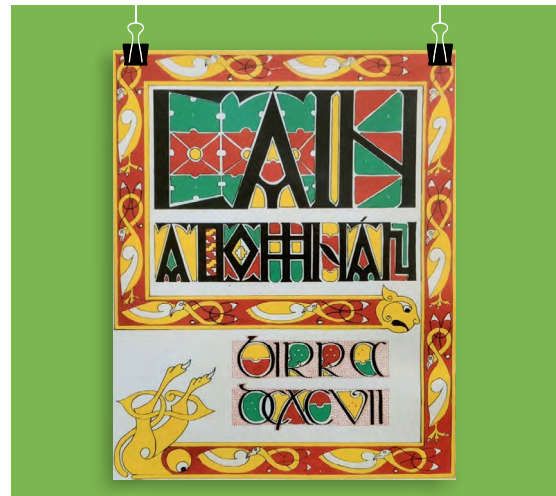
Creative practitioners in the Courthouse would have an ideal opportunity to engage with children in the 'nuts and bolts' of their trade and children would have a valuable opportunity to see real art and creativity taking place. Last year Birr Young Voices contributed singing, action and fun to the festival.



## CÁIN ADOMNÁIN

Adomnán, the ninth abbot of Iona, is well known for his biography of St Columba.

The Cáin Adomnáin or the 'Law of the Innocents' was publicly declared and adopted at a gathering of secular and clerical authorities in Birr in 697. It was attended by the highest kings and ecclesiastics in the land, including 'king of Ireland', Loingsech mac Oengus, a kinsman of Adomnán, and Fland Febla, the 'sage-bishop' of Armagh. It is the earliest known attempt to codify the protection of non-combatants in time of war. It has great relevance to more modern legal concepts such as genocide and crimes against humanity. Plans are being developed for a series of legal conferences that will invite Irish and international jurists to consider some of the challenges to human rights in today's world. The re-envisioned Birr Courthouse would be an ideal venue for such a conference, having historic and current resonance.



## THE EDIT SHED

Founded in 2007, Hello Camera is dedicated to creating innovative visual material which includes feature length production, short film production, commercial and corporate projects as well as facilitating community involvement in filmmaking. Based in The Edit Shed, Hello Camera also manages the OFFline Film Festival.

Working with the OFFline, Offaly County Council initiated Mini Movies in 2012 which brings high quality film production skills to primary and secondary school pupils in workshops held over a number of days leading up to the OFFline Film Festival.

The Edit Shed could move into the Courthouse as an anchor tenant paying a commercial rent. Its animation residents would benefit enormously from being co-located with other creative professionals.



05

## Experience from Elsewhere





## 05 EXPERIENCE FROM ELSEWHERE

### THE CASE STUDIES

*The purpose in identifying case studies was to better understand, from the experience of others, the conditions for success in the development and operation of a Creative Hub at the Courthouse.*

Guided by the Steering Group, a number of initiatives were chosen to ensure that a range of characteristics, broadly similar to those envisaged for the Courthouse initiative, were represented. However, as the work progressed, the initial case study list was further supplemented in response to the insights and pointers provided by key consultees during the course of the assignment. In all cases the projects investigated involve;

- the re-purposing of heritage properties
- they are concerned with providing spaces for a range of creative practices and activities
- they consider the provision of workspace and
- they touch on the provision of residency programmes.



The key case studies are presented here along with the key learnings. Further case studies are detailed in the Appendices to this report. Also within this section, in light of the requirement within the brief to 'review the potential for the provision of appropriate accommodation to support creative art residency programmes' we examine the wider context of studio space / workspace for artists.



## CALLAN WORKHOUSE UNION (CWU)

*Since 2013, artist and designer-led projects have been curating the use of and bringing meaning to the workhouse's new life, whilst all the time facilitating access for the public to this significant historic building in the town. CWU's work extends to projects that examine the future of rural towns, housing, civic infrastructure and the commons.*

Callan is a small town in Co. Kilkenny which has established itself as a centre for arts practice. Callan is home to numerous arts organisations including KCAT Art & Study Centre, Monkeyshine Theatre Company, Fennelly's, Equinox Theatre Company, Abhainn Rí Festival and Trasna Productions.

Callan Workhouse Union is an ever-developing shared space for art, design, research and community activities at Callan Workhouse. Callan Workhouse was built in 1840 under the Poor Law Act of 1838. Running during the summer of 2013, Workhouse Assembly was a twelve-day research workshop exploring the history and future development possibilities of a semi-derelict wing of the Workhouse. With the prospect of the renovation, restoration and development of this wing, Workhouse Assembly was developed as a project to inform this work and ensure that whatever resulted would be meaningful for the building, its history, the town and the diverse Callan community. Workhouse Assembly included over thirty participants, with backgrounds in architecture, art, heritage, geography, photography, writing and conservation. Between July 31st and August 11th





2013, LiD Architecture ran daily workshops to make a tapestried map of the local area, and artist Gareth Kennedy worked with a group to make a lime render to coat part of the workhouse's interior.

'Meet You at The Green' was an International Residency Programme offered by Create - the national development agency for collaborative arts in Ireland- and the Collaborative Arts Partnership Programme (CAPP) in partnership with Callan Workhouse Union and Trasna Productions. CAPP's Residency Programme seeks to explore new models of participation and cooperation and to encourage exchange of artist's methodologies and practice in context. The overall goal of CAPP is to improve and open up opportunities for artists who are working collaboratively across Europe, by enhancing mobility and exchange whilst at the same time engaging new publics and audiences for collaborative practices.

Workhouse Union has a small dedicated library and research space. The library holds a selection of books and printed material, which relate to and inform the research and projects of Workhouse Union.



## THE CAPP CWU RESIDENCY

- Artist fee of €3,000
- Subsistence allowance of €840
- Return travel costs to Callan to a maximum value of €300
- Research materials budget €500
- 24hr access to a large spacious studio space and research library
- Accommodation within a share house with locally based artists, arts workers and local organisations across various disciplines
- Introduction to local artists and various community groups and organisations

The book and archive collection also focuses on the history and heritage of Callan and the Workhouse. Designed by LiD Architecture, the library is a stand-alone structure situated within a room in the Workhouse. The library is thematic – with wide-ranging research topics such as 'Place and Space', 'Landscape and Belonging', 'Community and Publics', 'Reading the Wild, Geography and Wandering', 'Radical Craft', and 'Housing the Social'. In time the Library will archive Workhouse Union's previous work, as well as printed materials relating to artists, designers, and organisations that it works closely with. The library is a central and important aspect of CWU's work and, importantly, visitors and researchers are encouraged to use it.



'Meet you at the green' - Residency Programme



## KEY LEARNING

- A multidisciplinary approach to exploring the options for future use
- An experimental approach to occupying the spaces – 'try it and see'
- A residency programme focused on new models of participation with a European reach
- The value of developing the archive / the library as the project develops so that the story can be told



## THE ISLAND, BRISTOL

*The Island is a self-funded, multi-use arts facility and creation centre based in the old police station in Bristol city centre. It hosts a wide variety of creative spaces from circus training, dance and rehearsal rooms, artists' studios, dark rooms to gallery space, recording and music production studios and a suite of early 20th century police cells.*

As the name suggests, the Island is a stand-alone centre of creativity and energy located in the city centre. As a venue, it has many unique event spaces and a can-do attitude. The Island is part of the Artspace Lifespace charity that recycles vacant, underused and problem properties into thriving creative resources. It offers vibrant programming of regular workshops, training classes, performances and events. Artists from all disciplines now occupy all spaces at The Island. The variety of its spaces allows people from all walks of life to host their own exhibitions, or start their own class or group, which creates a widely varied collection of artist led projects.

