

Kilkenny County Heritage Strategy, 2026–2030

Submission by The Kilkenny PPN Environmental Linkage Group

The Kilkenny Public Participation Network (PPN) Environmental Linkage Group welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the Kilkenny County Heritage Strategy 2026-2030.

As a collective of local environmental and conservation groups within County Kilkenny, the Kilkenny PPN Environmental Linkage Group represents a strong, unified voice advocating for the protection, enhancement, and sustainable management of Kilkenny's rich built, natural, and cultural heritage. Our submission is rooted in the Kilkenny PPN's [Vision for Community Wellbeing](#), particularly the principles of environmental stewardship, sustainability, and community engagement.

We believe that safeguarding our heritage is critical not only for protecting the unique identity and biodiversity of our county but also for fostering a healthier, more resilient community for future generations. The challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss, as highlighted in the discussion paper, make this an urgent and essential undertaking. Our submission draws upon the lived experience, local knowledge, and passionate commitment of community groups across Kilkenny, and we hope it will support the development of a Heritage Strategy that is ambitious, inclusive, and forward-thinking.

Tangible Heritage

When we talk about tangible heritage we look to our buildings, monuments, archaeological objects, heritage objects, architectural heritage and wrecks.

Historic Built Environment and Streetscapes

Kilkenny has a wealth of buildings spanning across its inception as one of the most prominent cities in Ireland. It is something we are admired for and something that the inhabitants take great pride in.

We have been known as the 'Medieval City' due to the condition of many prominent architectural buildings such as Kilkenny Castle, Shee Alms House and Rothe House. These have sat into the landscape and have been repurposed for tourist and heritage uses over the years allowing them to remain cared for.

We have a strong tourist and retail city that is built around these as well as other buildings of significance. Over the years there has been modernisation, and for the most part, the city retained the heritage of the past.

One of Kilkenny's biggest assets is being lost to the assimilation to look 'modern' which in fact makes all cities and towns look the same. In particular the materials being used are not in keeping with retaining the historical heritage of Kilkenny.

The use of materials such as steel bins, granite surfaces, and poured concrete contrasts sharply with the medieval aesthetic and undermines the city's historic integrity. A more coordinated approach to look at the city environs as a whole would add to retaining the charm and heritage of Kilkenny City.

There is also an opportunity to utilise the architectural feature left by the removal of the houses at the Vicar Street/Wolfe Tone Street junction to incorporate it into a restroom facility for the proposed coach park in the car park in the Abbey Quarter.

Additionally, the prioritisation of cars, carparks and on-street parking in the city centre detracts from Kilkenny's medieval character and retail experience.

Vacancy, Dereliction, and Urban Renewal

Kilkenny has rich medieval history, but many areas are blighted by dereliction, vacancy and inappropriate development.

Recently we have seen a lot of vacant properties around the heart of the city that have remained uncared for and largely ignored. There has been a trend to demolish and rebuild some of these in ways that don't fit in with the look of the joining buildings. These recent developments have led to a fragmented and inconsistent approach to the built environment, risking the erosion of Kilkenny's distinct medieval character.

There is a real opportunity to use the current buildings within the city that are currently vacant for housing for the ever increasing demand. This would provide the opportunity to bring life back into the shops in Kilkenny that are suffering from higher rates, rent and less footfall.

If you bring back residential properties into the city centre we lessen the need for cars and outside shopping centres. Offering lower rates to start ups and small businesses offer consumers an opportunity to support more local businesses. If you offer spaces for connection and community they will be used.

Brewing in Kilkenny was part of the City's heritage, with Smithwicks, founded in 1710, perhaps the oldest surviving brewery in Ireland prior to its closure. Being a significant loss to the people of Kilkenny, its closure was accompanied with promises that the land, renamed the Abbey Quarter, would be developed for the benefit of the community.

Hoarding signage alongside the site still says "*A space for an intergenerational community to live, visit and play*", yet there appears to have been no attempt to develop the residential element of the area, meaning that it is empty and soulless after working hours. This is

despite the Masterplan for the area recommending that 30-35% of the area would be residential and that smaller infill sites within the Quarter should be considered for small scale residential opportunities. Such developments would bring vibrancy to the area and enhance the area's appeal.

