



BELCARRA

VILLAGE DESIGN STATEMENT

AN ACTION OF THE COUNTY MAYO HERITAGE PLAN 2006-2011



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NATIONAL
BUILDING AGENCY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....1	Design Guidelines.....15
• What is a Village Design Statement?	• Village Centre Design Guidelines
• Objectives of the Village Design Statement	• Some Design Guidelines for new development outside the Village Centre.
• Who is it for?	
• The aim of the Village Design Statement	Community Views.....19
• Why is a Village Design Statement important to Louisburgh?	• Community SWOT Analysis
	• Belcarra Questionnaire Survey Analysis and Wish List.
Community Participation.....2	
	Acknowledgements.....20
History and Village profile.....3	
• Location	
• Community	
• Facilities and Amenities	
• Employment	
• Development Pressure	
• Future Role	
Character of the Settlement.....6	
• Visual character of the surrounding countryside	
• Relationship between village and any heritage items	
• Natural assets of the village	
• Village Structure and Pattern	
• Character Zones	
• Road hierarchy and street pattern	
• Relationship between buildings and spaces	
• Characteristics of local roads and streets	
• Footpaths and Parking	
• Street Furniture	
• Established Planting	
Buildings and Details.....11	
• Buildings and Features of Interest	
• Traditional Building Design	
Design Principles based on Distinctive Local Character.....13	

INTRODUCTION

What is a Village Design Statement?

Belcarra has a distinctive and diverse character which is highly valued by its local residents and visitors. As Belcarra continues to evolve, this process of change needs to be positively managed so that the unique qualities that contribute to Belcarra's distinctive identity can be protected and enhanced, whilst managing future growth and new development.

A Village Design Statement (or VDS for short) is a community led planning document which describes the visual qualities and the distinctive character of Belcarra and provides design guidelines which address the qualities that local residents consider worthy of protection or improvement. The aim of the Village Design Statement is to ensure that future development and change will have regard to the village's unique attributes and historical context and contribute positively to the village.

Objectives of the Village Design Statement

- to describe the distinctive character of Belcarra and the surrounding countryside
- to draw up design principles based on the distinctive local character
- to work in partnership with the local planning authority in the context of existing local planning policy, and to influence future policies.

Who is it for?

Change is brought about not only by large developments, but also by the smaller day-to-day adjustments to homes and gardens, open spaces, paths and edges, which alter the look and feel of the whole village.

Therefore the Statement is addressed to:

- statutory bodies and public authorities
- planners, developers, builders, architects, designers and engineers
- local community groups
- householders and businesses.

How does the Design Statement work?

The Statement highlights the unique qualities of architectural, historical, archaeological, ecological and geographical importance that contribute to Belcarra's distinctive character and provides design guidelines that reflect the views of Belcarra local residents.

The aim of the Design Statement in the planning process

The Statement may be adopted by Mayo County Council as Supplementary Planning Guidance and its recommendations may be taken into account when planning applications are assessed. It may also influence future planning policies.

Why is a Village design Statement important to Belcarra?

Belcarra, with its unique surrounding landscape and proximity to Castlebar has been identified by Mayo County Council as an important village. Due to Belcarra's proximity to Castlebar and Westport there has been an increase of commuters in recent years, resulting in significant housing demand and development interest in Belcarra. The consequential new development should be carefully and sensitively managed to protect and enhance the character of the village.

A Village Design Statement is therefore needed to ensure that the nature and quality of future development makes a natural progression from the past to the future by being responsive to Belcarra's distinctive character and by having regard to its surrounding landscape, heritage and ecology.