The Island is a core part of Bristol's art scene, having recently been involved with BS1 Open, Brisfest, Destination Bristol, Big Green Week, Mayfest and Bristol Biennial. The Island is rapidly becoming one of the key locations of choice to be involved in local art promotion.

As well as all this, The Island hosts around 79 working artists. All of these artists, described as the beating heart of the hub, are continually producing and showcasing new and engaging artwork. This has made The Island has one of the liveliest and thriving artist communities in Bristol. The studios are of varying sizes and range from large open spaces, to smaller solo studios, to converted cell studios, which are exclusively used by artists who work with sound and music. The Island attracts artists from all over Britain and further afield to live and work in the city.

## KEY LEARNING

- Creative programming of a range of different spaces – note in particular the activation of the cells
- The showcasing of new and engaging work – something always anticipated / something always happening
- A wide variety of creative disciplines embraced, including recording and music production
- A focus on artists' needs first
- Note the connection with the charity dedicated to recycling vacant, underused, problem properties
- Professionals are migrating in from elsewhere.

"The Island is unique. Not only does it offer a truly exciting space in which to stage work and respond to its heritage; it also fosters a community spirit and supports artwork. The Island is not driven solely by the bottom line but provides a home to a variety of independent artists, performers & events alike, in its eclectic mix of studio spaces, rehearsals rooms, conference facilities and workshops. Furthermore, The Island stands virtually alone in an artistic landscape where most venues place concern of self-image or reaction before the artists or events they support; The Island is different, it is home to the challenging, the creative, the alternative and the adventurous. The Island is alive. The Island makes art work."

T.Bacon – Live art performer & Curator

## THE LAOIS ARTHOUSE STUDIOS AND LIBRARY, STRADBALLY

*The Laois Arthouse is a workspace for artists, local, national and international. It is also an important point of contact for the general public to engage with artists through workshops, exhibitions and residencies.*

Opened in May 2011, this development was made possible by significant funding from the Department of Tourism, Culture and Sport, under the ACCESS 11 scheme. The refurbishment of the existing Courthouse building and its extension, cost in excess of €1.2million. Capital funding from the Department's scheme amounted to some €440,000. The ACCESS programme was a key element in the Government's regional art strategy over the period 2007 to 2013, whereby grant aid towards the development of arts and culture infrastructure around the country facilitated the development of integrated arts



"At the Heart Botanical" Exbo Launch

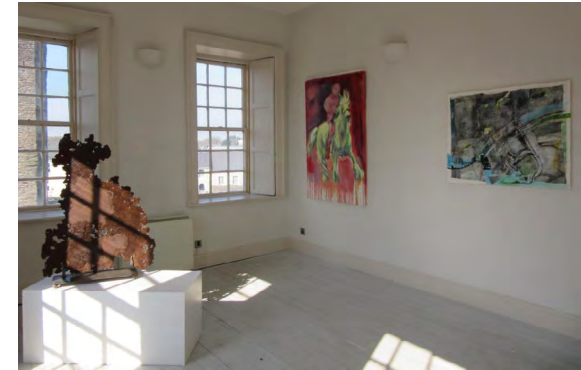
centres, theatres, and galleries as well as arts studios and performance spaces.

The facilities include a community library, four artists' studios and living accommodation, a small scale exhibition gallery, an equipped music rehearsal space, a kiln, and a garden space, complete with a commissioned Percentage for Art wall mounted artwork.

The process of setting up the artists' studios fostered and consolidated strategic links with the Arts Council of Ireland, the National College of Art and Design and the Craft Council of Ireland and with other artists' studios in Ireland and abroad. The Laois Arthouse – studios and gallery is managed directly by the Arts Office.

When it opened in 2011, one of the artists' studios, awarded under the Resident Artists' scheme, provided a significant opportunity to a recent graduate in fine art. This arrangement was funded through the Percent for Art scheme and was run in partnership with NCAD. The scheme provided a studio and accommodation for one year, and a fee of €10,000. The artist was selected on the basis of his/her practice and a proposal around community engagement. A change of focus was initiated in 2014 which, in continuing to utilise the scheme, offers shorter residencies of around three months' duration to professional artists. This has resulted in full occupancy of the studios.

Laois Arthouse runs projects on Plein Air painting, courses for adults in life drawing, botanical painting, and the commissioned Townscape project, which looked at homes in Stradbally. It will also run, in the summer



of 2019, a portraiture course with RHA artist, Una Sealy. The gallery programme is curated through open submission and by invitation. Six exhibitions are held annually.

The Arthouse hosts seasonal classes for children and courses to mark the Bealtaine festival, Culture Night, National Drawing day to name a few.

More recently it assisted in establishing an Artist Collective and monthly meetings are held in the gallery for artists to share their thoughts on practice and supporting each other.

## KEY LEARNING

- The role of public funding in project realisation
- The importance of establishing strategic links with national bodies - Arts Council of Ireland, the National College of Art and Design and the Craft Council of Ireland
- The emphasis placed on community engagement



## CASE STUDY IN BIRR

### OFFLINE ANIMATION RESIDENCIES

The animation residency programme is now recruiting for 2019, having successfully appointed two excellent young animators in 2018, one of whom has decided to move to Birr to work. He has rented accommodation in the town and will have access to the Edit Shed facilities on a semi-commercial basis. This will allow him to meet and collaborate with this year's animation residents. The second 2018 resident has developed a series of animated "stills" on the theme of the heritage of Birr and some of these will be used to add interest to the VisitBirr.ie and/or Birr Tidy Towns and/or Birr Castle websites. (Some have been used in this report)

The 2018 Residency included hosting visits by schools from as far away as Cavan and Dublin where students got to hear about the life of an animator and what it might take to prepare a portfolio for college. They also got to try their hand at creating simple but playful animations during their hours visiting the studio. In this way the residency can help and inspire future generations to learn about animation and aspire to enter the profession.

In time, It is expected that the animator residing in Birr will start his own studio and be in a position to offer future employment. When the Courthouse is habitable, one of the cells nominated for film work could provide this studio. This would mean that the Courthouse

would house not only creative artists on funded residencies but also those establishing their careers. It is possible that the Edit Shed in its entirety could move into the Courthouse as an anchor tenant. These exciting possibilities have all emerged from the early success of the animation residency, an extraordinarily positive outcome from the first year of this innovative programme that bodes well for the future. The Trench Trust has committed €10,000 per year for five years which means that the programme has a chance to grow and develop its reputation over this time.

Meanwhile, recruitment for the second pair of residencies is in train with a highly promising national and international field. Like their 2018 predecessors, they will work in Birr for six months and will have the opportunity of reporting on, and demonstrating, their work at the OFFLine Film Festival in October.

This model can also be developed for the visual arts and music. The early success of the animation residency demonstrates that the best young artists can be at home in Birr and feel supported to a sufficient extent that they can envisage working here while they establish their career. Nothing succeeds like success and the residencies are already "out there" among the animator population who are watching with great interest.



*Birr's Leviathan, by Animation Resident Dashiell Silva.*

## STUDIO FUNDING SOURCES

### PUBLICLY FUNDED STUDIOS

Under the Arts Council's Visual Artists' Workplace Scheme, which was announced in January 2018, studios in Cork, Limerick, Mayo, Galway, Louth, and Wicklow received grant aid of some €221,000 to maintain these spaces. The Scheme offered grants of up to a maximum of €40,000 towards the running costs of visual artists' workspaces, with the support going directly to studios that are set up and led by practicing artists, assisting them to access space and equipment to develop their practice and produce work. The scheme was aimed at assisting artists' workspaces throughout the country to provide the best possible environment for working visual artists and, where feasible, to enable a level of subsidy for resident visual artists. In total, 19 studios/workspaces were awarded funding, supporting facilities for 676 individual artists. The scheme was administered by Visual Artists Ireland on behalf of the Arts Council.

