



Long Term Plan for Balla - Balla Álainn TidyTowns 2021 - 2025



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Welcome to Balla TidyTowns' 3-Year Plan

There is a rich social capital in Balla. The volunteers of Balla TidyTowns have worked hard over the years linking with the schools, businesses and many others - all working together for the greater good of the community. The community has advanced rapidly in the national TidyTowns competition gaining an incredible 35 marks in the last three years alone.

This plan aims to provide guidance for Balla TidyTowns (BTT) over the next 3 adjudicator years for the National TidyTowns competition. It will not include details of everything that they complete but should provide focus and direction for their work for the community.

Thanks

Balla TidyTowns would like to thank their community for their help and support in the development of this plan. This includes businesses, individuals and Balla Community Council; Balla Community Resource Centre; and Balla National and Secondary Schools.

This report pulled together the ideas and hopes of the TidyTowns volunteers and the Community of Balla. It was collated by Woodrow Sustainable Solutions Ltd.

Key Projects

The following are the KEY PROJECT proposals that would form the focus of the work of the TidyTowns over the next three adjudication years.

Proposed Key Projects:

Key Project
Branding your work.
Developing Awareness and Brand around rich heritage of Balla.
Promotion of town as day-trip destination with so many numerous trails to enjoy.
Enhance Public Realm of Main Square.
Rationalisation of Commercial & Community Signage on Approach Roads.
Refurbishment of Garage on Approach Roads.
Provision of Sculpture on Approach Road.

Community – your planning & involvement. Proposed actions:

This aspect of the competition is about involving the community in your planning and activities. You need to provide evidence in entry forms of the good attendance at meetings, of mechanisms to get ideas and feedback from the community. How do you work across generations or involve new residents in the area? Below are ideas on how to build on this aspect of your work.

Branding

You have a lovely logo and it is recommended that this is put discretely on all work completed. You could also have high vis jackets with your logo. You could also have a portable sandwich board that states “*Balla TidyTowns Volunteers at work*”. This would be displayed whilst your volunteers are working on a BTT project.

Solicit Suggestions from the Community:

Ideas for inclusion from the long-term plan were gathered from meetings with volunteers and committee members. You could widen this to set up a community suggestion box and/ or circulate an on-line community questionnaire periodically.

Community Notice Board & Website Address at Key Points:

The community website is excellent, as are other forms of community notifications on-line. Heritage information is excellent. It is suggested that a number of community notice board are erected at key positions (e.g. Playground, outside community Centre).

Community Initiatives

There are many wonderful community initiatives (Eg Meal Deals offer with local take away) and you are suggested to enter some TidyTowns Special Awards to celebrate these where possible.

TidyTowns Entry Form

As this is your ‘sales pitch’ for the adjudicator, it is suggested this is reviewed independently and updated annually.

Community – your planning & Involvement - Suggested Recommendations under:

- **Promote your work across the community where possible.**
- **Issue and circulate community questionnaire or erect suggestion box.**
- **Erect Community Notice Boards at key locations.**
- **Advertise the www.balla.ie at entrances to the town and on community notice boards and QR codes for trails.**
- **Enter Special Awards to celebrate aspects of your work.**
- **Review Entry Form for National TidyTowns Competition Annually.**

Streetscape & Public Places. Proposed Actions:

There is a rich built heritage in Balla which it is felt is not obvious when you first arrive in the town. It is not until you explore around the Town Square area that you then encounter the many ancient features including the round tower and penitential station. Areas like this, which emphasise the history and heritage of the town, are important in creating a distinctive sense of place, and help to counteract the unfortunate modern tendency for towns to lose their individual character. Nearby newly erected heritage information looks well and adds credence to the importance of the area as a milestone departure point along the Croagh Patrick Trail.

Appendices 1 & 2 list some of the built heritage features of the village, some of which are afforded protection by their inclusion in the Record of Monuments & Places. More modern built heritage features of note listed in the Buildings of Ireland include the Nally Monument, the two water pumps and even the Water Tower.

You have chosen the round tower as a feature in your logo and it is recommended that you build on this where possible through branding, development of a trail, and even a statue could be erected on approach roads to highlight the heritage of the town.

Iconic statue on approach road to Cahersiveen highlighting the monastic links to the area. Could an iconic statue be designed for Balla?



Large egg sculptures on Main Green at Baltry, Co Louth highlighted the natural heritage of the area:



Heritage trails - detailing built, natural and cultural heritage of note.

With notable heritage around Balla, it is felt that this should be shared and imparted to locals and visitors alike not just in a static sign but via a trail to encourage them to explore Balla. The appendices of this report detail much of the heritage of the area. You already provide heritage information at the centre and this could be expanded.

Development of a Heritage Trail:

You have a lovely sign at the Town Square and you are encouraged to further develop this into a trail to follow whilst exploring the community. As you know, signs are expensive and have to be maintained, so alternatives could be available on-line, or simple signs with QR codes could direct to more information, or you could have simply laminated sheets available in dispensers. Take care not to provide too much information – ‘simple is effective’. A children’s version or scavenger trail could be also available. Letterfrack, Co Galway established a poetry trail around the village with 1m high pencils indicating the location to stand and read a selected poem. <https://www.irishtrails.ie/Trail/Letterfrack-Poetry-Trail/870/>

Dispensers beside an information point in Tallanstown containing sheets about local heritage that visitors can borrow to help them explore the area (below left).



Master-crafted gates (above) at entrance to St Cronan’s Church that could form part of a heritage trail around Balla.



Notice Board and leaflet dispenser at Abbey, Co Galway. Separate versions of sheets could be made for adults and children.

Town Square

Balla has a wonderful Town Square with many attractive, traditional buildings. Plans to re-open more empty properties will also enhance the Square. But it is felt the space is prioritised for Car Parking, and the wonderful Nally Monument and seating area appears on the edge as opposed to the focal point of the square. Public realm works at eg. Listowel Town Square or Clonakilty have greatly enhanced the centre of these towns providing a balanced public area for cars and pedestrians alike. Planting of mature specimen trees around the perimeter of the square is a recommendation.

Themed Markets

The space at the central Town Square would be good to host various markets with a theme such as a 'European Market, of a Sunday Arts & Crafts market, or a Christmas Market. The Community has the ability to research, invite and establish a variety of markets.

