

BESSBROOK PUBLIC REALM COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

Virtual consultation by ZOOM

21st July 2020

Co-ordinated by:

Newry & Mourne Enterprise Agency and Down Business Centre

On behalf of:

Newry Mourne and Down District Council

CONTENTS

1 BACKGROUND

2 THE CONSULTATION: When did it take place? Who participated?

3 WHAT PUBLIC REALM IMPROVEMENTS DO CONSULTEES THINK IS NEEDED?

3.1 Short term

3.2 Medium term

4 WHY ARE THEY NEEDED?

4.1 What would be the benefits of making these improvements?

4.2 What would be the negative effects of doing nothing?

5 WHAT WOULD BE THE COSTS OF A SHORT/MEDIUM TERM SCHEMES?

5.1 Sources of Funding

6 NEXT STEPS

Bessbrook Public Realm Community Consultation

1. BACKGROUND

Historically, eligibility for investment by the Department for Communities (DFC) in public realm (PR)/environmental improvement (EI) was restricted to urban areas with a population greater than 5,000. The DFC is now changing its eligibility criteria to include smaller towns with a population less than 5,000, but greater than 2,500.

In Newry Mourne and Down Council area, this now brings forward:

1. **Bessbrook**
2. Castlewellan
3. Killyleagh
4. Rostrevor
5. Saintfield

What can be funded

Eligible public realm/environmental improvement works can include upgrade works to pathways, street lightening, landscaping, and street furniture. Other works may be considered, subject to further discussion and approval from DFC, such as revitalisation works including upgrades to building facades and visual improvements to vacant or derelict properties. The eligible boundary will be within the town centre, i.e. within the 30-mph zone.

Requirement

Working with DFC, Newry Mourne and Down District Council will be putting in place a forward capital plan that will identify over the next 5 years schemes to be profiled for public realm investment. This will enable the Council and the Department to better plan budgets, submit funding applications, commission early pre-development design works, and apply for statutory approvals – all of which, are required ahead of scheme implementation.

The Council now needs to put in place a forward capital plan for these 5 rural settlements, which now fall within the public realm remit of DFC. Implementation of the forward plan will be subject to funding from DFC. Putting in place a forward plan will enable Council to take some early steps to work schemes up to a point where they are “funding ready.” To inform this plan, some scoping work has been required to identify where the need for investment in public realm/environmental improvement is greatest.

Community Engagement

To formalise the inclusion of these 5 rural settlements in a forward work plan for submission to DFC, and to develop potential future scheme proposals, Newry Mourne and Down Council engaged **Newry & Mourne Enterprise Agency (NMEA)** and **Down Business Centre (DBC)** to prepare a report for consideration. These organisations are a local enterprise partnership whose sole aim is the furtherance of economic and business development within the Newry Mourne and Down region. The partnership is assisted by Eamon Larkin, Managing Partner of **Milligan Reside & Larkin**, and uses the services of other professional advisors across a range of disciplines.

Bessbrook Public Realm Community Consultation

The Brief

The brief given to NMEA and DBC was to consult with stakeholders in Bessbrook to learn their views on what public realm works should be prioritised in Bessbrook and to prepare a final consultation report for the District Council to consider.

Consultation – during Covid 19

All consultations were undertaken within the terms of the Government's 2020 Covid 19 public health guidance, remotely using email and video / telephone conferencing.

Bessbrook Overview

For the purposes of this report the area referred to as Bessbrook is that which is delineated by the 30 mph signs on the various approach roads into the village; Bessbrook electoral ward covers this area. Unless otherwise stated the statistics below have been taken from the NI 2011 census.

The population of Bessbrook Ward was 2842 in 2019 (NISRA), a 17% increase on the 2011 census figure; the population has grown significantly faster than the NI average. In terms of demographics, 23% of residents are aged under 16 years with 16% aged 65 and over which is close to NI average. In relation to housing 60% of households are owner occupied and 37% are rented. Nearly 30% of households do not have access to either a car or a van which is well above the NI average. The most recent Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation measure in 2017 indicated that Bessbrook Ward was among the 20% most deprived wards in NI; it scored particularly poorly with regard to employment, health/disability, education skills and training.