A further feature of publicly funded studios has been an increase in the direct provision of workspaces by local authorities – either through the conversion of a building in their ownership or through the provision of workspaces as part of a larger facility such as an arts centre. With the addition of income from the public purse, these types of studios, while not necessarily cheaper to rent, are generally better equipped.

### SELF FUNDED STUDIOS

These workspaces offer studio accommodation to artists on a single occupancy and / or a shared occupancy basis. Many have shared facilities on-site although sometimes they are only for the use of artists occupying the studio spaces. Specific facilities can range from computer equipment, to darkrooms, printmaking equipment, cutting equipment, ventilation or extraction fans and kilns. The attraction of communal studios is that practitioners can share expertise, resources, production equipment and contacts and while networking can happen, the benefit of a studio complex is that the individual artist can, when necessary, close their own door. Some studios provide medium-specific spaces - some are geared up for print makers, other locations attract mainly illustrators or animators, and yet others only include painters. Some locations such as Belmont Mill, Art and Craft Studios, offer much larger workspaces – indoor and outdoor – which are better suited to more expansive practices

### RESIDENCIES

While residency-only studios can cater for one or more visual artists at any one time; their distinguishing characteristic is that they are awarded to artists for a specific period of time - usually less than 6 months and they may include a bursary. Most also offer residential accommodation. Residencies, both with and without residential accommodation, are much in demand but capacity outside the main urban centres is very limited. The provision in Birr Courthouse of such residency opportunities for

artists would, given the appeal of the cost of living differential, be highly attractive to students from the larger cities.

In terms of the practitioners consulted during the course of our work, while some indicated that their needs were already being met within their own personal studio space, they did welcome such a development. They also indicated the need to be mindful of the fact that as arts practices develop, requirements will change. What is important however is the overall quality of the space and the prospect of security of tenure.

## KEY LEARNING

- Quality of studio accommodation needs to satisfy as far as possible all modern requirements, including heating and lighting, disability access, health and safety and broadband access.
- Residencies are much in demand but capacity outside the main urban centres is very limited. The cost of living differential is strongly in Birr's favour and will attract students from the cities.
- Security of tenure for a fixed period, with or without supporting bursaries, is and will be a major attraction.

06

# The Courthouse Proposition





## 06 THE COURTHOUSE PROPOSITION

### THE CONCEPT

*To create a cooperative and supportive working environment for creative artists, nurtured by the artistic and cultural community of the town, inspired by the heritage and history of Birr and supported through specific residency programmes and grant-aided initiatives.*

During the last decade creative hubs and co-working spaces have become effective catalysts of the creative economy globally. Hubs are not only defined by the physical space which they occupy, but by the services they provide and the support they offer from the wider creative community and environment in which they operate.

The ambition for the Birr Courthouse is to create dynamic, flexible and affordable spaces to serve the town and the wider region's diverse community of artists and creative practitioners. The project will stimulate the cross pollination of ideas under one roof thereby nurturing further collaboration and innovation. 'Birr Creative Court' will position itself to meet a growing need for creative spaces and give new life and purpose to a significant heritage building in much need of looking after.

While the creative hub will be based in the Courthouse its support activities will range across a variety of local institutions and networks. The business model will be not-for-profit utilising while minimising as far as possible the costs to the working artists.

### THE LOCATION

Birr Courthouse is located on Townsend Street on the main national primary approach route from Tullamore (N52). The building dates from c.1809 and is a detached, five bay two storey castellated courthouse which has served in its time as a prison, a venue for the circuit and district court as well as the location of the Birr Town Council offices. The Courthouse is a Protected Structure in the Birr Record of Protected Structures and it is listed with a Regional rating on the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage.



Marked out for refurbishment in 2009, it unfortunately fell foul of the economic downturn and the consequent constraints on public finances. The plans were shelved, the improvement works did not proceed and, in December 2013, the Courthouse was closed.

Members of the steering group along with the consultant team, the Courts Service and the local authority were able to view the interior of the Courthouse as well as a small portion of the roof structure. While we observed that the building is in reasonably good shape, the lack of use over the past several years has resulted in its falling into disrepair, with water ingress visible in a number of places. Of key concern is the condition of the roof which requires immediate attention.

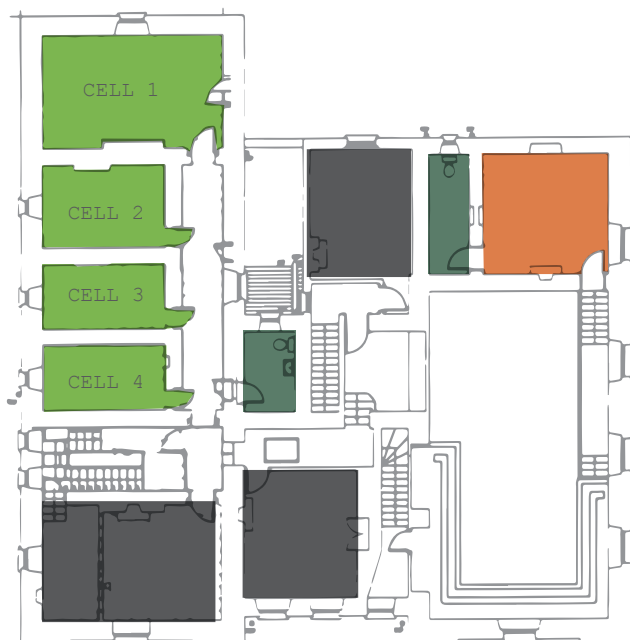
### BIRR COURTHOUSE

Since its establishment in 1999 the Courts Service has taken full responsibility for court facilities in Ireland. A major building/refurbishment programme was undertaken between 1999 and 2008 to upgrade a number of court venues. In recognising that some court venues were not fit for purpose, a programme of rationalisation and closure of court venues was undertaken and continues in an effort to reduce costs, to improve/streamline resource efficiencies and to focus on improved technology. The end use of court facilities and buildings is a critical aspect of this rationalisation plan to ensure the best outcome possible for buildings no longer required for their use judicially. It is evident that Birr Courthouse is a building no longer required for its intended/original use.

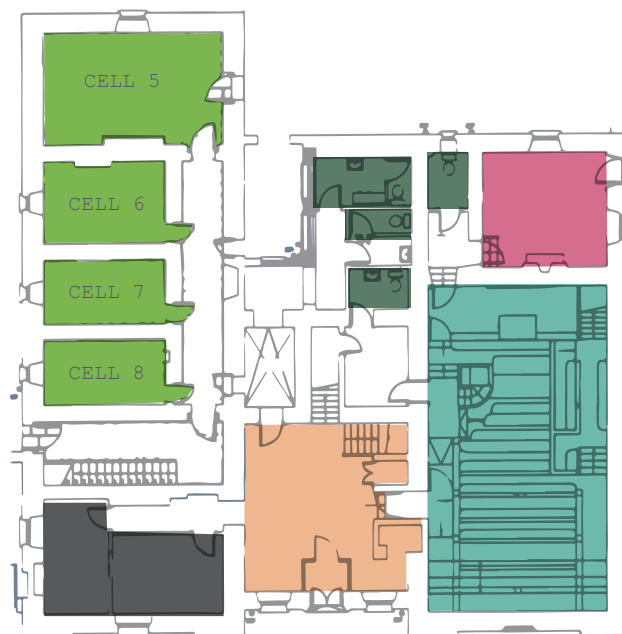
## EXISTING FLOOR PLAN

Birr Courthouse comprises two wings, North and South which are connected by a general access/ utilities lobby area. South is a two storey wing

and North is predominantly double height space containing the Courtroom with balcony. There are 16 useable rooms within this building.