Main Street

Balla is fortunate in that many of the premises along the main street are occupied and are nicely presented. Recent planning applications for refurbishment of a notable property in the street will help restore the symmetry of the street and enhance the streetscape some more.

Attractive colour and artistic use of bird boxes attracts the passer-by to stop at the attractive Community centre and car park in Ballinahown, Co Westmeath:



Discussions were raised about co-ordinating paint schemes along the area. Photo apps (eg. Dulux visualiser app) allow owners to see what and how colours could enhance their streets. The use of graphics (eg. Archigraphix) can allow communities to visualise the areas at low expenses.

Commercial Signage

Businesses should be encouraged to adopt the heritage brand of the village using appropriate signage and encouraged to be bi-lingual where possible.

Street Lights

While the street lights along the central Main Street of Balla have been replaced with lamps of a more traditional design, there are also still some of the previous design present. While replacing lights can be an expensive investment by the local authority, it would be more visually harmonious if all were of the same design and if associated wirescape was placed underground.

The older street lights, and associated wires, compare poorly with the more attractive street lights in Balla:



Derelict Buildings

You have few of these but you should keep pressure to ensure empty properties are registered with www.vacanthomes.ie. Monitor Planning Applications to ensure all proposals are in keeping with the heritage of buildings. Empty properties should have window displayed in place to ensure they look attractive. Monitor the number of empty/derelict buildings and report dilapidation to the council.

Opaque Windows

A number of properties have full opaque windows taking away from the streetscape. This should be discouraged.

Funeral Home

This is a great amenity to have in the Balla Community. The pebble dash differs from the buildings in this area and it is wondered if this could be brought back to original stone or plastered as appropriate.

Street Murals

This dilapidated building near the Southern Approaches of the Main Street is quite unsightly. We appreciate you have been in contact with the owner to request permission for changes here. You have also proposed to run a school project here. The wall provides a good opportunity for some nice wall art. A simple well-executed mural could attract the passer-by and hopefully encourage them to stop and explore the area. Sneem village has decorated a similar site with a wildlife mural. Balla could use a built heritage theme or an image relating to the Woods (eg. Red Squirrel).

Façade of empty site that could be a feature on the Main Street:



Images of how a similar site was painted in Sneem, Co Kerry.



Summary of recommendations for Streetscape & Public Places:

- **Built on the Heritage links of the area through PR and Branding.**
- **Create information sheets to follow whilst following the many wonderful trails around Balla.**
- **Develop a public realm plan for the Town Square widening the focus throughout the square area.**
- **Research feasibility of hosting a market with a theme in the Square.**
- **Offer colour visualisation through apps or graphics to premises / business owners.**
- **Run initiatives to support bi-lingual shop front signage in traditional style.**
- **Lobby for remaining street lights to be upgraded and associated wirescape to be positioned underground.**
- **Survey and monitor derelict buildings and promote appropriate action.**
- **Discourage opaque window stickers.**
- **Consider removal of pebble-dash on Community Funeral Home.**
- **Commission a statement mural on Main Street site reflecting heritage of Balla.**

Green Spaces & Landscaping. Proposed Action:

This part of the competition considers sustainable planting and strong structure in your planting, throughout the year. Concentrate efforts and make an impact.

All Ireland Pollinator Plan:

The TidyTowns is a partner body in the delivery of the All Ireland Pollinator Plan. A series of great resources are available to download for free from the website www.pollinators.ie Homes, planters, window boxes and raised beds can all be planted with flowers that look lovely and are also good for pollinators.

Willow-edged landscaped beds at Darver planted with pollinator-friendly plants:



Sensory Garden in Blackrock, Co Louth:



Planters

The position of every planter should be carefully considered. Is there a water-butt nearby so it can easily be serviced? Is it safe for a volunteer to access? Can it be appreciated by the passer-by? Do they clash with adjacent street furniture? Is the size appropriate for its location? Planters in clusters also look well, and they should not be positioned on grass. Do not be afraid to relocate, or remove planters as appropriate.

Church Carpark

The carpark opposite the church currently has a rather bare and unwelcoming appearance. The planter shown in the picture below looks isolated and lost. Trees in planters are not recommended and could lose you marks in the competition. Single planters in areas of concrete or other hard surfaces usually have little impact and can even emphasise the bareness of the surrounding area. As a rule, it is better to group planters and pots.

There have been concerns about sight-lines at this car park so instead of planters, a better solution would be to build a low double retaining wall, approx. 50 cm high, along the front edge of the car park, which would be planted with low-growing, low-maintenance perennial flowering plants. Natural local stone should be used for the wall, in order to visually integrate the new feature with the existing back wall of the car park. This should still allow for good visibility to local residents should be happy with this more attractive planting scheme.

The bare, quite-unwelcoming car park is not enhanced by the single planter.



The two photos below, showing a low stone planted with campanulas and thyme. This could be very effective in terms of visually softening the appearance and bringing in attractive colour and interest as would be appropriate to encourage contemplation in this area of Balla. These plants also offer benefits to pollinating insects.

Pollinator-friendly campanulas and thyme plants that look attractive on boundary walls:



Image: Wikimedia commons



Image: pixabay.com

Specific Planting Suggestions for Discreet Areas

Border Planting at the Smile Fence



The Smile Fence, near Circle K on the Main Street, is a nice community feature. In front of this is a shaded border in which some attractive planting could be done in order to further enhance the area. This is a great opportunity for a woodland-style planting scheme, incorporating ferns, woodland bulbs such as bluebells, and other plants which thrive in shade. The old logs are attractive and useful to wildlife, and should be kept. However, it would be best to move them from the gravel path and place them in among the trees, again adding to the naturalistic woodland feel.

The following plants are recommended for this area:

- Shuttlecock fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*) – plant in groups of 5 – 7 for elegant foliage displays.
- Coral bells (*Heuchera* spp.) – these provide attractive evergreen foliage in shaded areas, and also produce flowers in spring-early summer. ‘Green Spice’ and ‘Winter Joy’ are two colourful varieties.
- Soft shield fern (*Polystichum setiferum*) – a very elegant fern for a shaded area. Best planted in small groups under the trees.
- Bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) – these provide wonderful colour in April-May, and spread naturally to form carpets of colour under trees.
- Snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*) – plant in groups for early spring flowers.
- Lords and Ladies (*Arum maculatum*) – a woodland plant with flowers surrounded by distinctive greenish spathes.