Previous studies of the area include an in-depth Village Renewal Plan in 2012 for the Bessbrook and Camlough areas prepared at the request of Newry and Mourne District Council by URS, with an addendum commissioned by the Newry Mourne and Down District Council completed in 2018 by Ove Arup & Partners.

2. THE CONSULTATION: When did it take place? Who participated?

The Bessbrook stakeholder consultation was carried out using the Zoom video-conferencing platform on Tuesday 21st July 2020. The attendees were as follows:

Newry & Mourne Enterprise Agency

Dr Conor Patterson (Facilitator)

Colin Hanna (Scribe)

Eamon Larkin (Milligan Reside & Larkin Architects)

Newry, Mourne & Down Council representatives

Martin Patterson, Enterprise and Regeneration

Seamus Crossey, Enterprise and Regeneration

Taucher McDonald, Slieve Gullion DEA Co-ordinator

Bessbrook participants

Cllr Declan Murphy

Cllr David Taylor

Danny Kennedy (Bessbrook Development Company)

Rosemary Mulholland (Bessbrook Development Company, National Trust Ranger for Derrymore House)

Richard Black (Bessbrook Development Company)

Kathleen Moore (Bessbrook Development Company)

3. WHAT PUBLIC REALM IMPROVEMENTS DO CONSULTEES THINK ARE NEEDED?

Consultees participated in a virtual tour of the village using the Google Street View app. While some of the photography used by Google was recent some dated from 2010.

The key issues highlighted by the consultees were:

- The lack of signage to welcome visitors and to direct them to facilities and sites in the village
- The condition of the 'Back Ways' behind several of the 19th century terraces in the village
- The poor state of repair of the former hand-ball alley adjacent to the town hall
- The lack of litter/dog dirt bins in the village
- The resurfacing of Orior Park and Thomas Street
- The need for regular spraying in and around the cobble stones in the centre of the village
- The lack of drop kerbs in the vicinity of Griffiths shop on Fountain Street
- The requirement for upkeep of flower beds
- The lack of paths in Fountain Street moving through Church Street heading in the direction of Bessbrook Primary School
- The inadequacy of pedestrian walkways at various points
- The need for cycle paths
- The poor state of the flagged area adjacent to Saint Peter's and Saint Paul's
- The unsightly BT junction boxes and bus shelters in the village.

It was the unanimous view of consultees that all of these issues should be addressed in an overarching **Master Plan** for the village.

4.1 SHORT TERM

1. Welcome and internal directional signage

It was noted that there are no signs which highlight Bessbrook's unique history and significance as a model village or its status as a conservation area. While Derrymore House and Derrymore Wood are marketed as being in Bessbrook, there is no signage within the village to indicate how to get there. There is no directional signage for Bessbrook Mill, the Mill Pond, the village's 19th century squares, its townhall or its other social/cultural sporting buildings and outdoor spaces. There is also no signage to promote the village and its attractions on any of the main road approaches. These gaps could be remedied at a low-cost relative to their positive impact on the village in terms of increased visitor numbers.



Lack of signage on the main approach into the village

2. The 'Back Ways'

The Back Ways are a legacy feature from the era when housing in Bessbrook was provided by the mill owners for some of its workers. They are found to the rear of residences in Charlemont Square, O'Donoghue Park and Thomas Street. Portions of them have long been neglected and are in some cases attracting fly tippers. Ownership which is either disputed or unknown is hampering efforts to identify the agencies or persons who are responsible for their upkeep. A scheme is needed to improve these areas, the first step of which should be to identify ownership/responsibility.



An example of The Backways to the rear of O'Donoghue Park

3. Lack of litter/dog waste bins in the village

The lack of litter bins in general was noted along with the observation that there is only one dedicated bin for dog waste in the village and its environs. While it is becoming increasingly socially unacceptable for owners not to clean up after their dogs, consultees were of the view that there should be efforts made by the Council to supply the necessary facilities to allow for the easy disposal of dog dirt and street litter.

4. Resurfacing of Orior Park and Thomas Street



The area requiring resurfacing

The road surfaces in the environs of both Orior Park and Thomas Street are badly in need of resurfacing, they were described by consultees as being an unsightly patchwork.

Bessbrook Public Realm Community Consultation

5. Regular spraying in and around the cobble stones in the centre of the village

The cobblestoned areas in the centre of the village are undoubtedly an attractive feature. However, consultees pointed out that at certain times of year they were overgrown with weeds. It was suggested that a regular schedule of weed control should be instituted.

