

Tidy Towns Competition 2023

Adjudication Report

Centre: Balla - Balla Alainn	Ref: 894
County: Mayo	Mark: 349
Category: B	Date(s): 22/06/2023

	Maximum Mark	Mark Awarded 2022	Mark Awarded 2023
Community – Your Planning and Involvement	80	48	49
Streetscape & Public Places	80	46	48
Green Spaces and Landscaping	80	47	50
Nature and Biodiversity in your Locality	55	36	38
Sustainability – Doing more with less	55	26	28
Tidiness and Litter Control	90	62	63
Residential Streets & Housing Areas	55	35	36
Approach Roads, Streets & Lanes	55	35	37
TOTAL MARK	550	335	349

Community – Your Planning and Involvement / An Pobal - Pleanáil agus Rannpháirtíocht:

Fáilte chuig Comórtas Na mBailte Slachtmhara Super Valu don bhliain 2023. Táimid buíoch daoibh as ucht na hiontrála a chur chugainn, agus guimíd gach rath ar bhúr gcuid oibre amach anseo. Adh Mór.

Welcome to the Super Valu Tidy Towns Competition for 2023. We thank you for your entry, and wish you all the best in all your future work. Good luck.

Balla - Balla Álainn, a mid-sized village with a population of 720 people – has entered the competition for over 40 years and has a committee of 10 members with support of another 60 volunteers.

- You hold an AGM in March each year, and have regular meetings throughout the year as well as ‘Méitheal Days’. Your committee involves as many people as possible in reviewing and updating the long-term development plans for your village.
- Support is received and you liaise with a range of relevant organisations and local businesses, groups, and agencies with the objective of building a shared vision, crafting realistic plans, and agreeing common goals for the development of the village. Your committee has strong links with officials from Mayo County Council.
- You communicate with the public via a quarterly newsletter in conjunction with Balla CRD outlining all the positive aspects of your community. You keep a Facebook page and now have a ‘Tidy Towns Section’ on the Balla.ie webpage. A group texting system is used to keep people informed of new developments and to arrange meetings, community clean ups, ‘weeding & planting evenings’ and ‘meitheal days’ etc. All of this is administered by the Balla CRD office. New Powerpoint Presentations, highlighting activities and events, are prepared regularly and these are run on the Digital Community Notice Board in the local Community Resource Centre.
- Every year you organise a joint programme of activities with Mini Mi’s Early Years Learning Centre as well as Balla, Craggagh, & Manulla National Schools and Balla Secondary School. This involves the Spring Cleanup, surveys, ‘Bug Tours’ as well as a fairy trail and visits to the ‘Fairy Village’ in Balla Town Park as well as other programmes such as StreetScapes. Initiatives undertaken with schoolchildren has been very beneficial, as it helps to spread the Tidy Towns message amongst parents and across the wider community. Young people have a significant involvement in your regular clean up days with up to 250 volunteers attending the last Spring Cleanup Day – a fantastic achievement. The Chairperson & Secretary of your Junior Tidy Towns group are invited to attend Balla Tidy Towns committee meetings.
- It is noted that the voluntary work undertaken by Balla Community Tidy Towns has built confidence and developed a positive attitude in the community as well as a sense of pride in the village. The teamwork and community spirit created has also transferred into other areas in the development of the village and surrounding areas.

The coloured map and numbered legend showing the main features of the village and the listing of projects carried out over the last year, provided with your Entry Form, was of very good quality. The clarity of the map made it easy

for the adjudicator to navigate around the village and was very helpful in the overall assessment process.

The quality of the application form was also very good. Well done for including reference to the alignment of projects to the relevant sustainable development goals under each category. It was beneficial to include photos highlighting projects carried out under each category – a short description under each photo would also provide greater clarity to the document.

The adjudicator's assessment is based on a recent site visit and the contents of the application form, which is suitably concise at 22 pages long - well done. The text inserted on the form is also quite easy to read. The use of numbered bullet points worked well. It is also a good idea to try and minimise the number of long paragraphs on the form and to replace these with shortened sentences or bullet points. This makes the document much easier to read.