Planting Scheme opposite the Smile Fence

The island bed in front of the Smile Fence, almost opposite the Spar shop, is planted with a mixture of grasses, artichokes, and ground-cover plants. This area originally had weed-fabric and gravel laid around the plants, but these have become overgrown over time, mainly by grass. As grass and other plants can self-seed into the gravel overlying the weed-fabric, keeping an area such as this weed-free is not easy and requires regular maintenance.

However, a compromise solution would be to allow the grass to remain, but to trim it a few times during the growing season in order to keep it reasonably tidy and to reduce competition with the feature plants. Alternatively, the area could be sprinkled with seeds of annual wildflowers, some of which would grow quite well among the grass, and would also benefit bees and other pollinators. Cornflowers would be a very attractive choice. If this option is chosen, the flowers should be allowed to self-seed in autumn, and the area then trimmed to remove dead vegetation and tidy up the bed for the winter.



Landscaping at the Resting House and Holy Well

This has been very nicely restored and makes a pleasant, attractive areas for this stage of the Croagh Patrick Heritage Walk. The shallow water provides a good bathing and drinking place for small birds. Some of this area has been covered with weed-fabric and gravel. However, the weed-fabric is showing through in several places, which gives an unattractive and untidy appearance. This can be remedied by adding more gravel to form a thicker layer over the weed-fabric. It would be helpful to use metal pins (similar to tent pegs) to hold down the edges or corners of the fabric before adding more gravel. Limestone pea gravel would look best in terms of blending in aesthetically with the Rest House and surrounding stone walls. Updating the statue to one more in the style of the surroundings is a suggestion also.

Poor finish to the landscaping at Holy well:



Raised Bed outside Circle K

Outside the Circle K filling station on the Main Street is a raised bed. This is a good feature, but could be much improved by a few small changes. The bed has annuals added in the Summer, and has been planted with conifers and heathers permanently. However, some of these have not been planted deeply enough in the soil, leaving some of the roots exposed, and are unlikely to survive in the long term. When planting pot-grown plants, the plants should be placed so that the soil in the bed comes up to the same level as the surface of the compost surrounding the roots of the plant. When doing this, it is also useful to loosen the soil at the base of the planting hole, and to incorporate some organic material (e.g. garden compost or well-rotted manure), and some slow-release fertiliser. These measures help plants to become established, and reduce the risk of plants dying.

The soil in this raised bed is also trampled and compacted by people stepping on it while crossing the wall. This compaction is also bad for the plants and reduces their likelihood of surviving in the long term. While it can be difficult to prevent people from stepping over a low wall, a change in the planting scheme would help a lot. At the moment, the plants are spaced out widely, with bare soil in between. A more continuous planting feature, with fewer bare gaps between plants, would discourage people from trampling on the bed, and would also provide a more attractive visual feature.

When considering which plants to use, thought should be given to the biodiversity benefits that plants can offer. The existing heathers have benefits for pollinators, whereas the choice of dwarf conifers does little either visually or for wildlife. Further additions of plants should offer benefits to pollinators or other forms of biodiversity.

Raised bed that could be a show piece of pollinator-friendly planting in the village:



Green Near Playground

As one of the key areas where the community would congregate, it is suggested you consider more amenities here such as a communal pizza oven, or BBQ area. A raised herb bed could also be provided here for the public to use.

<https://www.pollinators.ie/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/AIPP-Herbs-A5-Flyer-PRINT.pdf>

A public, shared BBQ area, an adaption of which could be developed in the amenity park.



Trees

Balla has a strong history of tree planting and has done incredible work on this aspect of their TidyTowns Programme. It is recommended you have a volunteer specifically devoted to inspecting and tending to trees checking stags, tree pits, pruning etc.

Suggested actions for Green Spaces & Landscaping:

- **Encourage use of pollinator-friendly flowers in all planting schemes.**
- **Concentrate efforts on a small number of landscaped areas to make a big impact.**
- **Consider the location of every planter and provide pollinator-friendly, peat free compost in all.**
- **Soften Church Car Park with low traditional stone wall planted with attractive flowers suitable to reflect the importance of this area.**
- **Provide Community Facility by playground such as a Pizza Oven and Raised Herb Garden.**
- **Appoint a volunteer Tree Warden.**

Signage at Landscaped beds at Sligo encouraging the public to copy their planting schemes:



There are many great resources free to use such as the herb leaflet if you were to plant a community herb bed for the use of anyone in Balla:



<https://www.pollinators.ie/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/AIPP-Herbs-A5-Flyer-PRINT.pdf>

Nature & Biodiversity in your locality. Proposed actions:

In this category you have worked very hard. You have in place a Biodiversity Plan and this should be followed and implemented. One of the greatest projects you have actioned for this is the Neighbour Wood scheme and your work on swifts. You have also created a new bird hide with free equipment and notice boards for viewing.

Oaks in Balla

With the name Balla, and the oak leaf as your symbol, sustained planting of Oaks in the community should also be encouraged. You have already planted numerous as part of your Millennium Project and are encouraged to build on this. Could acorns be collected from local oaks and be grown and then re-planted. To encourage community support and buy-in this could be developed across the community. For example:

- Children at the creche could collect the acorns;
- The Men's shed could plant and grow these;
- Young saplings could be given to every family and each asked to plant them in a suitable pre-arranged destination

Giving ownership to families would encourage more involvement and buy-in with such a project.

Raise Awareness of Designated Sites in the Area & endangered species

To the East of Balla is a wildlife area of European importance. This is the Special Area of Conservation: Balla Turlough Site Code 00463. **Appendix 3** provides more details. The main aim of this designation is to maintain or restore the conservation status of this site and the awaited management plan will reflect this.

Raising awareness of the importance of this site is important and you should follow associated actions in our Biodiversity Plan on this.

Balla Town Park

Continue to promote the trails and amenities within the neighbour Wood scheme. This is an incredible achievement for a community the size of Balla. How wide-spread is this the existence of the wood outside of Balla? Details and signage to the Wood could be highlighted in the town and in local tourist information.