6. Drop kerbs in vicinity of Griffiths on Fountain Street

There is currently no easy access to allow either wheelchairs or prams to negotiate between pavements in the vicinity of Griffiths shop on Fountain Street. There was consensus among the consultees that the Council should work to ensure that this oversight is remedied by the responsible agency and that this should be addressed urgently as it presents a health and safety risk to vulnerable users.

7. Upkeep of flowerbeds

The flowerbeds in the village need to be tended more regularly as they can at times look unkempt with the result that far from enhancing the visual appeal of the village they can contribute to a sense that it is a place that has been passed by.



An example of a flowerbed in a prime central location which could be described as 'scruffy'

8. Pedestrian paths/walkways

The creation of new paths and the renovation of old ones was a recurring theme during the consultation. The potential projects discussed were:

- Extending the path around the Mill Pond.
- Developing the existing public right of way from Craigmore into a pedestrian/cycle path leading to the centre of the village.
- Clearing the undergrowth around Bessbrook Mill and creating a path linking the mill buildings and the Mill Pond.
- Creating a path/walk from the old tram station to Millvale.



Bessbrook Pond



The old tram station



Bessbrook Mill

9. Cycle paths/routes

Bessbrook Public Realm Community Consultation

Given the recent upsurge in the number of people cycling coupled with the village's attractions and its proximity to larger population centres, notably Newry, the provision of cycle routes should be a consideration in all future projects which plan to attract more visitors to Bessbrook.

10. Flagged area adjacent to Saint Peter's and Saint Paul's

The area in the vicinity of St Peter's & St Paul's catholic church was described as 'scruffy' and not in keeping with either the character of the church or the overall vernacular of the village. Consultees urged that lights, planting, seating etc. should be looked at with a view to enhancing the environment there and creating attractive public realm. The boundary wall between the church and this area was also described as dilapidated, with its finishes in need of revamping.



11. Mask or 'dress' the BT junction boxes and bus shelters

The BT junction boxes located throughout the village are covered in bill posts. Some of the consultees wondered if there were better designed junction boxes which could be sourced which would be more in keeping with the rest of the street furniture in the village (e.g. period street lighting) or whether the existing junction boxes could be masked in some way. The same question was asked about the bus shelters in the village which, while functional, were also visually unappealing if not an eyesore.

4.2 MEDIUM TERM

Bessbrook Public Realm Community Consultation

1. Square-shaped building adjacent to the town hall.

This building which is currently a void had been a handball alley. The sport was very popular in the area in the past but as its popularity declined the facility became derelict. Given its prime village centre location consultees were of the view that finding an alternative use for this space should be prioritised.



The old handball alley

2. Lack of paths in Fountain Street/Church Street

The lack of paths in Fountain Street and Church Street was highlighted as a concern for villagers. It was, however, acknowledged that the geography of this area in relation to the rest of the village and the geometry of the established building layout there meant that this would not be an easy issue to resolve. The proximity of the primary school and the poor sightlines on the approach to Church Street present a risk to vulnerable pedestrians and as a minimum some form of traffic management which favours pedestrians needs to be considered.

3. A Bessbrook Master Plan

A Master Development Plan should be commissioned to address the challenges highlighted in this report which are seen by consultees as the legacy of a piecemeal and dis-jointed approach to the development of Bessbrook from the closure of the mill and its conversion into a major army base and heliport (for two decades the busiest in western Europe). That very large site has now been abandoned for 20 years. But the departure of the military was not followed, as had been anticipated at the time by the long-suffering villagers, by a redevelopment dividend. The community of Bessbrook are of the view that the prioritisation of a development plan for Bessbrook which includes its historic mill is long overdue.

Bessbrook Public Realm Community Consultation

4. WHY ARE THEY NEEDED?

Among the key points raised in the 2012 Bessbrook & Camlough Cluster Village Renewal and Development Plan report were:

- “The entrance to the village is very poorly signposted. The ‘story’ of Bessbrook is not clear to visitors. Important sites are poorly marked.
- Pedestrian routes are in a poor condition.
- There is good provision of public open green space (i.e. the two squares and Bessbrook Park). However, the quality of these spaces needs to be improved.
- Derrymore House and Gardens are a valuable resource and are in close proximity to the village centre.”