Rural Development and Housing Patterns

Our rural heritage is greatly impoverished by dispersed housing. The proliferation of one-off housing and linear housing on rural roads with manicured verges and replacement of hedges with walls reduces natural ecosystems, results in social isolation of rural people, long commutes in private cars, underdeveloped public transport systems, underinvestment in power supply, water treatment and social services and adverse impacts on water pollution and carbon emissions.

Looking to our towns and villages they could be planned to become more connected. Allowing for housing schemes closer to the villages, even if they were self built one off houses would bring community and life back into them. This would allow for less dispersal of resources such as water and electricity. So in times of storms there will be fewer people left isolated in areas and left without these resources. Additionally, overhead wires should be put underground alongside the rollout of broadband.

Signage

There had previously been a push towards painted signage or use of natural materials or styles in Kilkenny. In the last few years with large chains taking up spaces on High Street, there has been a fall-off of these strict enforcements.

In many cities around Europe the large chains take on a more camouflaged look and assimilate into their environment. In Porto, for example, you would be hard pressed to recognise McDonalds on first glance as it has been pared back to blend in with its surroundings.

There is no denial that branding is an important tool in a business but when it comes to fitting in with the character of an area, special conditions should be met in order to make it more palatable to the surrounding areas.

We need to reevaluate at the signage of the streets and make adjustments to make the materials and reliefs to be more in keeping with the 'Medieval City' look.

There is also a need to keep and retain the signage that used to denote street names. There is currently a project in Trinity College Dublin to record the use of Cló gaelach — *"Cló gaelach' simply means Irish typeface", says Dr Volmering.*

There are still some signs around the side streets and main streets using this. If these could be retained and replicated on other signs there would be a coherence to the overall look in Kilkenny and its surrounding villages.

Protection of Heritage Objects

There are many scattered objects around Kilkenny and the surrounding area that are not being protected or recorded for posterity. Many are left exposed and left for vandalism or theft. On the historical map many of these are marked but to the public they don't exist. There needs to be a greater effort to record and mark these sites.

Actions Recommended to Improve Tangible Heritage:

- Address dereliction – historical buildings should be preserved through incentives and direct Council intervention.
- Incentivise upper-floor residential use in urban areas.
- Encourage planning to protect streetscapes, prevent inappropriate development.
- Window replacement to conform to original layout and balance.
- Abbey Quarter to follow through on stated aim to include “*office, residential, hospitality, retail, community and educational*” by facilitating housing.
- Historic buildings, monuments and ruins need protection from impacts of climate change.
- Public realm improvements are required to remove cars and provide better connectivity for walking, cycling and public transport.
- Encourage the Planning Section of the County Council to address the proliferation of rural housing and facilitate the growth of rural towns and villages instead.

Natural Heritage

Natural Heritage includes our flora, fauna, wildlife habitats, landscapes, seascapes, heritage gardens and parks, geology and inland waterways.

Biodiversity Overview

We are facing a biodiversity crisis; over half our native plant species are in decline, 20% of species assessed are threatened with extinction and over 85% of our EU designated heritage sites are of unsatisfactory status.

To address biodiversity loss, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has been tasked with improving conservation in the National Parks, and Kilkenny County Council have proposed actions to enhance biodiversity on its property.

The main driver of biodiversity loss is how people use land and water—A human-centric approach to development has contributed to the ongoing climate crisis and poses a serious threat to our natural heritage. Pressures include sprawling urbanisation, road construction, scattered rural dwellings, invasive species, wastewater discharges and the greatest pressure is from intensive agriculture.

Biodiversity in Agriculture

Our agricultural system has a major impact on Biodiversity and this is not adequately addressed. Farmers are custodians of about 70% of the land mass in Ireland. Their approach to intensive land use undervalues biodiversity. Wild habitats including hedgerows, wetlands and upland areas are lost to agricultural production. Flower rich meadows are replaced with monoculture grassland to support large cattle herds. Food crops are maintained with pesticides that eliminate pollinating insects and poison other wildlife, and excessive fertilizer runoff pollutes rivers.