The use of a red squirrel image on murals could help link together the town and the wood:



River Views in Balla

There is a small river that flows through Balla by Spar, not visible unless you lean over the wall. An idea would be to provide railings for part of this wall, to allow views to the river. This would allow people to be aware of its existence.

Bird Hide

The new Bird Hide is a worthwhile and attractive feature which can help to foster interest in the local biodiversity and wildlife. Free equipment is available inside, and the attractive signage of Whooper swans here is informative. You are encouraged to share details of the wildlife seen here on social media and have workshops/sessions showing attendees wildlife of interest.

Screening is to be erected outside the hide so approaching visitors do not disturb the water birds on the Turlough. Nest boxes are to be erected also in the woodland.

The top of the boundary wall finished with raised concrete is not ideal aesthetically. This is likely to become partly colonised by mosses over time, which would soften the appearance to some degree, but this would be a very slow process. It could be speeded up if painted with a blended mixture of live yoghurt and moss which would encourage moss on the walls and help it blend in better with the environment (See for example, <https://www.hunker.com/12448377/how-to-make-moss-with-yogurt>). This could be a fun project for younger volunteers within the community.



As with the proposed wall by the church car park, it would be very attractive to have low-growing alpine plants growing on top of these walls. A suggestion would be to cut out pieces from the concrete with an angle grinder, in order to form planting hollows. These could then be filled with a grit & compost mix, and planted with alpines and succulents.

As shown in the photos overleaf, sedums, campanulas, thyme, and houseleeks would be attractive choices for planting on top of the wall at the bird hide if planting hollows were provided:

Sedum *Image: Wikimedia Commons*Thyme *Image: pixabay.com*Campanula *Image: peakpx.com*House leek *Image: pixabay.com*

Fruit & Nut Orchard

The grass area north of the Smile fence, along the road leading northward out of the town, has been planted with fruit trees and soft fruit bushes, and occasional daffodils. You are encouraged to include this area in any wildlife walks & talks, or indeed any food / foraging workshops that you organise.

Some of the apple trees would benefit from being pruned, in order to improve their shape and encourage fruiting spurs. This is normally done after the growing season, during autumn-winter. The wall along the back of this area has a lot of ivy, and is in proximity to a row of mature trees, and so is likely to be a good nesting site for a variety of small birds. It would be nice to extend the bird habitat out from this wall by planting a band of native shrubs parallel to the wall, e.g. 3 metres in width. Good choices include:

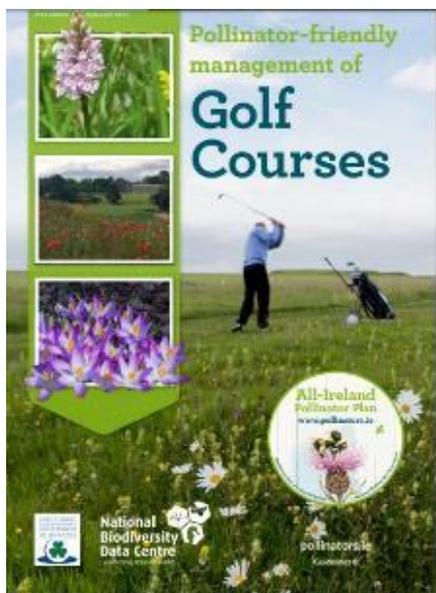
- Guelder rose *Viburnum opulus*
- Spindle *Euonymus europaeus*
- Bird cherry *Prunus padus*,
- Holly *Ilex aquifolium*
- Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*
- Honeysuckle *Lonicera periclymenum*.

These will also enhance the area visually, by providing flowers in summer, and great autumn foliage colour and berries. Much of the remainder of the grass area should be managed for wildlife as a meadow, with only paths being mowed regularly. You already erect signs about this and this should be continually promoted and the amount of grass mown should be reduced annually.

Golf Club

As mentioned, TidyTowns is a partner in the All Ireland Pollinator Plan. Free resources include a whole guidance document on how golf courses can be pollinator-friendly also.

Guidance to implement pollinator-friendly actions at Golf Courses:



<https://pollinators.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Pollinator-friendly-management-of-Golf-Courses-June-2019.pdf>

Nature & Biodiversity Recommendations:

- **Raise awareness through signage or other of the importance of the turloughs around Balla.**
- **Organise activities around the theme of the Oak tree.**
- **Run regular guided wildlife walks around Balla each year.**
- **Open views to the river within the town.**
- **Erect well designed bird and bat boxes.**
- **Run awareness-raising activities to highlight local wildlife eg. Prize for first to see a whooper swan from your new hide.**
- **Share knowledge and lessons on how to use a bird hide**
- **Approach the Golf Club to see if they would adopt and implement some of the proposed actions from the guidelines of golf clubs;**
- **Brand the town centre planting area as a 'fruit & nut' orchard and organise related themes/workshops.**

Town Park Logo:



Sustainability – doing more with less. Proposed actions:

This category is about driving efficiencies in communities whether it is car sharing or encouraging installation of insulation and upgrading of heating controls. Themes include energy, water, travel and waste reduction.

Waste Reduction

Sharing and waste reduction is an element of this adjudication category: bring & buy sales, second hand shops, upcycling workshops are a consideration here. Also, basic re-education on the etiquette of recycling is commendable 'Clean, Dry & Lose'. The Mayo reusable mugs are commended and should be continued to be promoted.

Stop Use of Single-Use Plastic across all in Balla

Continue to provide reusable crockery and cutlery to dissuade use of single-use plastics not just within the community centre but encourage local businesses to participate only. Offer a 'party box' with reusable items including bunting for parties.

Shared Kitchen Facilities at Centre

The new kitchen facilities that are available to rent by qualified start-ups is an excellent example of allowing your community to do more with less.

Promotion of Sustainable Travel options:

Where possible encourage use of public transport – provide timetables, prices and real-time information where possible. The bus stop on the Main Street is a lovely facility, though needing a few minor improvements. Car sharing could also be promoted with app for car sharing for commuters etc. School **Walking & Cycling Buses** should be encouraged.

Family Cycling Destination

The trails in and around Balla make it ideal day destination for families and cycling groups. Provision of cycling infrastructure to support this is recommended. This could include:

- Cycle Racks;
- Cycle Lockers;
- Street-fixed pumps & Tools;
- Cycle Park Areas.

Cycling proficiency classes are also a recommendation for local pupils and prizes could be distributed of bike locks/lights etc.

