

Consultation Report

Blarney

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UCC
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UCC's MPlan students assess street /footpath infrastructure with transport planning consultant & lecturer, Kevin Burke.

Contents

1. Public Consultation	2
1.1 Introduction	2
1.2 Identity and Belonging	6
1.3 Jobs and Businesses	7
1.4 Nature, Tourism and Landscape	9
1.5 Countryside; Transport and other services	10
1.6 Streets and Spaces	12
1.7 Amenities for All	13
1.8 Housing and Living	14
1.9 Moving Around	14
3. Report Summary and Conclusions	16
3.1 Summary of Public Consultation	16

1. Public Consultation

1.1 Introduction

Blarney is a satellite town located 8 km north-west of Cork City Centre in its topographically hilly hinterland. It has a population of 2539 (CSO 2016). University College Cork's Masters in Planning and Sustainable Development (MPlan) students, under the supervision of Jeanette Fitzsimons, Alison Harvey of the Heritage Council and Martin McCormick and Stephen Murphy of Cork City Council, undertook a Collaborative Town Centre Health Check (CTCHC) Programme of Blarney during May and June, 2021. This consisted of a two day observational study on Friday 28th and Saturday 29th May, 2021

Observational studies were followed up with engagement with the community in Blarney, as part of the CTCHC process. Findings from this consultation will be submitted to the Cork City Council's Draft Development Plan consultation in August 2021. Three methods of engagement were undertaken:

- Invitation for submissions to a suggestion box or email
- Invitation to join the students in a webinar consultation
- Observation of artwork by the young people of the area about their vision for the future of Cork City including Blarney.

A poster campaign informed the community that a suggestion box was to be located at the Centra convenience store at the village square. Unfortunately, this box was inadvertently taken and its contents lost. UCC's MPlan students, therefore, learnt the necessity in providing a chained down box for future community suggestions in planning.



Fig.1. Over 2000+ primary and secondary students’ visual and written expressions of how they would like areas in Greater Metropolitan Area of Cork to be developed, on show at the Glucksman, include creating a greener, more sustainable, and playful city and hinterland.

U.C.C.’s MPlan students, in conjunction with the Glucksman Art Gallery, assessed 2000+ primary and secondary school students’ visual and written responses to their reimaginings of Cork City, Cloghroe, Tower, and Blarney. While we understand the secondary school in Blarney participated, Blarney’s student population’s contributions were not formally submitted to the Glucksman and were unavailable for perusal. It is, therefore, recommended that if possible, the participating schools in Blarney will be asked if the students can review these valuable, visual and written explorations of Blarney’s youths’ ideas on how their town should be developed when schools reopen in September, so that these voices are heard and filter in to the formulation of the *Cork City Draft Development Plan* and any subsequent development of the area.

**Taking
Your Town's
Pulse**

UCC, the Heritage Council and Partners and Cork City Council wish to hear your views on the future of **Blarney, Tower and Cloghroe**, as part of the Collaborative Town Centre Health Check (CTCHC) Programme.

This project is sponsored by Project Ireland 2040 will inform the Cork City Development Plan review.

**Join UCC Planning Students at
Tower and Cloghroe webinar
Thursday 10th June 7-8:15pm
Blarney webinar
Thursday 17th June 7-8:15pm**

If you wish to join these webinars, or send us your ideas, please email jeanette.fitzsimons@ucc.ie at least 24 hours before the start of the relevant webinar.

Alternatively, you can drop your ideas into Centra, Blarney Square or Supervalu, Tower.

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council

Tionscadal Éireann
Project Ireland
2040

UCC
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh, Éire
University College Cork, Ireland

Comhairle Cathrach
Cork City Council

We are Cork.

Fig. 2. An example of the posters used to attract participation and engagement of the communities of Blarney, Tower and Cloghroe.

The poster campaign also informed the community in Blarney of a forthcoming, online webinar in which the community in Blarney would get the opportunity to make suggestions and engage with the MPlan students on June 17th, 2021 @ 7-8.30 pm. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions it was decided to run this event online as a webinar using Microsoft Teams. This webinar was supervised by Jeanette Fitzsimons of U.C.C.'s Centre for Planning Education & Research, Alison Harvey of the Heritage Council, and Cork County Council's, Martin McCormick.

