

DÚN LAOGHAIRE, IRELAND

Category: Great Town / Small City

Year: 2022

Lead Assessor: Tim Challans, Steve Bee (Deputy)

Assessment photos: [flic.kr/s/aHBqjAf7KK](https://www.flic.kr/s/aHBqjAf7KK)

Introduction

Dun Laoghaire is a suburban town 12 km south of Dublin linked to central Dublin by road and the Dublin Area Rapid Transit (DART) rail. It developed from 1816 when a safe harbour for shipping on was built. It became a port for mail boats to and from Wales and England and then an Irish Sea ferry port, until Stena Line left in 2014. It has a population of 26500 and, despite the loss of this major employer, it has built on its attraction as a day visit destination, its cultural history and its coastal location. It has also taken advantage of COVID pandemic restrictions to implement traffic management and other projects that have benefited the town, including temporary pedestrianisation that is now being made permanent. Plans and developments that have been in the pipeline for several years have been implemented in recent years through a series of Urban Framework Plans from 2004 - 2022.

Leadership and Governance

There is strong political and professional leadership from the Dun Laoghaire and Rathdown County Council, created in 1994 from the subdivision of the former Dublin County Council. The Council is the major agent for change and works closely with local communities and other partners. It has identified opportunities to improve the town and is carrying these through to implementation. This is creating lively urban spaces that people value and use, demonstrating an innovative and open-minded approach to sustainable urban change.

The Council acquired the harbour in 2019, ending a period when the management of the port and the town were not closely integrated. It is being developed as a significant asset accommodating further water-based activities and sports, bringing cruise liner passengers into the town and surrounding area, and enabling the further mixed-use development of the waterfront.

Local Character

Dun Laoghaire is a quintessentially Victorian town with some fine, protected 19th Century buildings and parks. Its character is largely determined by its coastal location giving it the feel of a resort without the dominance of tourist honey traps. It has several sailing and watersport clubs serving different sections of the community, and now the largest yacht marina in Ireland. Its main shopping streets have an interesting mix of independent shops, bars, cafes, and workspaces, but it avoids being hip and exclusive and provides services appropriate to the social mix of the town. The centre is dominated by a 1970s shopping mall but, this does not detract from the character of the town and potential for further integration is being pursued. New developments of offices, private and social housing are designed sensitively and respect the scale of existing buildings.

George Place social housing is an example of contextual design and a rapid building programme (21 months from design to completion) designed by Council architects for an awkwardly shaped former depot adjacent to a former fire station that is to be redeveloped as a school. The Council ensures that, where possible, pedestrian links with, and glimpses of, the coast are included in both new and restoration projects. For example, on the refurbishment of the prominent Royal Marine Hotel (1828), the Council insisted that additional rooms should be incorporated in the original mansard rather than an intrusive upward extension. It also ensured that this scheme incorporated public routes through the grounds to improve connection between the waterfront and the town centre.

Substantial investment in the public realm includes covering part of the DART route to create a linear park close to the waterfront, repurposing a disused sea bathing pool as a public space near the harbour and creating a new public plaza, Myrtle Square, as part of the imminent pedestrianisation of part George Street. An interesting detail is the selection of high-quality wooden seating for public spaces that it is seen as more comfortable, and popular than some contemporary over 'designed' street furniture.

The Council's signature development is The Lexicon, a prominent and distinctive multi-purpose public building with a public library, study areas, an art gallery, exhibition space, public meeting rooms, and a small theatre. The ground floor 'living room' open to all at all times for any activity is particularly welcoming. Although controversial when it was built, it has become a popular local landmark and venue, with great views over Dublin Bay.

Commercial Success and Viability

The shopping streets appear to flourish, with a broad retail and service offer. At the periphery, where retail now struggles, the Council has allowed change of use to residential and managed workspaces to maintain occupancy and avoid gaps in the frontage. The Council has also provided 'pop up' retail space for businesses to test out their offer. 'The Glasshouse', is a commercial co-working enterprise in a former store providing workspaces from hot desks to dedicated offices. The repurposing of the harbour is also an important income source for the Council, as well as supporting local tourism.

Environmental Sustainability

The sustainability of all public and private projects is evaluated. All street and public space maintenance uses ecologically safe materials and measures. In 'People's Park' the Victorian plan has been restored and traditional annual bedding plants have been replaced with ecologically-sound perennial planting schemes. Myrtle Square is a nature-focused project with 66 new trees designed to attract wildlife. The volunteers of the 'Tidy Town' project work well with the Council to create and maintain planting schemes around the town, as well keeping it litter-free. Small electric carts are used to empty waste bins avoiding large waste vehicles in the town centre.

There are electric car and cycle charging points throughout the town and 85% of street and other public lighting uses LEDs.

Community Health and Wellbeing

The wider harbour area supports a number of water sport activities for all levels of skill. The Council supports a community project that repairs and maintains bicycles and provides specialist cycles for people with disabilities. The Coastal Mobility Route encourages local commuter cycling as well as recreational use. The continuing efforts to limit traffic movements in the town are making it safer and healthier for pedestrians.

There is an emphasis on accessibility and inclusion across a range of projects - particularly Smart District Accessible parking which places sensors in disabled parking spaces connected to an app helping drivers to find empty spaces.

Connections

The town claims to have had the first commuter rail service in the World and is well connected by road, rail and even sea to Dublin and beyond to the north and routes to the south. There are good public transport links via the DART network and bus services. The Council is committed to alternative transport with pedestrianisation schemes that encouraging walking and cycling. During the Covid pandemic the Coastal Mobility Route for cycling was created joining up five towns and villages along the coast. Dun Laoghaire has developed as a cruise liner stop providing facilities for large liners to send tenders into the port and smaller ones to come into the harbour. The town is also about 50 minutes from Dublin airport.