These issues remain high on the list of concerns raised during this consultation. One consultee said that the fact that this is so eight years after the comprehensive 2012 report was completed would seem to confirm the validity of the feeling within the community that Bessbrook’s needs and more importantly its potential have been neglected. Consultees were agreed that it was now time for central and local government to come together with the residents of the village to make Bessbrook the great place to live and work in and to visit that it could be.

4.1 What would be the benefits of making these improvements?

The proposed improvement schemes identified through this consultation have the potential to produce a significant positive impact. These include:

- Greater numbers of visitors generating higher levels of spend in the village, where almost all of the businesses are locally owned and operated. This would create new employment opportunities as well as safeguarding existing jobs.
- Schemes targeting footpaths in particular would make the village streets safer and generally more pleasant for pedestrians and facilitate easier movement of visitors between the village’s visitor attractions which in terms of industrial/commercial history are of international significance.
- New pathways and cycle routes will potentially bring health benefits to both visitors and residents.
- A properly resourced and well executed Master Development Plan would have the effect of boosting the appearance of the village. This would make it a more attractive place to live, not only for the existing residents but also for potential new residents and help to secure the long-term sustainability of the village.

4.2 What would be the negative effects of doing nothing?

The negative effects of doing nothing are likely to include:

- Unaddressed grubbiness and decay reinforcing a sense of neglect, initiating a vicious cycle of decline and dereliction which would ripple out to areas not currently suffering from these problems.
- Bessbrook is competing with other destinations for visitors. But investment is needed to attract them in the numbers needed to make a real difference to the prosperity of the area.

Bessbrook Public Realm Community Consultation

In the world of business companies which do not invest in new products/facilities are doomed to failure. This is also true of towns and villages. Though their failure may be a longer drawn out process the consequences for residents and the wider economy can be no less devastating.

5. WHAT WOULD BE THE COSTS OF SHORT-TERM SCHEMES?

The projects identified through this consultation are listed below. Total costs involved in the implementation of each project will require to be worked up to take account of all expenditure items, including the:

- Appointment of design team (Architect, Quantity Surveyor, Structural Engineer etc)
- Preparation and costing of final designs
- Pre-tender and post-tender collaboration
- Planning submissions
- Final scheme costs.

This report does not include a full summary of these costs. It is sufficient at this stage to insert an overall estimated per-project cost (which takes account of the above).

SHORT TERM PROJECTS

	PROJECT DESCRIPTION	COST £
1	Welcome and internal directional signage	20,000
2	Clean-up of the 'Back Ways'	30,000
3	Provision of litter/dog dirt bins in the village	5,000
4	Resurfacing of Orior Park and Thomas Street	30,000
5	Regular spraying in and around the cobble stones	Revenue Cost TBC
6	Provision of drop kerbs in vicinity of Griffiths	3,000
7	Upkeep of flower beds	Revenue Cost TBC
8	New pedestrian paths/walkways	Up to 100,000
9	Cycle paths/routes	Up to 100,000
10	Revamp of flagged area adjacent to Saint Peter's and Saint Paul's	15,000
11	Alternative designs for BT junction boxes and bus shelters	10,000

Bessbrook Public Realm Community Consultation

MEDIUM TERM PROJECT

	PROJECT DESCRIPTION	COST
1	Handball alley adjacent to town hall	200,000
2	Paths in Fountain Street/Church Street for traffic management	Up to 100,000

5.1 Sources of Funding

The Department for Communities (DFC) will be the primary funding source. Working in conjunction with Newry Mourne and Down District Council, the Department will decide and agree which projects, if any, will be selected for drawdown of funds to meet project costs.

6. Next Steps

This report has been submitted to Newry Mourne and Down Council for consideration and discussion at various levels, including the Council's Economic Development Committee, before being tabled for scrutiny and decision by a meeting of the full Council. Those councillors with responsibility for the Bessbrook area will consult with village representatives to ensure the report's content reflects the outcomes of the consultation.

It will be for the Council, working closely with the Department for Communities, to move forward as follows:

Action	Outcome
Step 1	Secure Funding
Step 2	Appoint a Design Team (through Central Procurement Directorate)
Step 3	Secure Planning Permission
Step 4	Tender for a Contractor (through Central Procurement Directorate)
Step 5	Complete Construction