Subsequent to a brief introduction, students engaged with the Blarney Community under the various eight headings of the Place-Standard Tool (for more information on the tool, see <https://www.placestandard.scot/>). Each topic was presented to the community by a student; key questions were asked to stimulate responses and suggestions. Both verbal, and typed, suggestions into the chat box from the Blarney Community were recorded. After the topic discussion, utilising the Place-Standard Tool’s scoring mechanism, Blarney’s Community rated how Blarney performed under the various headings and an average score was calculated for each planning topic discussed (see results in fig. 3. below).

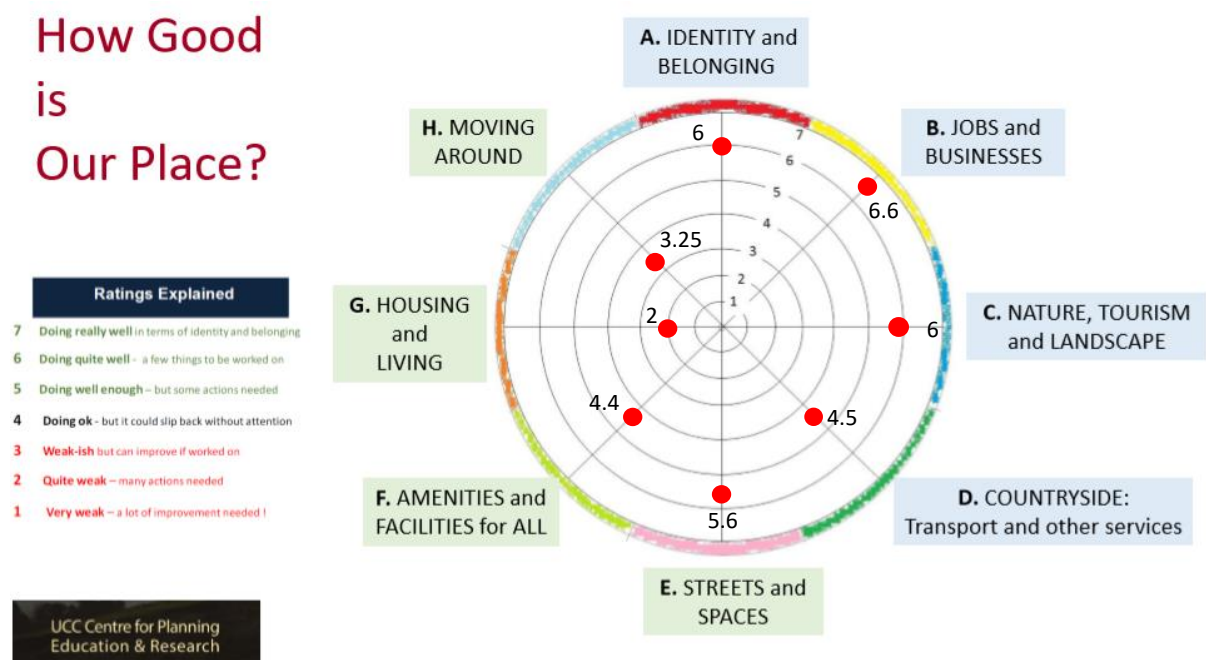


Fig.3. Plotting the scores for each topic that was discussed at the Blarney webinar gives a strong visual indicator for how healthy, locals perceive Blarney, to be. Score towards the outside of the circle represent the towns strength, whereas those closer to the centre suggest areas in which the town can develop and improve.

Suggestions by the community and the Place Standard Tool’s assessment of Blarney revealed the following:

1.2 Identity and Belonging: Overall score: 6

This was the first topic for discussion, fewer people were present, and three people contributed to the discussion. Having said that, those who spoke had strong feelings on the subject and contributed positively to the discussion. Key themes around identity, sense of place, history and heritage were discussed. It emerged that some of those contributing were originally 'blow-ins' to Blarney. Although it was mentioned that there was some resistance to 'blow-ins' 40 - 50 years ago, all now felt not only accepted by the community, but that both they and subsequent 'blow-ins', were "welcomed with open arms". As such, this presented a unique perspective to identity and belonging.