Image from www.cyclehoop.com of permanent pump and tools available for passing cyclists.



Water Usage

You have already completed a water habits survey. A revisit to that in a couple of years following targeted messages and training would be a useful exercise.

Use of water butts, and rain water harvesting is a consideration here. Push-buttons on external taps and built-in water storage in planters are additional ideas.

Energy

Use of smart metres, and initiatives to reduce energy are a consideration here. For example, the toilets at the centre have motion-activated sensors. Solar power speed lights, and low energy up lighting is also a consideration here. Promotion of installation of insulation is another.

The solar powered compacter bins here are promoted and details of saving from these should be highlighted.

The Community hopes to work with Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland to form a Sustainable Energy Community.

Home working & Hot Desks

The pandemic has shown how much easier it is to work from home, or at least not travel great distances. An application is being submitted to rejuvenate the Courthouse and offer an IT centre with Hot Desks.

Herbs planted in an old Reel beside recycling centre at Abbey, Co Galway:

Sensory plants could be planted by benches for active-age so smells and sounds of plants could be appreciated. A 'wee library' is provided to share books in this sensory garden:



Recommendations for Sustainability – Doing More with Less in Balla:

- **Continue to promote good waste management.**
- **Promote shared kitchen facilities for certified cooks.**
- **Share details of bus times and maintain bus stops.**
- **Promote car-sharing app usage across the community.**
- **Provide cycling infrastructure at key points in the community.**
- **Install BTT logo'd water butts where possible near planters or flower beds.**
- **Install push-buttons on external taps.**
- **Work with SEAI to form a Sustainable Energy Community.**
- **Install an electric vehicle charge points near community centre.**
- **Install solar-powered up lighting (that is suitable for roosting wildlife).**
- **Highlight savings from motion-activities lights at Community Centre.**
- **Run a workshop on juicing apples or harvesting fruits & nuts from community orchard.**
- **Support development of Hot Desk Centre with high spec IT facilities in the old Courthouse.**

Tidiness & Litter Control – proposed actions

With good levels of litter control in Balla, this report looks mostly at tidiness issues that could be considered.

Litter Picking & Spring Clean

Safe, litter picking as part of a communal event with the reward of a slice of cake should be continued and encouraged.

Public litter Bins

You are lucky to have a number of donated solar-powered waste compacter bins. Cost & time savings from these should be highlighted.

With increased bin charges, more public bins are being used to dump household waste. As a result, many communities are removing these especially with there are not needed. Are all the public bins used in Balla?

Erratic Signage for Community Events

Balla also has problems with notices for community events e.g. tractor runs, fundraising events, being erected at traffic junctions again in random places. A solution would be to set up a communal billboard like the one shown below in Mullingar. Signs for each business would then be attached to this rather than being erected separately.

Community Board for all temporary notices on approaches into Mullingar:



Abundant Signage – Commercial

The approaches to the town, especially along the N60 from both the north and south, have several signs which advertise various businesses in the town. As these have been erected in a fairly haphazard manner, they have an untidy and uncoordinated appearance.

Untidy, haphazard commercial signs on approach roads into Balla.



It is suggested that someone with good inter-personal skills is asked to discuss this with all the businesses concerned. They could approach the owners and convince them that the signs should be removed as a means of improving the town's appearance. They could be reminded that the town map at the square also listed the variety of businesses and services available across the community. Is there a way to direct tourists here to view this?

An alternative could be to offer them a similar display as suggested above for community notices. They could be offered a standard sign size and design template which could be used by each business. This would improve the visual coherence, and may even be a convenience for businesses who could simply use an existing attractive template rather than having signs designed specially.

As mentioned under the "Community" section of this report, the website address could be featured on approach roads under the town name (as is common in most European towns). Here businesses could be listed here also with a search facility for e.g. Restaurants.

Tidiness Issues

There are a number of general tidiness issues that could be identified if you carry out an annual walk-around the community to compile an action list. These include cable ties, tattered flags & bunting, rusty signs, a redundant post (Kiltimagh road) and old sign holders. The presence of old sign-holders on former business premises can add to a sense of visual clutter in a streetscape, and in some cases can emphasise the fact that businesses have closed down in the area. These old sign holders (examples are shown in the pictures below) could be removed quite simply. Another suggestion is to remove the new dog litter signage on the community centre wall as it is becoming very cluttered.

Pictures of Old Sign Holders, and aerials on old premises that should be removed to minimise visual clutter:



Repaint Top of Sewage Vent Pipes

The vent pipe on the right of this photo is in bad repair and should be painted.



Poster-Free Balla

Like 150 other towns and villages in Ireland you could establish Balla as a town where no election posters are displayed. <https://www.posterfree.ie/>

- Establish Balla as an election poster-free town.

Concrete Bollards to Block Roads

There are some ugly concrete bollards in place to stop traffic crossing the now closed road, and the adjacent grass. The community do not like these. Could they be painted? Could Tree Boxes be installed here instead? Could an artist work with residents to make an art sculpture working around the concrete blocks?



Image c/o Google Maps/

Presentation of Bring Banks

The bring banks off the main street could have better signage and surrounds and be positioned on a plinth. See ideas overleaf. Is the separate clothing bank on the Back Lane needed? It would be better positioned alongside these existing banks so they are all in the one position and could be more easily monitored?

Nicely maintained Banks in Co Louth with signage & planting on a concrete plinth at edge of car park.



Simple spacing, and nicely positioned planters enhance Birdhill's Banks.



Cider drinkers in Moynalty recycled cans to enhance their bring banks:



Simple screens help keep these banks presentable:



Tidiness & Litter Recommendations:

- **Organise and support Annual Spring Clean.**
- **Check street bins are used properly and relocate if necessary, to under-utilised areas.**
- **Eradicate commercial signage on approach roads.**
- **Highlight website for details on local businesses.**
- **Consider branding/mechanism to encourage visitors to stop and view notices at Own Square.**
- **Erect Community Events Display Board/s on approach roads**
- **Establish Balla as an 'election poster free' town.**
- **Walk-around Balla every March to identify tidiness issues to be addressed.**
- **Remove all old Sign Holders.**
- **Research ability to remove old aerials from home, for metal recycling.**
- **Remove all tattered flags and bunting.**
- **Remove cable ties and redundant poles.**
- **Enhance or replace ugly concrete blocks near Woodlands.**
- **Enhance the Bottle Banks as appropriate for Balla.**

Residential Streets & Housing Areas – Proposed actions

The Balla community is very fortunate in having a high percentage of buildings that are occupied, most of these homes are presented to a high standard. The home owners could be asked to help in other ways to help you in your work. They could be invited to help with actions to promote pollinators.