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION



Photo 1: Community Workshop

Community Consultation Process

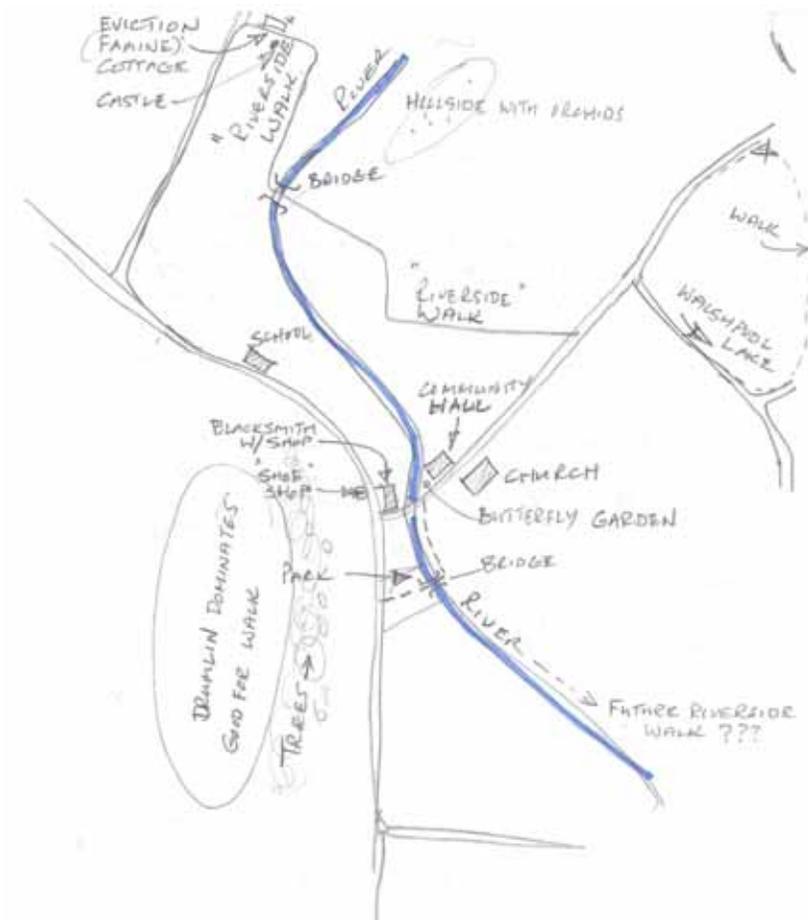
A variety of community consultation techniques were used to ensure that a wide range of local residents participated in the preparation of this Village Design Statement.

The Community Consultation consisted of a Workshop and a Public Meeting. The first part of the Workshop introduced the Village Design Statement objectives and process. The second part of the Workshop consisted of round table discussions with facilitators present. A number of exercises were undertaken which focused on exploring and identifying the character of the settlement, surrounding landscape, open spaces, streetscape, landmarks, buildings, and other notable features of the village and community.

This was followed by a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis of the village, and a questionnaire survey completed the workshop.

The majority of the participants commented that they not only enjoyed the workshop but they also understood the purpose of the event and felt that it had been useful and beneficial.

Key Concerns and Issues Raised by the Local Community are detailed in the appendix. The VDS draws on these comments in its preparation.



Sketch 1: Community members were encouraged to sketch a map of the village and highlight its most important attributes.

Photo 2: Round Table discussions at community workshop.



HISTORY AND VILLAGE PROFILE

Location

Belcarra is situated approximately four miles southwest of Castlebar on the Manulla River, in the northern Plains of Mayo. It is situated on the road from Castlebar to Hollymount.

Brief history and morphological study of the village

The name Belcarra is thought to have been derived from the Gaelic 'Baile na Cora', meaning village of the weir or river crossing – referring to one of the village's most important natural attributes, the Manulla River.

The immediate hinterland around Belcarra – within a short distance of the village centre - possesses a significant number

of archaeological features, principally enclosures (otherwise known as Rath's or ringforts) and a number of Fulachtaí Fia (early cooking sites). Possible Crannogs are identified at Walshpool Lough – the small lake a short distance to the east of the village. To the north of the village in the Carrajames area, a tumulus grave was discovered dating from the Bronze Age (2000 BC). These all indicate an early settlement pattern in the area.