It was generally felt that there was a strong sense of identity, with community organisations that "grounded" people in the place, such as tidy towns, schools, Active Retirement, GAA and Scouting. These groups were considered to be supportive of one another and helped to create an active sense of community that "bring people together". It was also noted that the range of community groups provided something for all ages.

A strong sense of history and heritage was considered a positive for Blarney and its identity. There is good local knowledge of the town within the community, with groups actively advocating and relating the history of the town. There was agreement that the history and heritage of Blarney invoked a strong feeling of pride of place that contributed to the sense of identity.



Fig. 4. Crowds of visitors congregate outside the Woollen Mills. Although both the Mills and the Castle encourage high visitor footfalls to the area, students observed that little of this seems to filter into the town.

1.3 Jobs and Businesses: Overall score: 6.6

The higher score reflects Blarney's thriving local economy. Organisations such as Blarney's Chamber of Commerce, Brand Blarney and the Old Butter Road Group actively promote businesses, employment and festivals in the area. During the webinar, representatives of Blarney's Chamber of Commerce encouraged circa fifty small-to-medium businesses in Blarney, hitherto not involved, to become members of the Chamber of Commerce.

Blarney Business Park provides large-scale sites for warehousing, storage and distribution, commercial, and supply chain businesses. Two new sites, currently under construction, will provide 400-500 jobs when completed within the year, and there is plenty of scope for future development and expansion at the business park.

Tourism and weddings, both international and indigenous, were identified as providing a significant amount of both full-time and part-time employment. While the attractions of Blarney Castle and Grounds, and Blarney Woollen Mills and Hotel, underpin tourism in the town, the scope and necessity to develop other natural amenities and activities to attract visitors, as well as locals, was identified.

Consultees expressed the potential to attract further nature loving/activity based visitors to the village subject to the development of natural amenities such as the Clogheen Milcon Fenn walkway, more cycle routes and the linking of routes, such as along the old Muskerry

Tramway and the Old Butter Road (including the signposting of such important heritage routes), and kayaking by deepening the river adjacent to the flood field which could be developed as a park amenity for tourists and locals.



Fig.5. Further development of food, activity and wildlife festivals and Blarney’s natural amenities could attract new and repeat visitors (image sources: Brand Blarney).

Spin-off wildlife festivals resulting from the development of Blarney’s natural, wildlife amenities were identified. Satisfaction and appreciation were expressed for Cork City Council’s work in attracting initial funding for the ecological surveys carried out, thus far, of the Clogheen Milcon Fen walkway. Enthusiasm was expressed for further progressing with the project, and a suggestion was made to further develop the walkway into a circuitous route. The importance of biodiversity as an attractor for ecotourism was also raised by resident’s whist students carried out their site visits.

The potential to sensitively develop the former Blarney Park Hotel ground as a community hall, swimming pool and commercial centre to host events and activities including bike hire (currently non-existent) in the town was also noted, in a way that will not detract from Blarney’s quintessential village heritage.

The potential was identified to further develop the Old Butter Roads Food Festival: a historical celebration of locally-produced food, subject to permitted use of a suitable location to hold the event such as the village square or a new community hall.

Several voices expressed the desire and need for the sensitive location of a large supermarket in the town that would not impact Blarney's heritage village identity or impact views from the castle.

1.4 Nature, Tourism and Landscape: Overall score: 6

The consensus among the community was that nature, tourism, and landscape act as one of Blarney's most significant assets. The community noted that there are many beautiful walks and parklands in the area surrounding Blarney, one of which being the Waterloo walk. This walk is stunning and encompasses the beautiful nature of the area and members of the public believed that Blarney town should link up with the Waterloo walk as this would give people a reason to stay longer in Blarney. There are also many viewpoints and panoramas in Blarney, and these are critical to the identity of the town, with one participant stating that they are 'what Blarney is all about'.

In terms of tourism, the public welcome the 450,000 American tourists that arrive every year. However, there was a strong desire to try and attract more Irish tourists to Blarney. One participant believed that this would naturally occur given the walks present and the natural beauty of the area. However, one member of the community believed that a lot of extra work would need to be done to encourage Irish people to visit and stay in Blarney. It was also noted that there are many people who travel from the northside of Cork City to explore the nature of Blarney.