Streetscape & Public Places / Sráid-Dreach & Áiteanna Poiblí:

- Your committee has rightly placed a significant focus on the conservation, protection and enhancement of the heritage buildings in Balla. It is noted that you have applied for the Heritage Award this year – we wish you the best of luck. You have also undertaken a number of new projects under this category this year including the production of a general history of Balla called 'Balla - a Rich History' providing information on Balla since St. Mochua settled there in the year 639 and when Balla was known as Ros-Dairbhreach (Oak-Grove). You have also launched the Balla Heritage Plan and Heritage E-Trail using QR codes as well as a Walking Guide which looks very impressive. In relation to streetscape issues, you are taking steps to agree a Balla Streetscape Plan and will offer a colour visualisation through graphics to premises / business owners – a very innovative project which will no doubt transform your village.

- The adjudicator called to Balla village on a warm sunny day in late June. We commenced our visit at the Church car park which was well marked and presented. The attractive stonewall and dense backdrop of trees and greenery to the rear of the car park created a very good first impression. The Church grounds and graveyard located on the opposite side of the road displaying attractive and imposing cut stone piers and gates together with coniferous tree planting, were all greatly admired.

- The adjudicator proceeded along Station Road to the village square which was neatly laid out and surfaced to provide an extensive tarmac car and bus parking area. One wonders whether a re-design of the entire area could be considered as part of the Balla Streetscape Plan, to make it more walkable, pedestrian and cycle friendly. At present an expanse of cars dominates the square and there is little space for any other activities. This public space could be the focus of greater community activity in Balla. One wonders whether the amount of car parking provided here is 'absolutely necessary', to meet the needs of the adjoining community centre or generally for a village the size of Balla. In advance of any major changes, perhaps consideration should be given to introducing some landscape elements into the car park in order to better regulate traffic movements in this area and visually enhance the area. Those parts of the square not currently used for car parking could be transformed to create planted areas with trees and herbaceous perennial plantings, which would significantly enhance the overall visual appearance of the area in the short/medium term. As part of any major redesign of the square in the future, a large paved area could be set aside for a community marketplace for a piece of sculpture. This could be associated with the significance of Balla's local heritage features, such as the well and round tower and its importance as a former monastic settlement on a pilgrim route, links to Saint Mochua and St. Cronan etc.

- The mix of residential and commercial buildings surrounding the square are in various states of presentation and if not already done, it would be good to establish vacant properties register to see if owners can be encouraged to renovate their properties and shop fronts. There are significant government grants available for this and might be an opportunity to provide much needed accommodation and prevent the properties falling into disrepair and dereliction. Further consultation with Mayo County Council in this regard is suggested.

- The a very wide Main Street, the Breaffy Road in the central part of the village has nicely paved footpaths and traditional style public lighting with all services laid underground. Road surfaces and markings along the Main Street are to a good standard. The residential and commercial properties facing the road provide a pleasant colourful aspect and the young lime trees planted as part of a previous village renewal scheme are growing well, enhancing the streetscape. The newly painted plant containers and floral displays in the vicinity of the Nally monument added a welcome splash of colour here.

- The Balla Blessed Well and the site of the old monastery, round tower and graveyard were visited and it was interesting to read about the historic significance of this area and the monastery site over many centuries. The area around the well, the small Church, Grotto area were in tip top condition and the historic information signage provided on site was very interesting to read for the first-time visitor. Balla is fortunate to have so many walking trails and the start of the heritage trail near this well was noted positively.

- The handrails at the steps leading to the community centre from the main street need a freshen up with paint and the nearby bus shelter and litter bin have both seen better days and detract from this area. The adjudicator enjoyed the quotes and sentiments expressed on the 'Smile Wall' and indeed it did make us smile!