FIRST FLOOR PLAN



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

**THE COURTROOM**  
Double height space with 'noted' timber access staircase and tailored balcony.

**JURY ROOM**  
Located on the ground floor.

**EIGHT HOLDING CELLS**  
These are stone floored barrel-vault arched ceilinged units over two levels with a single window per cell, two large, and six small.

**ENTRANCE FOYER**  
Main reception area and information point.

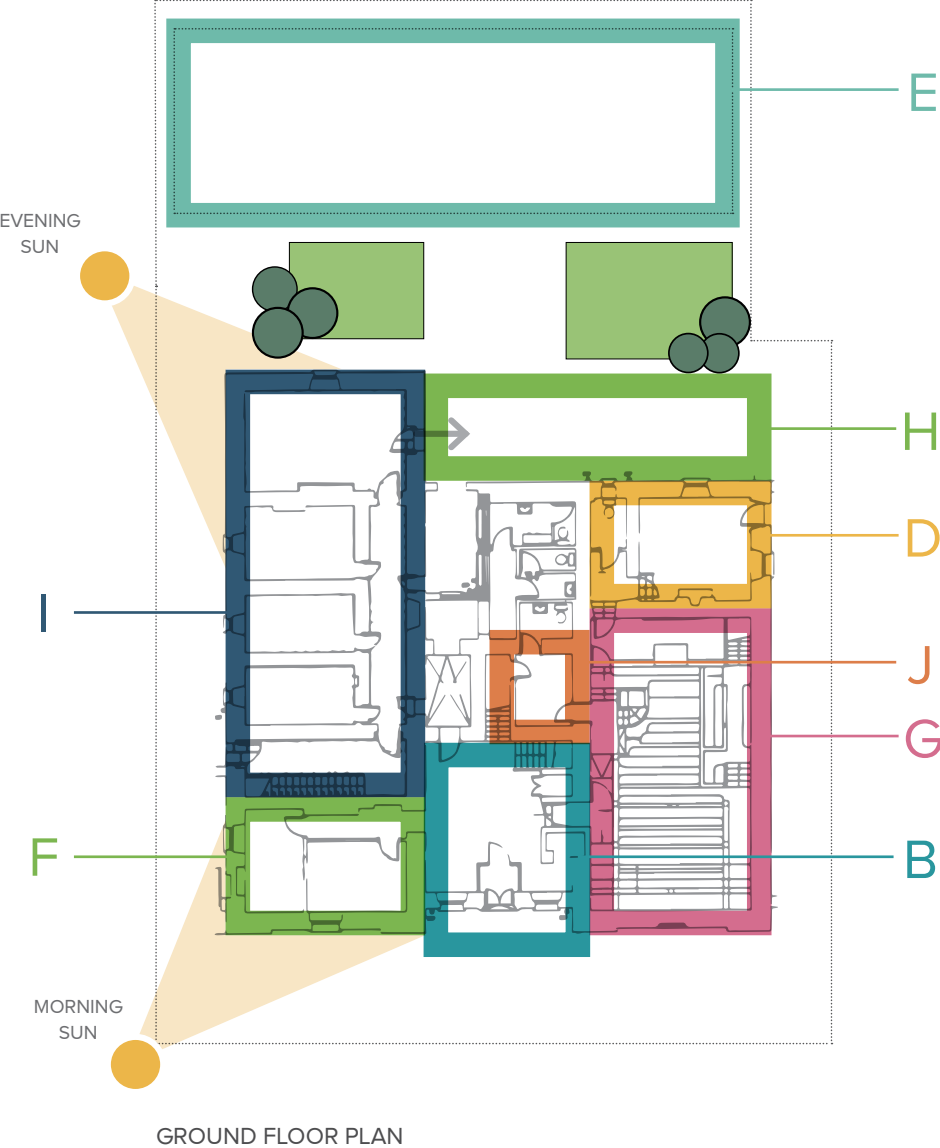
**THE JUDGES CHAMBER**  
To the rear of the building, has external access to yard entrance.

**OFFICES**  
One on the ground floor off the entrance foyer and three in the first floor

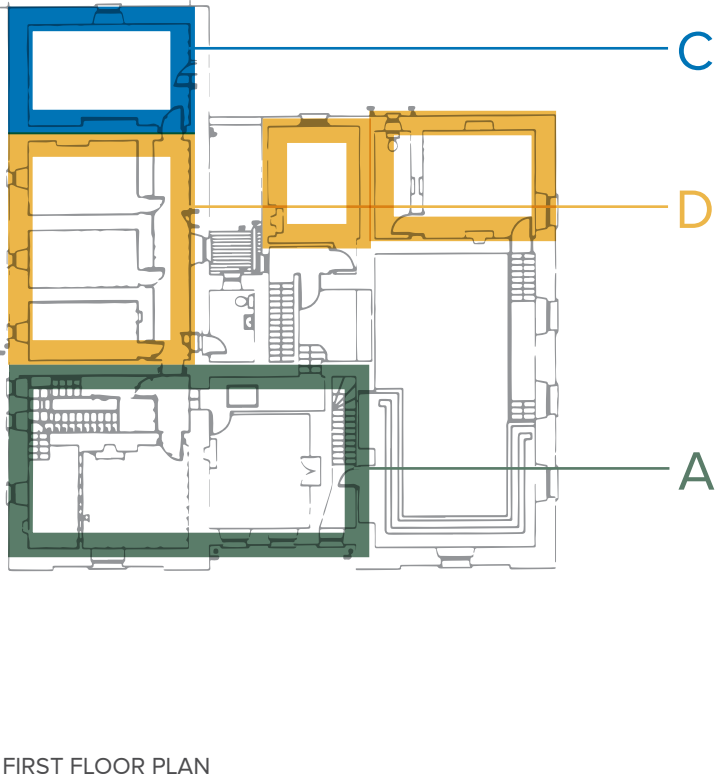
**SIX UTILITIES/WASHROOMS**  
throughout the building.







# BIRR COURTHOUSE POSSIBLE USE OF SPACE





- A LIGHT AND SPACE TO CHILL OUT, REFUEL AND EXCHANGE IDEAS**  
Artists Studios



- B WELCOME, PAUSE, CONNECT**  
A welcoming and sociable reception and refreshment space, the heart of the building, animating the streetscape



- C CREATIVE COLLABORATION**  
Studio space for multi-disciplinary working.



- D CREATIVE WORKING & DREAMING**  
Live-work artist studios with own entrance.



- E FIGHT & FLY**  
A purpose-built multifunctional space in which to box, dance, rehearse.



- F INNOVATING VOICES**  
Great space for physical theatre and music makers to create, learn, move around, mix it up and experiment. A space for informal encounters and the stimulation of ideas.



- G GREAT MINDS & KEEN DEBATE**  
A forum for Birr to address the great issues of the day.



- H UNDER THE STARS**  
Test the creative audience with an audience.



- I CREATIVE CELLS**  
Customised spaces for animators, sound producers and film editors.