Furthermore, a community member drew everybody's attention to 'Brand Blarney', a community led initiative that aims to enhance Blarney's image as a global tourist brand. The website for Brand Blarney is still a work in progress, however, there was an overall sense of optimism that it would enhance the visitor experience of Blarney. It was also brought to everybody's attention that an ecological and tourism study of the Clogheen Milcon Fen has

been carried out. Brand Blarney will be seeking to apply for funding for the next stage of the project, which aims to enhance the Fen as a tourist destination. In addition, residents raised their desire to accommodate and promote biodiversity through the provision of trees and “insect friendly vegetation” during the MPlan students site visit. An enquiry as to whether council-owned areas could be used for this purpose.

1.5 Countryside: Transport and other services: Overall score: 4.5

While the community expressed satisfaction with the half-hourly bus service between Blarney and Cork City, its hinterlands are less well-served and amenities such as footpaths and cycle lanes that facilitate other modes of travel, especially active modes of travel which Cork City Council seeks to promote, were deemed inadequate.

Pedestrian infrastructure such as the footpath along the R617 that links Blarney to the Business Park and to Tower was identified as too narrow and unsafe given the significant number of HGVs that travel very fast down this road, and as being discontinuous, forcing pedestrians to cross the road at several points. A continuous, wider footpath coupled with the adequate provision of cycle lanes was requested to facilitate active, sustainable modes of travel for residents, workers, and students, alike.

Throughout the town, footpaths were frequently found to become too narrow and dangerous, or to disappear entirely, forcing pedestrians onto the road and excluding safe accessibility for pushchairs and wheelchairs/mobility aids. This occurs at the busy pedestrian link from the Blarney’s Woollen Mills and Hotel to the village square, which becomes even more dangerous given the two-way traffic at this very narrow point by the bridge (see cover photo). Improvements such as a raised speed table and/or a rumble strip or zebra crossing were identified as being important improvements to pedestrian safety both at this location and at the main entrance to the village square adjacent to the Church of the Resurrection. This

would also aid children’s independent, active patterns of mobility to and from school further reducing traffic congestion, especially as a primary school, Scoil Chroí Íosa, is located a few hundred metres further along Castle Close Road. The upgrading to a continuous footpath with the inclusion of raised t-tables at the numerous turn offs/entrances along the Castle Close Road, would further prioritise pedestrian/school children’s access and safety along this school route. The necessity for speed ramps on the Waterloo Road was identified by a resident who felt the safety of pedestrians along this route was currently being jeopardised due to the high speeds cars often travel at.

It is hoped that improvements to the County of Cork’s rail services such as the location of a nearby railway station should further enhance Blarney’s connectivity.

The desire and need for both a community hall and a health centre was expressed.