Ardcronan Water Tower

The water tower is no longer used. Discussions suggest a wish by some for it to be demolished. It is detailed in the National Registry of Buildings of Ireland (See Appendix 2). Another suggestion is to make a feature of it and apply for funding for a mural /design feature. The following website link will bring you to images of various water towers in Australia painted in bright colours:

<https://www.unitywater.com/community/community-artwork-program/completed-projects>

There are also many photographs of water towers painted with weird, wonderful or wildlife images in Pinterest:

<https://www.pinterest.ie/fawnee3/water-towers/?autologin=true>

You could discuss with the local residents, if this would be of interest and if so, what theme would they like? Check also with the Arts Officer of Mayo County Council for any compliance issues and recommendations.

Approach to the Church View Estate

The entrance to the Church View Housing Estate features some attractive grounds and planting. Two areas at the entrance have been identified for planting advice:

1. The border on the right, near the entrance to Church View, is quite shaded by trees in summer. The existing border is too narrow to give any aesthetic impact, and should be widened to 60 – 80 cm in width. This can be done by removing the grass and improving the soil by digging in some well-rotted manure or garden compost. A slow-release fertiliser will also help plants to become established. The following plants are recommended:
 - Lady's mantle (*Alchemilla mollis*)
 - Lily of the valley (*Convallaria majalis*)
 - Ivy-leaved cyclamen (*Cyclamen hederifolium*)
 - Lesser periwinkle (*Vinca minor*)
2. The grass area on the left at the entrance to Church View has a lot of moss due to the dampness of the soil and the fact that it is partly shaded by trees during the growing season. While the moss is attractive and gives a natural appearance, this has been identified as an area in which some minor and tasteful additions of plants could add more interest, while leaving the general character of the grounds largely unaltered. It is proposed that plants be added along the wall, and that these be hardy and tough perennials which should flourish without much maintenance. It is not necessary to have a full border along the inside of the wall, as plants can be planted

in groups or clumps as required. Planting areas should be prepared as described above, with the addition of manure or compost, and slow-release fertiliser. The following plants are suggested:

- Japanese anemone (*Anemone x hybrida* 'Honorine Jobert')
- Astilbe 'Fanal'
- Male fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*)

Development of a Community Garden at Woodlands

The Woodland residents would like to develop a Community Area / Space to enjoy that could have raised beds, a wheelchair garden, trails and even a Green House. They would love to establish a wild flower alley on the Old Road.

Cycliability & Links with every estate

Balla aims to ensure that every estate has safe off-road access to the centre of the town. This is through short cuts, links and pavements where possible. This aims to ensure safe cycling and walking to the town centre from all key residential areas.

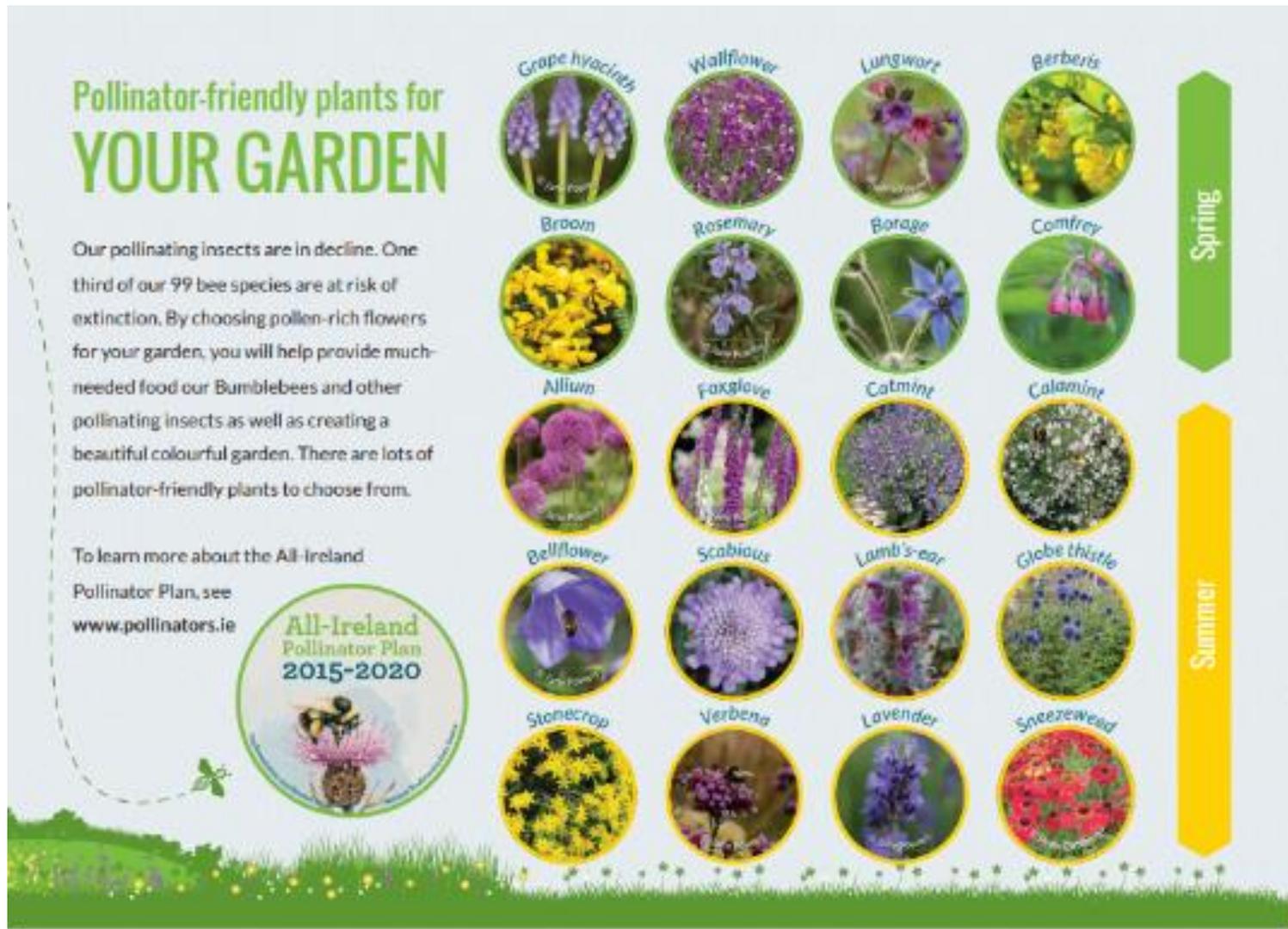
Suggested Recommendations for Residential Streets & Housing Areas:

- **Homeowners to participate in energy saving initiatives and upgrades.**
- **Offer prizes such as low energy light bulbs or water butts for home owners.**
- **Encourage pollinator-friendly actions in homes eg. Do not mow Dandelions in lawns until they flower in April.**
- **Provision of a ride-on mower should be subject to reduced & tiered mowing regimes.**
- **Only allow pollinator-friendly plants to be purchased for any communal landscaping scheme;**
- **Install bilingual estate name signs where possible.**
- **Support Residents Plans at Woodlands to Develop Community Garden and Trails.**

Bed of ox-eye daisies that could be created in estate areas:



Flyer available for free on Pollinator-friendly plants for gardens



https://pollinators.ie/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AIPP-Garden-Plants_A5-Flyer-PRINT.pdf

Approach Roads, Streets & Lanes – proposed actions:

This category considers arrival points and making a good first impression. As mentioned, a large statue/ sculpture to highlight the rich religious & cultural heritage of the area is a suggestion for the approach roads.

Changing Mowing Regimes on Approach Roads

You have very large areas of grass to be mown. You have commenced changes in this and this should be continued. Public understanding and support is crucial which could be achieved by sustained promotion of the benefits of changing mowing regimes. You could even add some recycled sculptures to highlight this.

Large (movable) willow sculpture in Drumshanbo. A similar styled one could be positioned in the new roadside wildflower bed:



Similar works at www.biggreenart.com

Leaflet from www.pollinators.ie/resources on Pollinator-Friendly Grass Cutting.



<https://pollinators.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Pollinator-friendly-grass-cutting-A5-Flyer-PRINT.pdf>

N6-/L1705 Junction at the south end of Main Street

This junction, while well-maintained, has little visual interest. Planters with small conifers are in place, and presumably these are planted with flowering plants in summer. However, because they are spaced out evenly, they lack any significant visual impact and look a bit lost. By grouping them closer together, and including more variety in planting, more impact can be achieved.

In addition, this area lacks a vertical dimension, and could be much improved by the addition of trees. The altered image below conveys this suggestion, and shows how vertical features can add interest and variety. This would also be a nice visual echo of the birch trees already present just across the road, and would present a more balanced aesthetic. It could also serve to slow traffic down at this junction as they would have to stop to view traffic.

You have applied for a grant for a large flower bed here. There are some H&S concerns regarding the management of this roadside bed. There is already a flower bed at the other side of the road so it is suggested to focus on providing mature trees here instead, with minor planting to compliment the main large flower bed across the road. A suggestion for here could be:

- Narrow Oak - *Quercus robur* 'Fastigiata' - (A lovely narrow, upright version of the Irish Oak has similar wildlife benefits as oak, but v narrow, and leaves v dry when fall, hence little mess).
- Lime – *Tilia cordata* (v good for the western counties as hardier with late Spring)

Street trees should have a 2m clear-stemmed trunk, and a compact crown and a non-invasive root system that is 'tap' shaped. Rather than buy street guards, it is better to spend your money by buying trees with a bigger girth as less likely to snap, and are hardier.

Impressions of how trees could add a vertical dimension at N60/L1705 junction, whilst also encouraging traffic to slow down.



Disused Building

This building on the outskirts of the town is in a state of disrepair, and presents a rather untidy and unkempt appearance. A small disused kiosk in front of the building adds to the sense of dilapidation.

This dilapidated building makes a poor first impressions when arriving into Balla.



Any serious refurbishment of the building would of course be expensive, and subject to the wishes and plans of the building's owner. Nonetheless, a number of fairly simple steps could be taken to improve its current appearance, if the owner is agreeable to these.

- The removal of the ruined kiosk could be quickly done with a digger
- The front of the building, and the door, could be repainted
- The overgrown yard in front of the building could be cleaned up and tidied

These steps alone would bring a substantial improvement to the building's appearance. If further improvement is desired, it would be possible to transform the building into a quirky and colourful feature by painting murals on the front wall. As this building has the look of an old garage, murals of old cars would be in keeping with its character and would provide a noteworthy feature.

The altered photograph overleaf gives a suggestion of how this might be done on quite an elaborate scale. However, simpler images could also be very effective if carefully done.

Artists Impressions of what this building could look like:



New Embankment at North of Balla

A new embankment has been created at the north of the town as the road was widened. This provides a great opportunity for it to be mown to encourage wild flowers in this area. There is another good resource available for this:

<https://pollinators.ie/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/How-to-guide-Wildflower-Meadows-2018-WEB.pdf>

Back Lane

You plan to direct your efforts on this area. Shelving is neat at Spar for external storage of fuel but other trolleys could be positioned better. Entrance gates could be enhanced and some fun murals could be provided here.

Fun signage used in a back lane in Sneem:



Hedgerows on Back Lanes and Estates.

Hedgerows are a vital wildlife habitat that have been lost. Residents in estates in Balla suggested they would like to enhance their communal areas by planting some native hedgerows for public well-being and to improve wildlife habitats, and reduce flooring impacts. Mayo County Council's Heritage Office are generally very supportive of this and has provided grants in the past. The latest publication provides advice and guidance on this

<https://www.biodiversityireland.ie/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Pollinator-How-to-Guide-3-FINAL-1.pdf>

Farm Gates

Farm gates within the town could be enhanced by painting, attaching pictures etc.

Albeit a little tired, the concept of the silhouettes on the farm gate catches the eye on the approach road into Blackrock, Co Louth:



Approach Roads, Streets & Lanes - Suggested Recommendations.