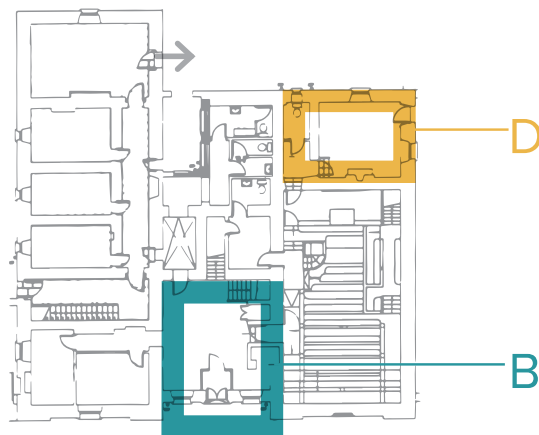
- J COSY NOOK**  
For writers, collaborators, administrators and activists.



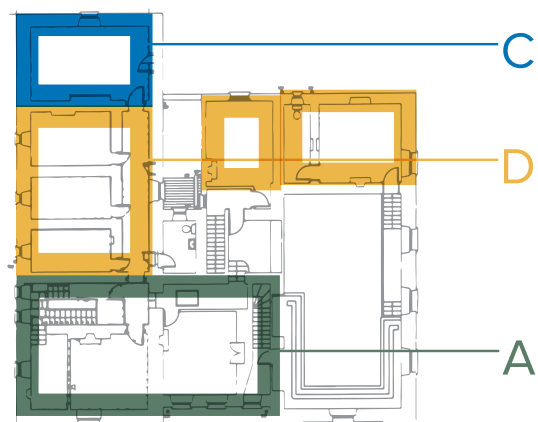




# VISUAL ARTISTS






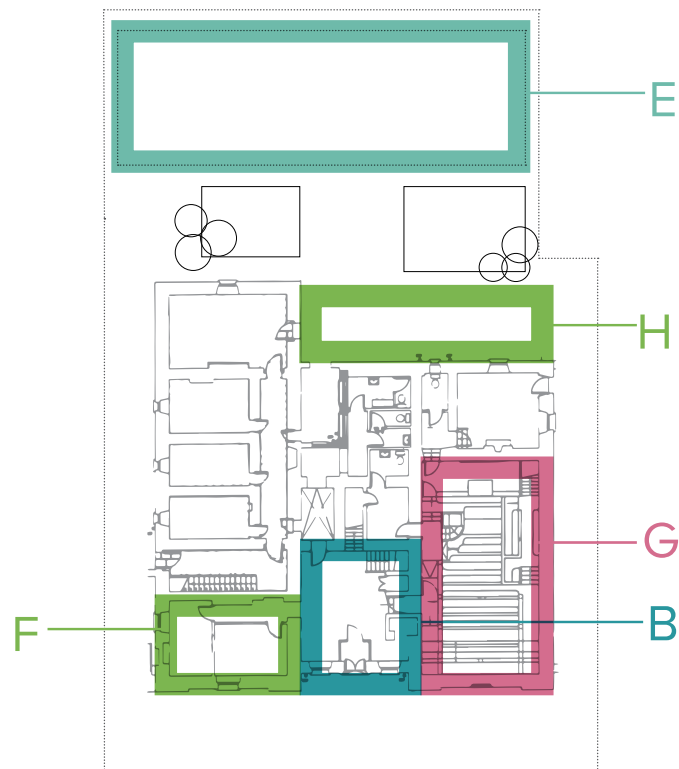
GROUND FLOOR PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

A place where visual artists can make / produce artwork; where they can have access to other creatives across other disciplines; where they can work both in a solo and a collaborative capacity; where they can show their work; where they can have access to shared facilities & equipment; where residencies are offered; where people can learn how to make art.

CREATIVE ACTIVITY	SPACE CHARACTERISTICS	AVAILABLE SPACE	SPACE RE-IMAGINED
<b>TALKING ART</b> An attractive and welcoming space for informal encounters where Creative Court residents can relax and talk with one another and with visitors from the town and beyond.	A welcoming, comfortable space with good height and light.	<b>First Floor Office Space</b> 6.3 X 4.5m (without partition) 27.95sqm	<b>Light and Space to Chill Out, Refuel &amp; Exchange Ideas A</b>
<b>EXHIBITING ART</b> An opportunity to showcase new, experimental and emerging work.	Clear wall space in a publicly accessible, yet surveilled area. Good natural and artificial lighting, ambience and atmosphere.	<b>Entrance Foyer</b>	<b>Welcome, Pause, Connect B</b> 
<b>WORKING COLLABORATIVELY</b> Creatives across different disciplines will be able to connect, collaborate and share with other like-minded people.	Good lighting, room to manoeuvre and space to securely store 'works in progress'. Access to digitally enabled technology plus specialist technical equipment.	<b>First Floor</b> Cell 5: 6.5 X 4.3m 27.95sqm	<b>Creative Collaboration C</b> 
<b>LIVING/WORKING</b> Affordable live/work accommodation available to rent and also available as variable term residencies with public facing activities.	Genuine workspace – good height, light, unfettered walls, with ancillary accommodation. separate unit along with access to/use of a shared workspace.	<b>Ground Floor Judge's Chamber</b> 4.3 X 4.4m 18.92sqm First Floor Jury Room 4.3 X 4.4m 18.92sqm; Cells 6: 4 X 3.1m 12.4sqm, 7 & 8: 4 X 2.4m 9.6sqm; Sleeping Quarters; Clerk of Works Office: 3.5m X 4.3m 15.05sqm; Shared Living Space; Cell 5: Shared Workspace: 6.5 X 4.3m 27.95sqm	<b>Creative Working &amp; Dreaming D</b> 
<b>LEARNING ART</b> Accommodate artist education/ outreach programmes with schools, portfolio preparation classes, summer courses partnering with existing festivals.	Community art space with good lighting and space for several students/small groups to work.	<b>First Floor Area Engineer's Office Space</b> 4.4 X 4.3m 18.49sqm  <b>Ground Floor Court Room</b> 6.5 X 11.5m 74.75sqm	







GROUND FLOOR PLAN

# PERFORMING ARTISTS

## DANCE, MUSIC, VOICE, THEATRE & DRAMA

Readily accessible rehearsal space plus space for people to learn through participation in arts practice – such as art classes, singing classes, dance classes.

In time the ambition will be, once the building is fully enabled, to evolve its learning role into becoming a regional satellite for national institutions such as the Royal Academy of Music.

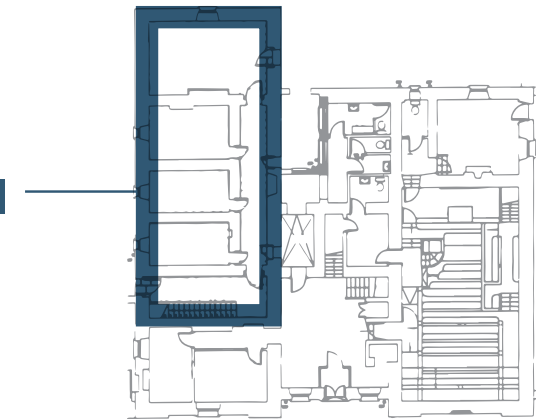
CREATIVE ACTIVITY	SPACE CHARACTERISTICS	AVAILABLE SPACE	SPACE RE-IMAGINED
<b>REHEARSING</b> A flexible, purpose-built Dance Space offering classes and training sessions; can be programmed to meet the demand for rehearsal space.	A large, purpose-built naturally lit space designed especially to be used as a dance training and rehearsal space.	It is envisaged that the Dance Space will be developed within the rear curtilage of the Courthouse, a space that will also incorporate the development of a new facility for Birr Boxing Club.	<b>Fight &amp; Fly E</b> 
Other rehearsal spaces within the Courthouse geared towards smaller group activity such as choral groups, ensembles etc.	A bright clear space – music room - equipped with lighting and access to a piano.  A flexible space for theatre making.	<b>Ground Floor Office Space</b> 6.5 X 4.3m (without partition) 27.95sqm  Entrance Foyer	<b>Innovating Voices F</b> 
<b>LEARNING</b> A music room for music learning, voice training and coaching.	It is envisaged that the Dance Space will be a multi-functional space and can be used for theatre making.		
<b>THEATRE MAKING</b> A great space for physical theatre to create, learn, move around, mix it up and experiment.			
<b>PERFORMING</b> A 'micro venue' with capacity to showcase aspects of the performing arts & attract different audiences throughout the year.	A digitally enabled space capable of receiving real-time Master Classes and other participatory events transmitted from national & international venues  Publicly accessible external spaces with the capacity to accommodate small audiences.	<b>Ground Floor Court Room</b> 6.5 X 11.5m 74.75sqm  Open Air Spaces	<b>Great Minds &amp; Keen Debate G</b>   <b>Under the Stars H</b> 