The Lewis Topographical Dictionary written in 1838 indicates that Belcarra was a village, in the parish of Drum, Barony of Carra and comprised about 35 houses at that time. It also had a constabulary police station, and held Fairs on February 2nd, June 4th and November 10th. It contained

a Parish Church and a R.C. Chapel. North of the village and in its immediate vicinity was Elm Hall, once a seat of Lord Tyrawley, but even at that time, it was in ruins. Elmhall Church is evident on the 1838 Ordnance Survey map, but it too is shown as in ruins.

Since the time of the emergence of a traditional village structure, it has remained a small settlement. The Ordnance Survey Map of 1838 reveals a strong linear pattern through the village, most of which was developed on the west side. With the exception of a small cluster of dwellings at the central junction of the village, the east side of the road had few dwellings. This would appear to be explained by the presence of the Glebe House situated

Map 1: Ordnance Survey Map 1838



Map 2: Ordnance Survey Map 1923



HISTORY AND VILLAGE PROFILE

about 150 metres back from the road amongst the fields on the east side of the road and within its own extensive grounds. The associated Church – the Church of Ireland – which one assumes replaced the former one at Elmhall, was situated south of the Glebe House on the Ballinafad Road that heads southwest from the village. Today, it too is in ruins and all that remains is the old stone walls and its associated Graveyard.

The Catholic Church was shown on the O.S Map of 1838 and the only other feature of note was the Pound, near or at the current day basketball and tennis court. A laneway ran from the Pound north and west to reconnect with the main road to Castlebar near the former 'Arcadia Ballroom' (near the junction that leads to Elmhall) – this laneway has been referred to as the 'sean bothar' (the old road), the Old Dublin Road and the Old Dublin Coach Road. In 1838, this lane also possessed a number of dwellings, though today the lane no longer interconnects and has fewer dwellings along it. This map also reveals that a second settlement or village known as 'New Dublin' existed approximately 500 metres to the west of Elmhall on the Castlebar Road.

The 1923 Ordnance Survey map shows little or no change to the structure of the village. Indeed, the pattern of development appears to have retracted, as there were fewer buildings on either the 'sean bothar,' referred to above, or on the west side of the road leading south of the village. Perhaps the Great Famine of the 1840's had a pronounced impact on the village. The remains of a famine cottage/eviction cottage and a tigin (a tiny cottage used to house the evicted family) are evident in the vicinity of Tyrawley Castle, north of Elmhall Church ruins and graveyard.

While the village appears to have retracted somewhat by 1923, a few new buildings did emerge, including Riverview House and Ivy Cottage, northwest and northeast of the village respectively. The map also indicates that there was a School, a Post Office and a ball alley serving the town at this time.



Photo 3 (top): Eviction Cottage at Elmhall in its current refurbished state, and Photo 4 (below): The same cottage on the eviction day in the 1800's.



Photo 5: Approaching the centre of the village from the Castlebar Road.

Demographic Trends

The population of Belcarra is estimated at 167 people and containing approximately 57 households (as derived from Central Statistical Office, 2002 Census data). This gives an average household size of approximately 2.92 persons per household, a figure that is slightly below the national average. There is no detailed demographic breakdown of the village inhabitants (the closest demographic information relates to the Electoral Divisions of Ballinacorney and Breaghwy), though the community workshop undertaken in the village indicated that most people agreed that Belcarra displayed a higher percentage of those in the middle age and older age group. Over recent years, Belcarra has seen a significant growth in new housing catering for young families, which may address this demographic imbalance.

Community

Belcarra has a variety of community groups including the Tidy Towns Committee, a Community Co-op, Community Council, PTAA, Vincent de Paul Society, Sports Committee, a Gun Club, a Parents Council and some Church associations.

The village has won the county Tidy Towns Award on 14 occasions, indicating the pride of the local community and their energy and commitment to maintaining a positive image and presentation of the village.