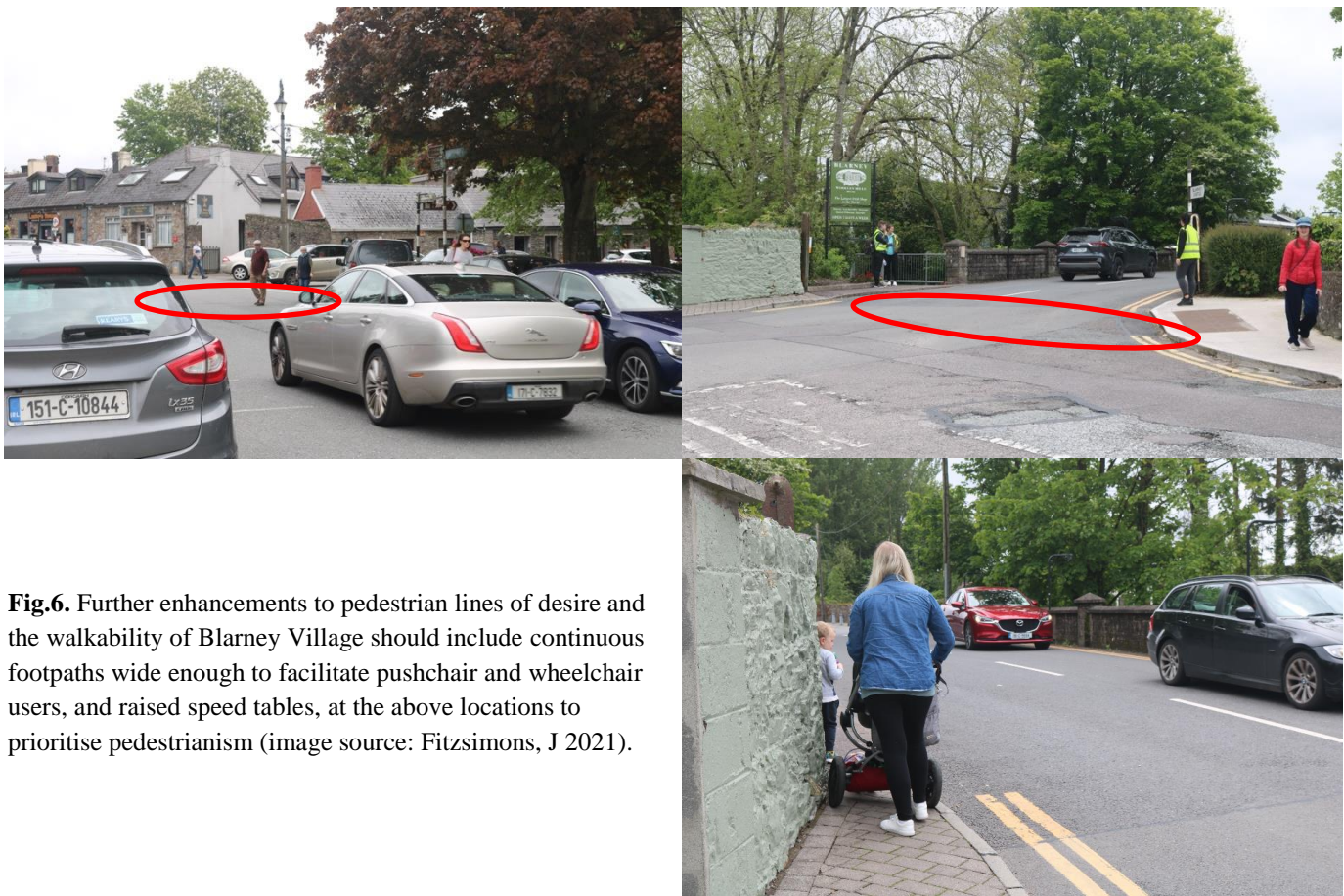


Fig.6. Further enhancements to pedestrian lines of desire and the walkability of Blarney Village should include continuous footpaths wide enough to facilitate pushchair and wheelchair users, and raised speed tables, at the above locations to prioritise pedestrianism (image source: Fitzsimons, J 2021).

1.6 Streets and Spaces: Overall score: 5.6. (See fig.6. and **1.5 Countryside: Transport and other services** for recommendations for street improvements as well).

Blarney’s residents, business owners, and councillors, expressed the need for an upgrade of several of Blarney’s footpaths and the installation of raised pedestrian crossings coupled with rumble strips to improve Blarney’s walkability and connectivity and slow traffic at specific points in the village.

It was also suggested by a business owner that creating a one way system or rerouting tour buses access to the town’s core could encourage further exploration of what Blarney has to offer besides the castle and the woollen mills and hotel, as well as reducing traffic congestion around the village square at peak tourist periods, especially at the pedestrian desire route between Blarney Woollen Mills and Hotel, and Blarney Castle and village square.

The village square was highlighted as an important social amenity that should continue to be preserved. As one resident put it: “The village square was created for all to enjoy and will remain for all to enjoy as long as there are children in Blarney to enjoy it”.



Fig.7. UCC students appreciating a vital, recreational amenity: Blarney’s grassed, heritage village square (image source: Jeanette Fitzsimons).

1.7 Amenities and Facilities for All: Overall score: 4.5.

From the discussion, an evident opinion from across the board was the need for a reasonable community centre in the town of Blarney. It was brought to our attention that there are a number of local groups and organisations that have to arrange a meeting in the local hotel, GAA clubs or elsewhere as there is nowhere else suitable for them. Therefore, the construction of a community centre would be a fantastic resource in order to facilitate these meetings and other activities.

There was a general consensus with the idea of a new community centre. Participants discussed how a community centre could facilitate local groups with a diverse range of interests and needs, particularly for people who are not involved in sport as the local GAA, and Soccer Club are both well equipped with clubhouses.

A positive view on this topic expressed, was the plentiful supply of open spaces for people not involved with sport and these are well managed throughout the town such as the park. However, it was considered that more can be done with these spaces.