# DIGITAL ARTISTS

**FILM MAKERS**  
Post-production has become a leading area of expertise in the Irish film industry, with talent being recognised at home and on the global stage.

**ANIMATORS**  
Build on the success of the animation residencies to facilitate the growth of the creative digital sector.



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

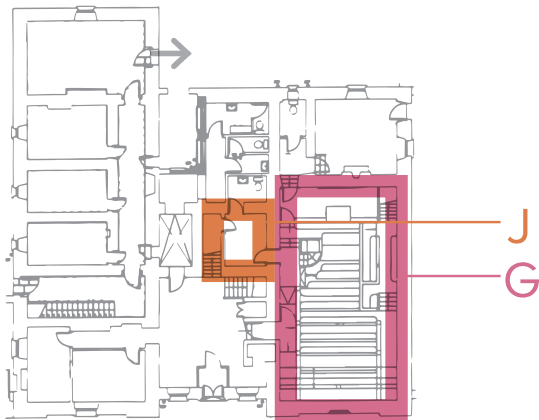
CREATIVE ACTIVITY	SPACE CHARACTERISTICS	AVAILABLE SPACE	SPACE RE-IMAGINED
<b>MIXING VISUALS</b> Editing Compositing, Motion Graphics, Colour Grading	Customised, fully enabled spaces for film editors, sound producers.	<b>Ground Floor Cells</b> Cell 2: 4 X 3.1m 12.4sqm Cell 3: 4 x 2.4m 9.6sqm Cell 4: 4 x 2.4m 9.6sqm	<b>Creative Cells I</b> 
<b>MIXING SOUND</b> Sound Editing, Music Mixing, Sound Mixing			
<b>ANIMATION</b>	Customised, fully enabled spaces for animators.		
<b>ANIMATION RESIDENCY</b>	Space to host at least two nine-month animation residencies	<b>Ground Floor Cells</b> Cell 1: 6.5 X 4.3m, 27.95sqm	







# CURIOUS MINDS

Build on Birr's reputation for finding the universal in the local by providing a space for citizens and visitors to participate in great debates.



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

CREATIVE ACTIVITY	SPACE CHARACTERISTICS	AVAILABLE SPACE	SPACE RE-IMAGINED
<p><b>DISCUSSION &amp; DEBATE</b></p> <p>A public space for facilitating enquiry, discussion, debate on, for example, how arts and culture affect our values and our lives.</p>	<p>A publicly accessible space for debates, discussion, seminars, events and happenings on matters that matter.</p>	<p><b>Ground Floor Court Room</b> 6.5 X 11.5m 74.75sqm</p>	<p><b>Great Minds &amp; Keen Debate G</b></p> 
<p><b>QUIET SPACE</b></p> <p>A quiet space – a mini-library - for creatives, citizens &amp; visitors to trawl through the archives to find out more about the journey the Courthouse is on.</p>	<p>A publicly accessible mini-library and research space.</p>	<p><b>Ground Floor</b> 2.4 X 2.5m 6sqm</p>	<p><b>Cosy Nook J</b></p> 

07

## The **Boxing Club**



## 07 THE BOXING CLUB

### BIRR'S TRAVELLING COMMUNITY

The Birr Traveller and Settled People's Group has developed the Traveller Halting Sites in the town at Croghan Road and Millbrook Park. Developed over many years with enormous voluntary effort they are held up as examples of best practice in culturally sensitive housing provision. This initiative has not only enabled two generations of young Travellers to enjoy the benefits of continuous education but it has also enabled the heritage of this community to become a part of the wider heritage of the town.

Birr Boxing Club, an initiative of the Birr Traveller and Settled People's Group, has brought Travellers and settled people together as coaches and boxers. The Club, which is seeking a permanent home, epitomises the values of healthy living, personal self-respect, respect for others and self-discipline. Plans are underway to develop a permanent home for the club in the yard of a re-imagined Courthouse complex.

The Birr Boxing Club was conceived following the stellar performances of Irish boxers in the 2012 London Olympics when Katie Taylor won a gold medal and the Mullingar Traveller John Joe Nevin won silver. The club was established as an affiliated club of the Irish Athletic Boxing Association and by 2016/17, 25 members were in active training. By the following year, that had risen to 33.



The club has trained its own coaches and was able to purchase a large amount of little used equipment from a neighbouring club that had disbanded. The club has male and female coaches and child protection officers and their young boxers are now winning provincial and national medals. The greatest need is to find a premises that is fit for purpose. The club has already demonstrated that it can manage a premises both for its own purposes and for renting space to other sporting activities. The Courthouse yard has sufficient space for a purpose-built boxing club with sufficient flat-floor space for a range of indoor sporting and health-promoting activities that can include dance. Preliminary research suggests that a combination of capital sports funding from the

state, supplemented by pledged funding from the local community, can be put together to fund this project. The club is an initiative of the Birr Traveller and Settled People's group which is a recognised charity by the Revenue Commissioners and its present rented premises in Glebe Street is legally guaranteed by Birr 20:20 Vision Company.

The proposal to build in the yard of the Courthouse is a separate though related proposal to the Courthouse Hub as it will tap into different funding streams and will raise money separately from private benefactors. A number of pledges have already been made. The amount of funding raised will determine the scale of the building and the range of activities that can be accommodated.



08

## Conditions for **Success**



## 08 CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

*The conditions for success detailed below are drawn not only from the findings of the case study review but are also informed by the insights gleaned from the many strategic conversations had with a range of key informants. The conditions for success are organised here by theme and each condition is followed by the perceived capacity of the Creative Court to deliver.*

### DEVELOP A CLEAR VISION

Whether fully articulated or not, all the projects investigated in the best practice review are based on a strong shared vision that emerged from research and engagement. A project's vision must, however, be tailored to the specific site on which it is located, the community it intends to serve and the goals it hopes to achieve.

The Proposition for Birr Courthouse is that the cells, meeting rooms and courtroom itself can provide at least eight studios, some single and some double, for local and visiting creative professional practitioners to create and collaborate with each other and the wider community. The feedback from Festival visitors is that a high degree of excellence already exists in the young people who participate in competitions like the Trench Trust award, in playwrights who enter Scripts, and among artists who exhibit in Birr at festival time and all year

round. The OFFline residencies have attracted high calibre candidates in year one and now, in year two also. Our vision is already within reach.

### AVOID DUPLICATION

It will be important not to duplicate existing services already offered by other venues. Opportunities to join forces if appropriate – to signpost, share resources, learn from each other, innovate or re-design activities - to create mutual benefits for everyone need to be factored into the considerations.