Facilities and Amenities

The village, while small, possess a church, three shops, two pubs, a primary school, a post office, a community centre, a handball/sports centre, a school of music, a

dance hall, basketball/tennis court, a picnic area and riverside amenity. The village also offers the distinctive niche tourism activity of horse drawn caravans for hire and there is also a caravan and camping park. There is also a builder's providers and hardware store in the village. Other commercial activities include a frozen food depot and a car sales and service garage too. Refer to Map 3: Existing Land Use Map.

Employment

Apart from some of the local facilities and amenities, there is little employment in Belcarra. Most people commute to work out of the village, mostly Castlebar and Westport.

Development Pressure

Due to the close proximity of Castlebar (the County Town), to Belcarra, the village has experienced significant development pressure over recent years. At the time of preparation of this Village Design Statement, there had been a number of large planning applications either refused, withdrawn or on Further Information. Had these applications been granted, the total number of new houses constructed in Belcarra could have reached over 250 units. This is hugely significant, bearing in mind that the 2002 Census indicates that there were just 57 households recorded in the village and the immediate townlands in its vicinity. Most of the planning applications were for suburban style housing developments that had little relationship with the existing character and form of the village.

Current Planning Policy

The current policy framework for addressing planning and development issues in Belcarra is the Mayo County Development Plan, 2003-2009. While there are no specific or detailed policies for the village of Belcarra, the Development Framework sees the rural villages, such as Belcarra, as an integral part of rural areas providing essential local services and facilities, while also playing a major role in improving the quality of life and well-being of the rural community. To fulfill their role these villages need to grow and develop and be seen as attractive and sustainable options for those wishing to reside in a rural area.

A Draft Local Area Plan is currently being prepared for the village. When adopted it will provide a statutory framework through which the future growth and development of the village will be assessed. The Belcarra VDS is seen as a supplementary planning guidance document, which will compliment the LAP.

Future Role

In addition to the above policy framework provided in the County Development Plan, Belcarra should diversify its activities and encourage local employment generation, if its role is to be more than a dormitory settlement to Castlebar. At present, relatively small numbers are employed in local commercial enterprises. Its future role could explore opportunities for specialist, year round niche tourism activities, which compliment its strong landscape setting and current activities such as the Cara Caravans. Linkages and networks with other villages and other tourism enterprises in the area should be actively encouraged.

CHARACTER OF THE SETTLEMENT



Photo 6: Aerial view of Belcarra Village, Mid 1990s

Visual character of the surrounding countryside

The village of Belcarra is set within an attractive undulating landscape which displays small hummocks and hills characteristic of the drumlin formation. There are at least three key defining features of the landscape that surround and enclose the village. These features include –

- 1. The Manulla River** and associated floodplain – an area identified by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government as a Special Area of Conservation, under the EU Habitats Directive..
- 2. The Drumlin** – a long ridge that buffers and defines the western side of the village.
- 3. Very significant mature trees** that contribute significantly to the character of the village, giving the village a leafy character and providing a strong sense of enclosure.

In the wider village setting there are a number of other interesting landscape features, a number of other drumlins, the nearby lake of Walshpool less than a kilometer to the east. Clooncundra is a bogland area that is situated approximately 2-3 kilometres southwest. These areas were identified by the local community as being attractive features of interest with strong amenity value. The potential establishment and/or promotion

of walks from the village to these areas was highlighted by the local community.

The field pattern around the village is typically small, most commonly defined by strong and well established hedgerows, interspersed with small groups of mature trees or copses. Many of these mature tree groups are associated with archaeological features and enclosures, which have remained more or less untouched for many years. Fields are typically used for grazing and the agricultural activity tends not to be too intensive.