Intensive farming is characterised by loss of diverse habitats and wildlife in the landscape, no food or shelter is left for nature, all our wildlife species have been reduced in numbers and many species including wild bees and farmland birds are threatened with extinction. Farming practices must be made more sustainable for wildlife.

As the demand for more food both for livestock and humans has intensified there has been an increase in use of fertilizers (nitrogen and phosphorus compounds) and pesticides to increase the yield. This has a knock on effect on our rivers as there is runoff from these fields that affects the water quality. The increase in the milk quota has resulted have more livestock to meet the demand. This is well documented as having an effect on greenhouse emissions.

The use of pesticides targets not only pest species but also kills our pollinating insects which in turn affects all growth of plants and flowers. The native bee is declining due to pesticides and the introduction of the European variant of the species. The native species needs to be protected as its loss will have a future effect on tillage and vegetable production.

Actions recommended to improve biodiversity in agriculture:

- The Heritage Officer could liaise with the Biodiversity Officer and Teagasc Environmental Section to deliver educational programmes for farmers aimed at increasing the diversity of habitats on farms and improved management of land for wildlife.
- Hedgerows planting and maintenance should be targeted specifically to ensure quality hedgerows that produce flowers, fruits and habitats to support pollinators, other insects, birds and small mammals. Strengthening of legislation to protect hedgerows and greater enforcement is required.
- Restoration of wetland habitats including the creations of ponds.
- Provision of microhabitats such as tufted grass (shelter for wildlife), bare patches of soil (for mining bees), and larger habits such as small woodlands and hare's corner.
- Reduced use of fertilizer and increased use of multispecies swards.
- Reduced use of pesticides and other toxins (e.g. spreading of sewage sludge which contains microplastics and 'forever' chemicals).

Biodiversity in Forestry & Hedgerows

The bulk of forestry in County Kilkenny is monoculture sitka spruce with token amounts of native species. Biodiversity is very low due to high density planting and the resulting shading.

There has been a noticeable destruction of our hedgerows in the last number of years. They are very important for insects, small rodents, foxes and birds. They also provide shelter for livestock in fields.

The current method of cutting back hedgerows is killing them as it breaks the trees and leaves them open to die off and rot. The 'lawnmower' type machine is highly unsuitable. County Kilkenny has an opportunity to become a positive example for other counties to follow by going back to a more suitable cutting method.

Actions recommended to improve biodiversity in forest & hedgerows:

- Protect existing native forests from overgrazing by deer and by controlling invasive species.
- Encourage planting of more native forests and a management system that allows the shrub layer and woodland herbs to grow so they can provide food and shelter for birds, wild bees, hoverflies, moths, butterflies, beetles and other invertebrates.
- Encourage planting of small native woodlands on all farms to improve connectivity in the landscape for wildlife in conjunction with improved hedgerows.
- Adopt a more suitable method for cutting and maintaining hedgerows.

Biodiversity in Freshwater Ecosystems

The river and lake quality has been on the decline in Ireland over the last 100 years. About half of our freshwater aquatic ecosystems including the River Nore and its tributaries are in an unsatisfactory ecological condition. These rivers are filled with plume from nitrate runoffs which is killing the fish and other life in the river.

Industrial waste continues to flow into these rivers with inadequate oversight and treatment, contributing to environmental degradation—the foam gathering on a heavy rain flow day is a signal of water pollution. The rivers as well as being a beautiful amenity need to be protected from pollution so they can be enjoyed for years to come.

Biodiversity in rivers is further impacted by invasive species of plants, animals and infectious microorganisms. The pressures include:

- Agricultural run-off of nutrients (mainly nitrogen and phosphorus), sediments and pesticides.

- Urban wastewater treatment and septic tanks produce discharges that also contain nutrients in addition to household chemicals and pharmaceutical waste products.
- Anything added to soil, including chemicals in sewage sludge and leaching from plastics make their way into rivers.

The proposed development of a new water entry at the County Council buildings poses significant risk to existing wildlife habitats of many species. There are ducks, swans, moorhens, herons, cormorants, otters, water voles, trout, salmon, songbirds and kingfishers to name a small number that rely on the very spot proposed.

The removal of an area along the river that has already lost the natural river edge from the new bridge to Johns bridge is short sighted and will only cause more of the natural inhabitants of the river to lose their homes.