The proposition is that a model of governance is proposed that will see Birr Creative Court and Birr Theatre and Arts Centre managed as a single complementary facility under a single board of management. We anticipate a site manager will be necessary for the Creative Court as the Theatre team is already fully stretched. However, facilities such as the courtroom and theatre can be marketed together when appropriate, and the Courthouse will have facilities such as meeting rooms that the Theatre does not have. It will also have a performance space that will be smaller and more intimate and that will suit recitals (music, poetry) and debate/discussion that the theatre is less suited to.

### PROVIDE A UNIQUE DRAW

Several informants stressed the importance of having a unique draw - a unique hook – one that would differentiate the offer at the Courthouse from the range of other 'arts venues' offers available elsewhere. Rather than mimic or



reproduce these, informants were adamant that the proposition for the Courthouse should find its source in what gives Birr its distinctive character, its reputation, its particular achievements, its claim to fame, its appealing landscape – in summary its sense and spirit of place.

The proposition is that Birr town already has much that is unique. We are therefore building on a strong foundation (a Georgian heritage town, Birr Castle, Gardens and historic Science Centre). The strong Victorian character of the Theatre linked with the Georgian courthouse offers a unique combination of heritage spaces while the town as a whole inspires and relaxes young and old in equal measure. Its location almost equidistant between Dublin, Galway, Limerick and Cork makes it accessible from all four cities.



## ENSURE SUFFICIENT CAPACITY

All consultees were in agreement that the project would require 'professional' management in terms of its day-to-day operation and that a professional centre manager supported by part-time staff and a cohort of volunteers would be critical to the successful operation of the project. All concluded that an initiative of this nature was a hugely significant undertaking and would require a robust coalition of support if it is to succeed. The role of the local authority, while not necessarily identified as the lead organisation, was considered to be of central importance in providing the keystone of such a coalition, as evidenced by the authority's inclusion of the project in Offaly County Council's Arts Strategy 2018-2022 – see opposite.

## DEVELOP CRITICAL MASS

Clustering arts, culture and creative people, organisations and small businesses together is a proven strategy in regenerating places. If regeneration of the local community is one of the goals of Birr Creative Court, the facilities

## COUNTY OFFALY ARTS STRATEGY, 2018 – 2022

**Goal 2:** Enhance sense of place and build on the distinctive cultural identity of County Offaly by engaging artists to collaborate in the design and development of the county's physical, social and cultural spaces.

**2.1:** Support the development of concepts and models for spaces, existing and potential, that align with innovative art production and presentation, with local enterprise and civic engagement.

**2.1.1:** Lend advice and support, as required, to artistic and community groups reimagining the potential of disused building stock, as viable culture and civic urban spaces. (in particular, Edenderry culture and community working group, and **Birr 2020 Artist Hub**).

need to serve a sizeable community of artists. That is why it will be important to look beyond Birr to ensure that the reach of the centre is not just regional but national and ultimately international. Live/work studios were identified as being a key requirement in terms of their being able to leverage investment into the facility and, through residencies, augment the supply of available accommodation in the town for visiting artists. It is envisaged that in terms of residencies, a diversity of cultural and creative practitioners will live and work in the Creative Court for variable periods of time

The proposition is to build the foundations of the project on philanthropy and commercial tenancies. The Theatre is already achieving this and is proving the success of vigorous and professional marketing. We believe the Courthouse can only improve the cultural creative 'package' on offer in Birr. Nevertheless, we accept that the building and refurbishment of the Courthouse is only the first step in creating a sustainable creative arts activity in the town and look forward to exploring this further in relation to drawing up a detailed business plan.

## EMBRACE DIVERSE DISCIPLINES

Our survey of leading cultural and creative projects has revealed the importance of a diverse mix of tenants, uses, activities and participants to the success of these projects. Diversity in this context refers to a diversity of disciplines and sectors, activities and users and



types of tenants and stages of development. Consultees voiced a strong need to address the lack of available space for arts practice relative to collaborative projects which require the input of several practitioners engaged in working together and supported by on-site access to digitally enabled technology / specialist technical equipment. Furthermore, a diversity of tenants, uses, users and activities opens the project up to a more diverse pool of potential funders and supporters.

The proposition embraces the importance of a diverse mix of creative practitioners. For this reason, we want to ensure that there is an attractive and welcoming space in the building where the residents can relax and talk with one another and visitors from the town and beyond. We recognise that it is in these informal encounters that ideas are stimulated. All creative artists need solitude and company to grow and develop. The space needs to support that.

## SECURE KEY PARTNERS

Successful creative hubs secure their financial sustainability and public support by ensuring that an ever widening circle of funders, stakeholders and supporters are engaged in the project. Most of the projects reviewed have several partners who have offered political, financial and public support. Building a network of partners, stakeholders and supporters is an ongoing process but the major focus is during the pre-development and development phase.

The local authority is commonly the most important partner for these projects, playing a key role in championing, funding and enabling project development.

The proposition recognises the importance of the local authority. It is also important to build international contacts so that we build reputation as well as financial stability. In this the festivals play a key role because they bring big names from abroad to participate and adjudicate. As reputation grows, the town can take ownership and pride in that reputation and this in turn will help those with access to finance to throw their weight behind the town's cultural endeavours.

## PROMOTE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The level of programming offered by Birr Creative Court is dependent on its mission. Public access to space, activities and programming will be an essential feature of the project to ensure that the initiative builds public support and creates wider social and cultural benefits. Tenants will offer classes and courses to the community. Open studio tours one day every month, for example, could attract a range of different audiences in addition to providing events space to local community organisations.

The proposition is that some spaces in the Courthouse should be freely available or available at a small cost to local activities so that the townspeople of Birr can feel a sense



of belonging in the building. The Animation Residents already engage with schools, we anticipate that clubs and societies will use the discussion space and meeting rooms to enrich their activities; for some years the Tin Jug Studio has offered art tuition to Traveller children, limited because of a lack of space. The use of courthouse rooms for group art teaching is something we plan to develop. Undoubtedly many other opportunities for community engagement will arise in the future.



## MAKE THE MOST OF THE LOCATION

The full extent of the project will see the restoration of the Birr Courthouse and a repurposing of the building to facilitate a cultural end use, a creative hub. The building is noted for its historical, social and architectural significance and this is reflected in its status as a Protected Structure in the Birr Town Plan. Section 7.3 of the Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines for Planning Authorities (2004) discusses the issue of 'Keeping a Building in Use' and states that 'It is generally recognised that the best method of conserving a historic building is to keep it in

active use. Where a structure is of great rarity or quality, every effort should be made to find a solution which will allow it to be adapted to a new use without unacceptable damage to its character and special interest.'

The proposition recognises that the Courthouse is a protected structure on one of the main approach roads to Birr. It is unlikely to be of interest to a private developer. What is proposed lies within an accepted and tested cultural spectrum. The town already has a strong cultural life and therefore we believe the proposition is a 'good fit' to the space and location of the building.

## DEMONSTRATE STRONG GOVERNANCE

All projects, and particularly those that seek to promote art and culture, need strong and robust governance if they are to be sustainable in a funding environment that of its nature depends on national prosperity and economic wellbeing.

The decision by Government to abolish Town Councils in 2014 caused a genuine concern that a heritage town like Birr might lose its voice and influence in the affairs of County Offaly. A series of large and small public consultations demonstrated that there was support for a community-based forum that would facilitate public consideration of issues that would affect the welfare and wellbeing of Birr and its neighbourhood areas. From this public consultation Birr 20:20 Vision Limited was established and began regular public meetings in 2015.