- Consider possible sculpture on approach roads to highlight heritage of Balla.
- Reduce Mowing and make feature of this on approach roads.
- Add trees to Junction at South of Town
- Refurbish Garage on Claremorris Road
- Amend grass mowing on northern approach roads at newly-widened road to encourage flowers such as ox-eye daises.
- Enhance farm gates within Balla.
- Research Grants for Hedgerow Planting n Balla and support residents in plans to plant these.
- Complete enhancement of Back Lane.

Appendix 1 – Heritage Features of Balla - National Monuments Services

The following table consists of National Monuments Service Data extracted whilst using the Historic Environment Viewer from the website www.archaeology.ie (retrieved April 2020). The data lists all monuments and places (sites) where it is believed there is a monument known to the ASI pre-dating AD 1700 and also includes a selection of monuments from the post-AD 1700 period.

SMR No.	Class	Townland
MA090-023----	Moated site	MOAT (Clanmorris By.)
MA090-024001-	Ritual site - holy well	BALLA
MA090-024002-	Penitential station	BALLA
MA090-024003-	Building	BALLA
MA090-024004-	Round tower	BALLA
MA090-024005-	Graveyard	BALLA
MA090-024006-	Penitential station	BALLA
MA090-024007-	Inscribed stone	BALLA
MA090-024008-	Cross-slab	BALLA
MA090-024009-	Cross-slab	BALLA
MA090-024010-	Church	BALLA
MA090-024011-	Architectural feature	BALLA
MA090-024012-	Inscribed stone	BALLA
MA090-024013-	Architectural fragment	BALLA
MA090-025----	Enclosure	BALLA
MA090-123----	Moated site	BALLA
MA090-154----	Stone head	BALLA

Appendix 2 – Built Heritage of Balla (post 1760).

The following table lists notable building in Balla. The list is compiled from National Inventory of Architectural Heritage Data extracted whilst using the Historic Environment Viewer from the website www.archaeology.ie (retrieved April 2020).

Reg. No	Name	Townland
31309013	Holy Trinity Church (Balla)	LEGAUN
31309014	Athavallie House originally Attavally	MOAT [CLAN. BY.]
31309015	Athavallie House originally Attavally	MOAT [CLAN. BY.]
31309016	Athavallie House originally Attavally	MOAT [CLAN. BY.]
31309017	Athavallie House originally Attavally	MOAT [CLAN. BY.]
31309018	Nally Monument	BALLA
31309019	Street Water Pump (1898-1945)	BALLA
31309021	Bank of Ireland originally National Bank of Ireland	BALLA
31309022	Saint Cronan's Catholic Church	BALLA
31309023	Water Tower	BALLA
31309024	Street Water Pump	BALLA

Appendix 3 - Balla Turlough Wildlife Information from NPWS

Extracted from Internet April 2020.

Available at <https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/protected-sites/synopsis/SY000463.pdf>

Site Name: Balla Turlough SAC Collated 26/8/2013.

Site Code: 000463

This turlough lies in a north-south hollow just east of the village of Balla, Co. Mayo. Along each side of its basin there are smooth, low ridges of glacial deposition, while to the east the land rises more steeply. The floor of the basin is probably flat but there is a considerable accumulation of peat in the basin, which forms a raised platform. This process of peat build-up is taking the central dome above the level of frequent flooding, and the period of inundation here may be reduced as a result. Marl deposits are also present, and marl deposition is actively occurring in places. Water seems to rise mostly on the western side of the site and from the depression at the southern end, where there are more permanent bodies of water.

The site is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) selected for the following habitats and/or species listed on Annex I / II of the E.U. Habitats Directive (* = priority; numbers in brackets are Natura 2000 codes):

[3180] Turloughs*

The peat dome has a uniform vegetation of Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*) and sedges (*Carex panicea* and *C. hostiana*), with scattered Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) and Meadow Thistle (*Cirsium dissectum*). This vegetation type is extensive at Balla, compared to other Irish turloughs. In damper places, Marsh Cinquefoil (*Potentilla palustris*) and Brown Sedge (*Carex disticha*) become abundant, and here the scarce plant Marsh Stitchwort (*Stellaria palustris*) occurs, with Yellow Loosestrife (*Lysimachia vulgaris*) and Bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*). Marsh Stitchwort is a relatively rare species in the central lowlands of Ireland, and occurs in few turloughs. Around the peat dome, the vegetation consists of dry and wet mesotrophic grassland, which is more typical of turlough habitats. Amphibious Bistort (*Polygonum amphibium*) and sedges (*Carex nigra* and *C. vesicaria*) are frequent in wet grassland, while Mat-grass (*Nardus stricta*) and Quaking-grass (*Briza media*) occur in drier areas.

Standing water supports an emergent community with Common Club-rush (*Scirpus lacustris*) and sedges (*Carex rostrata* and *C. elata*), with aquatic plants such as Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*) and Fen Pondweed (*Potamogeton coloratus*). Marl ponds also contain oligotrophic communities with Bulbous Rush (*Juncus bulbosus*) and Floating Club-rush (*Scirpus fluitans*). This community is more a feature of the Burren turloughs, and its occurrence here is unusual for the region.

Most of the turlough is open to cattle but grazing is light. Peat-cutting took place in the past but ceased a long time ago. The main threats to turloughs are drainage and agricultural reclamation. Balla Turlough lies in the Moy (Manulla) catchment, which was drained in the 1960's-70's. Due to local catchment conditions, the turlough still floods regularly and retains its habitat quality. The site remains oligotrophic, but this would be threatened in the event of nutrient input into its system.

The turlough and surrounding grasslands attract significant numbers of waders in winter. Counts made in one season from 1984/85 to 1986/87 indicate locally/regionally important numbers of Golden Plover (380), Lapwing (190) and Curlew (110). Swans also use the area in winter.

Balla Turlough occurs at the northern edge of the main range of turloughs in Mayo and Roscommon, and is one of very few within the Moy catchment. Overall, the turlough is of high ecological value for its range of unusual topographical features and vegetation communities. The amount and physical shape of the peat present here is of interest in offering a comparison with other northern turloughs where peat-cutting has been widespread. Turloughs are an increasingly rare habitat in Europe and Ireland, and Balla is important as an excellent example of an unusual turlough in a very natural condition.

Version date: 26.08.2013 2 of 2 000463_Rev13.Doc