It was felt that accessibility to amenities, particularly for those with restricted mobility was poor. It was considered that developments such as the Clogheen Milcon Fen will provide greater levels of inclusive accessibility and therefore address some of these issues. During the site visit, one resident also raised the possibility to make the Clogheen Milcon Fen walk a circular route.

Although the discussion centred around a community centre and the provision of access to nature, the MPlan students were made aware by informal discussions with local residents during their site visits, of the need for public toilets and more seating, throughout the town. This was felt important to accommodate Blarney's aging population.

1.8 Housing and Living: Average score: 2.

Whilst it was noted by participants that many of Blarney's older demographic do not wish to downsize for myriad reasons, a few expressed the desire to downsize if suitable and attractive housing was available within their community. Research shows that often first-time buyers and downsizers are in direct competition with one another, which, in turn, limits supply for families who are expanding and need to upsize. Participants of the public consultation agreed that future housing development must respect the beautiful, rolling countryside, and views of such, especially from key historic, economic linchpins of the village such as Blarney Castle. Several housing schemes have been refused for environmental / landscape reasons in the area. Suitable screening with considered landscaping of future housing developments was suggested during the consultation webinar. Housing development of an appropriate scale reflecting demographic demands and sensitive to Blarney's industrial village heritage that avoids any amelioration of key views of scenic beauty was identified. Subsequent to Blarney's CTCHC, the identification of dereliction, albeit limited, within Blarney, and the subsequent regeneration of such, could also provide residences both for first-time buyers, and those who desire to upsize or downsize.

1.9 Moving Around: Overall score: 3.25

In this section, several members of the Blarney community raised issues relating to the footpaths around the village. Firstly, it was stated that while the footpaths are safe in terms of lighting, they are too narrow, and thus dangerous, for pedestrians. One member of the community mentioned that it is particularly unsafe on the Blarney/Tower Road, and that the footpath from the village out to Clogheen Milcon Fen is much too narrow for a wheelchair or a buggy. The footpath tapers off and disappears at the corner of the road by the entrance to

Blarney Castle. This issue needs to be improved because many tourists visit the castle year round.

The second issue that was raised by the community related to traffic and parking in the village. It was stated that the cars 'take precedence' over pedestrians and suggested that this needs to change. Widening the footpaths was suggested in the discussion. There is limited mobility for cars, particularly in the centre of the village. The lack of safe and adequate cycling paths, coupled with narrow roads results in cyclists using footpaths instead of the road, which is dangerous for both the cyclist and the pedestrian.

Public transport was also briefly mentioned and the participants stated that they were happy with the bus services but that it could still be improved. Finally, the role of the Department of Transport (who have recently joined the CTCHC) and the €120 million for proposed greenways was mentioned as a positive aspect for Blarney and its future.

2 Report Summary and Conclusions:

2.1 Summary of Public Consultation

Overall, participants from the public consultation webinar felt that Blarney was a positive place to live. This is reflected in some of the positive scoring by participants from the community during the webinar. It is clear from the discussion held in the webinar that there is a strong sense of belonging and identity within the community that is underpinned by community organisations. A thriving economy is promoted and supported by passionate local business groups. Key to the economic success of Blarney is its close ties with the surrounding natural beauty and landscape through tourism. There is a strong vision for the future to utilise the town's natural assets to enhance Blarney as a destination for domestic and foreign visitors that is oriented towards ecotourism.

However, participants noted that Blarney could be improved in some aspects. Whilst public transport links from the town to Cork City were deemed satisfactory, the hinterlands are less well connected. Cycle lanes and footpaths were also deemed inadequate, which exacerbated underperforming accessibility to public spaces and amenities, particularly for those with restricted mobility. Although participants commended the number and variety of local organisations, the need for a community centre was identified. Participants raised safety concerns with the dominance of cars within the town in combination with the poorer connectivity and capacity of footpaths, and this is reflected in the lower score attributed to 'Moving Around'. Housing was identified as an issue for the town and scored lowest of all topics discussed. Similar to national trends, it was felt that supply did not meet demand, and that much of the current stock was inadequate to support lifelong needs. Participants were cognisant that future housing development did not impact on either the heritage of the town or its surrounding environs that are key assets to Blarneys economy and character.