Green Spaces and Landscaping / Spásanna Glasa agus Tírdhreachú:

- Balla is noted for its many magnificent green spaces. You have initiated a grass cutting regime with "Don't Mow Yet" signs erected, which allows for more extensive natural meadows and wildflower areas. New planting is biodiversity friendly and is done in accordance with advice from an ecologist, who is preparing a Biodiversity Plan and is also in partnership with Mayo County Council. You have placed emphasis on the planting of perennial shrubs, plants and wildflowers and are giving priority to the development of the Community Biodiversity Garden and Community Orchard. In partnership with ASIAM, Schools and local organisations you are in the process of creating a Sensory Garden on the green space in the vicinity in the Playground and MUGA.

- The green space and parkland area near Saint Cronan's Church was visited and we noted the works commencing on the new community sensory garden. The wide range of facilities provided here including a large

children's playground, all weather pitch, tennis court with picnic benches impressed. The horse chestnut trees planted on the perimeter of the open space provided good screening along the road. The entire area was maintained to a very good standard. The newly painted train planter was a particular highlight here.

- Balla Town Park is an excellent local amenity and the adjudicator noted the high-quality access road and boundary fencing installed through the woodland areas, providing a sweeping access to the park. There is good information signage at the entrance although it is not so clear the exact extent of the public park in relation to the adjoining GAA Grounds and Golf Club. A particular highlight in this area is the oakwood resulting from the 'Dawn Oak 2000 Project' and the trees here are establishing well. The seating installed provides very scenic views across the adjoining countryside. The Golf Club and GAA grounds are maintained to an excellent standard and the works underway on the development of new pitches at the GAA Club were noted positively.
- We viewed the community garden and noted that a complete overhaul of the garden has taken place with the application of bark mulch to improve growth and minimise ongoing maintenance. The fruit trees are cropping well this year and it looks like there will be a good demand for home baked apple tarts in Balla this year! The items of signage erected highlighting biodiversity friendly mowing regime in this area, were positively noted.
- Reducing further your use of seasonal bedding schemes for your floral displays is an important initiative for your committee to consider in future years. Colourful perennial and pollinator friendly plants e.g., *Alstroemeria* spp. can be used to very good effect as an alternative to the flamboyant but labour/water/energy-intensive bedding annuals such as *Begonias* and *Petunias*.

Nature and Biodiversity in your Locality / An Dúlra agus an Bhithéagsúlacht i do cheantar:

- As noted previously you are currently developing a Biodiversity Plan for Balla, with funding from Community Foundation Ireland. Your Biodiversity Garden continues to be enhanced and you have planted more pollinator friendly flowers and shrubs to provide habitats for insects and birds in the garden.
- There are two Turloughs close to Balla which provide important habitats for wildlife in the area. An interesting project is the development of a Birdwatching Hide at the Turlough to the west of the village and this is further enhanced by signage. Bird feeders and nesting boxes have also been installed at this location.
- It is noted that your committee seeks to discourage the use of weedkillers in all areas by all organisations working in the Balla area. The adjudicator is very pleased to read that you are currently investigating the purchase a mechanical weed remover to keep the pavements, cycle paths and road margins free from weeds – these machines have proved very effective in other areas in controlling weeds without the use of herbicides.
- The further development of loop walks in Balla is an important project to pursue and will provide improved access to existing woodland and other habitats for the benefit of the whole community.

Sustainability – Doing more with less / Inmharthanacht - Mórán ar an mbeagán:

- This category is all about doing more with less and your committee has fully recognized that a range of further efficiencies can be driven in the wider Balla community. A total of 18 projects are included under this category and you have applied this year for 'The Waters and Communities' Award. You are driving efficiencies locally including encouraging carpooling, remote working, encouraging installation of insulation and upgrading of home heating controls. Your adjudicator is pleased to note that you have enhanced your mobile watering system in order to use rain harvested water for watering planters and hanging baskets and have increased the use of pollinator friendly perennials in flower beds and planters.
- It is noted that you have been accepted into the Sustainable Energy Communities Renewable Energy Support Scheme and are currently developing a Community Master Plan in conjunction with local organisations in the community. In considering the contents of the masterplan you might look at the development of small electric microgeneration schemes for Wind, Solar and Hydro in the area in partnership with the Local Authority - these may also attract suitable SEAI or Leader funding. In addition, the provision of public e-car charge points at suitable locations in the village could be pursued. You have also applied for the Community Energy Grant Scheme in conjunction with Balla National School and Mini Mi's.
- Your time share community kitchen is a good example of doing more with less, offering state of the art facilities to local chefs and food entrepreneurs so they don't have to travel elsewhere. The old courthouse has also been developed to provide an IT Remote Working Hub, offering members of the community, who are currently commuting long distances, the option of working locally.
- Your plans to improve cycling facilities in Balla are fully in keeping with the objectives under this category. The idea to market Balla as a Family Cycling Destination using existing trails to create facilities for families and cycling groups is an excellent proposal. Additional cycling infrastructure, to include off-road macadamed pathways, directional signage, cycle tracks and cycle park areas, can be developed over time. You are wished well with plans to arrange cycling proficiency classes for local pupils including the offer of cycle friendly prizes, such as bike locks/lights etc.
- You might in the future consider installing a community composter in the village. These are useful and provide a quantity of mulch to use on your planted areas, which will ensure rapid establishment of the plantings.

Tidiness and Litter Control / Slachtmhaireacht agus Rialú Bruscair:

- It is noted at Balla Tidy Towns has applied for a 'leave no trace' Tidy Towns Award this year and you are fortunate to have a number of vigilant committee members who keep on top of the litter control in the village and surrounding areas. You had a successful Spring Clean in early May with over 200 volunteers from the community including the schools, Foróige and ARA – that is a great level of local commitment to maintaining a high standard of presentation and litter control in the village. Thanks, are due to the company PEL which donated 2 smart bins to

Balla which have greater capacity and are far more effective than the normal bins.

- On the day of adjudication, the bring centre near the Centra shop was neat and tidy and the village area and environs were found to be largely litter free – congratulations to all concerned.

Residential Streets & Housing Areas / Sráideanna Cónaithe & Ceantair Tithíochta:

- Balla is very fortunate in having a high percentage of buildings occupied and presented to a high standard. You have a total of 10 residential areas and residents are encouraged by your committee to maintain green areas and children's play areas to the highest possible standards, whilst also providing areas for pollinators. It is noted that all stakes and tree ties were removed from the remaining trees in College Woods and the residents painted the railings at the front. Well done on your quest to ensure individual estates have suitable name signs and preferably bilingual.
- The adjudicator called to Church View, Oak Mill, Ashling Manor, Moat, Woodlands and College Woods estates - all of these estates were generally found to be maintained to a very good standard.

Approach Roads, Streets & Lanes / Bóithre Isteach, Sráideanna & Lánaí:

- Major improvements have taken place on the approaches to Balla in recent years with the realignment of the N60 on each side of the village. Bearing in mind that that 9000 vehicles pass through the village each day, the main street continues to be presented to a high standard.
- Other significant infrastructural work undertaken recently in the Balla area include the resurfacing and upgrading of connecting roads, laneways, cycle lanes and greenways to provide improved access and pedestrian connections. In addition, the new cycleway associated with the Claremorris Road (N60) will link up with all the other walks and cycleways in Balla, also providing safe access to the Balla Turlough, which is an important SAC.
- On the Castlebar approach to the village the road is characterized by very well maintained and attractive open spaces on both sides of the road with attractive avenues of lime trees and colourful stone planters. There is potential to plant a hedge along the white concrete post and rail fence on the Kiltimagh approach.

Concluding Remarks:

It was a great pleasure to visit Balla village this summer and you are wished well with the preparation of the Balla Streetscape Plan, with the support of the County Council and local Community. There is no doubt that significant improvements can be achieved in the village and environs given the wonderful amenities that already exist on your doorstep. Balla continues to make good strides in the competition and your committee is clearly working very hard to improve community spirit and the overall appearance and environs of your village – keep up the good work.