We urge the Kilkenny County Council to actually take a look at the river as a guide for its future uses.

Actions recommended to improve biodiversity in freshwater ecosystems:

- Support LAWPRO Citizen Science programmes that enable a community role in monitoring their local rivers and in removal of invasive species.
- Support educational programs and advertisement campaigns on nutrient management.
- Encourage the development of effective river corridors along the Nore and its tributaries that will buffer the river from farming activities on adjacent land.

Biodiversity in Gardens

There are great resources, educational material and programmes available to inform gardeners about measures that increase the diversity of wildlife in their gardens, produced by the Heritage Officers and by the National Biodiversity Data Centre. Continued support for these measures is desirable.

Biodiversity in the City:

Future development of Kilkenny City should aim to enhance the heritage of a green city designed with sustainability in mind. Features would include sustainable architecture, use of renewable energy, efficient public transport, pedestrian and cycling infrastructure, waste reduction, climate proofing actions and accessible green spaces. Much progress has been made on the latter by provision of riverside parks and other public realm spaces.

Integrating nature into the city would enhance biodiversity, carbon sequestration, improve air and water quality.

The Castle park has had a very successful rewilding programme in the back meadow and there is hope that this will encourage the corncrake to this environment.

When the Abbey Quarter was proposed, there was to be an area within the abbey quarter to house all the water sports. There is even an existing jetty and a carpark that as yet is not utilised to its full potential.

Programs like Japanese knotweed removal and Himalayan balsam removal have been successful in controlling these invasive species in the city.

Actions recommended to improve biodiversity in the City:

- Plant more native trees in the city and suburbs both in streets and in pocket forests.
 - Use pollinator friendly plants in all planters and flower beds.
 - Better management of runoff water would be achieved by increasing permeable surfaces and keeping asphalt surfaces to a minimum in designed landscapes. Permeable grass-filled paving blocks would suit some public car parking spaces and private driveways. Rain garden planters (with pollinator friendly plants) could also be used to attenuate surface runoff.
 - Many roads and laneways in Kilkenny have ugly concrete walls. Increased planting is necessary to disguise them. Use of pollinator friendly climbers or living walls using mosses and ferns could be employed.
 - Encourage rooftop gardens on appropriate surfaces.
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Intangible Heritage

Looking at our Folklore, place names, local history, genealogy, sport, traditional skills, industrial heritage, social history, oral heritage.

- Graveyards should be preserved, tomb inscriptions should be recorded and digitised with a recorded map at entrances to graveyards.
- Updating of 1990 Industrial Archaeology Survey to take account of restoration and deterioration.
- Kilkenny needs archive facilities to hold historical documents and photographic records centrally.

Folklore

We have a rich folklore in Kilkenny. In order to protect this for future generations it should be recorded and stored. Whether this is written or voice recording. There is a need to record stories about areas or buildings or people that will be lost.

With recording facilities more accessible and voice to text facilities this could be achieved easier. Linking in with the local KETB, secondary schools or SETU could be used to facilitate this.

With many vacant properties even the old Meubles building these could be collated and stored. This would provide a great resource for locals and other interested stakeholders.

Traditions

We have many traditions in Kilkenny that need to be passed on and kept alive, whether they are rural or from Kilkenny city it is important to keep them going.

Springs and Community Water Sources

Once the only source of fresh water for many communities, these are being lost. There are still many pumps still taking pride of place in many villages and towns around Ireland. On the continent these are still available and used for refreshments.

Not only does it nod to our past it is a sustainable way to provide a water source that will lessen the need for plastic bottles. There used to be natural springs at Kilkenny Castle and down at the base of the Black Quarry that in the last 20 years have been blocked.

Industrial Heritage

Once a thriving place with many mills along the River, many are now derelict and no longer in use. Some have been bought by private landowners and have been lovingly restored, others have been demolished. There should be a push to repurpose these buildings or at least record the history of them.

There was an active canal in Kilkenny city that has been left to be overgrown and forgotten about. The created waterfalls that powered them could be used to harness the power of water as a renewable source of power. Active mills like Nicholas Mosse still use these wheels.

This submission has been prepared and approved by the Kilkenny PPN Environmental Linkage Group, April 2025