Its aim is to provide the conditions in which by cooperation, collaboration and complementarity the interests of Birr can be identified, envisioned and pursued vigorously. It has identified tourism, and particularly cultural tourism, as a key generator of wealth in the town and district. Birr 20:20 Vision Company is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee. It was set up on Tuesday 27 October 2015. Its current address for correspondence is The Ring, Crinkill, Co. Offaly, and the company status is Normal. The company has 8 directors who have also been the directors of 22 other Irish



companies between them, 10 of which are now closed. They are: W. Salters Sterling (Chair); Mr Sean Loughnane, C. Eng. (Vice Chair); Cllr John Carroll, (Secretary), Ms Breda Purcell (Treasurer); Ms Fiona Breen; Ms Bernadette Fannneran; Mr Brendan Hutchinson; Ms. Hannah Ward. The Chairperson, Dr Sterling was Academic Secretary of Trinity College Dublin. The Treasurer, Ms. Breda Purcell, runs Memory Lane antique and curio shop. Cllr John Carroll is a Councillor and farmer. Ms Fiona Breen is a Theatre Producer; Ms Bernie Fanneran was a Town Councillor and is now a Carer. Mr Brendan Hutchinson is a Traveller and Ms Hannah Ward is a Restaurateur.

The proposition will utilise the Birr 2020 Vision Company as the vehicle that will ensure robust governance of this project and its integration into the other cultural activities of the town, including the Birr Theatre and Arts Centre. It will establish a board of management that will include members of the management team of Birr Theatre and Arts Centre as a means of ensuring complementarity of activity between the two centres, particularly in the utilisation of the Courtroom for performances in poetry, drama and music. The board of management will report to the board of Birr 20:20 at both private and public meetings. Annual accounts will be submitted to Birr 20:20. Staff will be recruited and employed by Birr 20:20 Ltd. A Birr Creative Court manager will be appointed, initially perhaps on a part-time basis, to manage the activities in the building. The manager will report to the board of management.

One of the primary purposes of Birr Creative Court will be to accommodate residencies in film and the arts. These residencies will be funded by a combination of grants and private philanthropy. Each will have a mentor who will be an experienced practitioner in the area and who will take day to day responsibility

for the Residency. It is envisaged that some of the Residents may continue working in the Hub after the period of their Residency is over. In these circumstances, space will be let on a commercial basis as negotiated between the tenant and the Creative Court manager.





09

## Next Steps



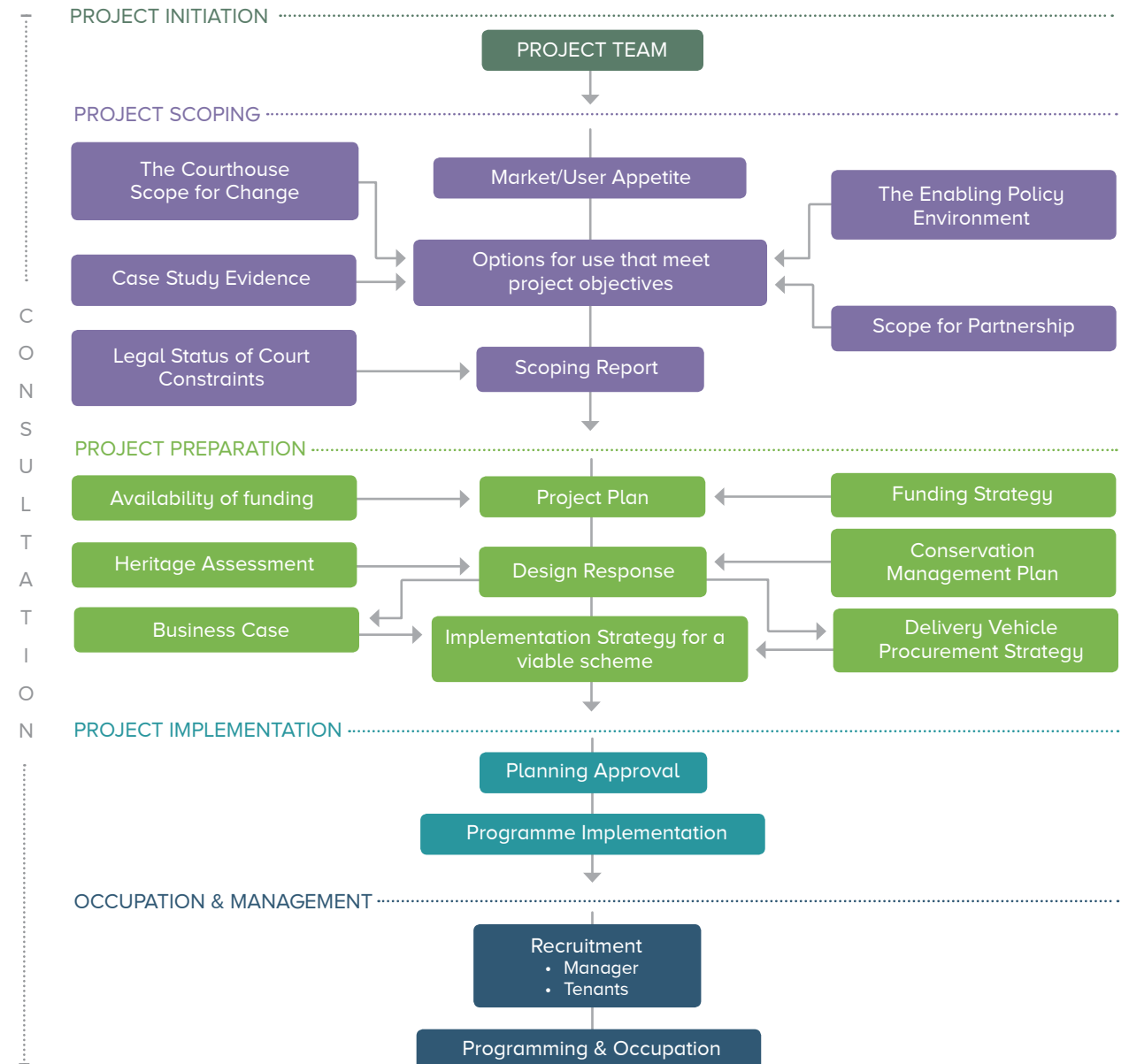
## 09 NEXT STEPS

We were asked to scope the possibility of re-purposing the Courthouse in Birr for use as a creative hub. Building on all the good work undertaken by individual members of the study steering group over many years, the model for Birr Creative Court is rooted in the 'conditions for success' gathered from the review of good practice elsewhere; conversations with a wide range of contributors and an assessment of the scope of the heritage building to accommodate change. While the exact mix of tenants, uses and programming will be subject to further refinement, the report illustrates how the needs identified as a result of the engagement strategy could be accommodated within re-imagined spaces within the building and complemented by purpose-built spaces within the courtyard area to the rear. Activation of the outdoor spaces has been a key consideration, in particular the prospect of an 'open door' to the street to signify the inclusive nature of the initiative and its disposition towards the people of Birr.

Our research indicates that there is substantial community and stakeholder enthusiasm and potential for the development of a significant new piece of creative and cultural infrastructure in Birr. Notwithstanding the challenges that a project of this scale presents, Birr's track record in heritage conservation and cultural activation speaks for itself. Birr Creative Court can play a role in stimulating local economic development and support community cultural development and engagement to enrich the lives of all those who will be encouraged to participate in its development and ensure its success.

Following on from this scoping report, we have identified the critical next steps.

Progress to date...



# BIRR CREATIVE COURT

A SCOPING  
REPORT ON THE  
POTENTIAL OF  
BIRR  
COURTHOUSE

Birr 20:20 Vision

05 2019