Relationship between village and any heritage items

Today the village does not have any direct relationship with the older historical sites and archaeological features. The early raths, ringforts and enclosures are evident in the surrounding fields. The early historical features, are situated on the edge or fringe of the village - namely Elmhall Church and Graveyard to the north and the former Church of Ireland Church and graveyard in the townland of Glebe to the south. The riverside walk however, runs from the bridge in the centre of the village to the townland of Elmhall and connects the village with the old famine/eviction cottage and the ruins of Tyrawley Castle. The walkway connects with the Elmhall road and thus offers a loop walk from the

village.

Natural assets of the village

The local community have a strong sense of the importance of the landscape and its heritage features. The community workshop revealed an appreciation of the following landscape components –

- The river and its associated riverside walk
- The trees and the sheltered nature of the village
- The drumlins and the potential development of a drumlin walkway
- The crows and the rookery in the centre of the village
- The well maintained gardens
- The open green area alongside the 1916 commemorative trees.

Public consultation with the local community revealed important wildlife habitats around the village. The surrounding landscape and in particular, the river corridor, provided habitats for herons, kingfishers, badgers, foxes, swans, duck, mink and sparrowhawks. Bats are also known to reside in the centre of the village, near the bridge, presumably in some of the older buildings/structures and the old mature trees. Despite the fact that kingfishers were known to use the river, local knowledge indicated that the Office of Public Works had at one time sought to improve drainage by deepening its channel, which has had a negative impact

CHARACTER OF THE SETTLEMENT



Photo 7 (Above Top): Tree group indicating archaeological site - ringfort/rath/enclosure.



Photo 8 (Above): Elmhall Church and Graveyard.



Photo 9 (Below): Pathway to Riverside Walk - the level landscape typifies Character Area 3



Photo 10 (Bottom of page): The Manulla River flowing through the village.

on the river ecology and fish-life. Since then, they have tried to reinstate material and gravel into the river so as to try and recreate fish pools, that were at one time natural. Overall, the river remains slow moving with a very high concentration of reeds and does not reflect its former free flowing glory.

The community also identified the need for more indigenous tree planting in the village so as to ensure that in time the older trees will be replaced by newer tree groups.

The public consultation workshop revealed a very strong appreciation for the natural heritage in the village. 65% of respondents to the questionnaire stated that they used the public spaces in the village such as the Riverside Walk. A number of proposals emerged in relation to the development or extension of existing walkways.

Village structure/pattern

The village structure is predominantly linear – focusing primarily on the main route through the village – the Castlebar to Ballyglass Road. This linear pattern also extends out the Balla Road and to a lesser extent the Ballinafad Road, though in both cases the nature, type and age of development is somewhat different, being characterized by a higher concentration of modern residential development set further back from the road. Significant ribbon development is also noted on the old lane situated off the Ballyglass Road.

The village core or village nucleus is focused near the junction with the Balla Road. This is one of the few parts of the village which retains a greater sense of enclosure created by short terraces on either side of the street. It is also the place with the greatest concentration of shops and commercial activity. Over the bridge on the Balla Road, there are a number of important community buildings that also contribute to the village nucleus, including the community centre, ball alley/sports centre and the Catholic Church.

Many traditional Irish streets have a strong sense of enclosure created by terraced building lines and streetscapes. In Belcarra this enclosure is created by a combination of buildings and significant trees.

Character zones

While the village is relatively small, the community identified different character areas. On the maps provided at the community workshop, local people used adjectives such as busy, lively, calm, quiet, attractive, etc. to describe various parts of their village.

Deriving from these maps, it is possible to identify common themes and distinguish between the following principal character areas (Refer to Map No. 4, Character Zones):

Character Area 1: The Village Core

– this is the heart of the village as defined by both building form - mostly terraced development providing a certain compactness, unity and enclosure – and a stronger commercial presence.

Character Area 2: The Linear Village

– as defined by a mix of uses, including commercial, residential and community facilities. This includes an area extending from the former Arcadia Ballroom and the national school on the north side of the village, and extends southwards to include the post office, service station and Cara Horse Drawn Carraiges and associated caravan park. This character area encompasses and surrounds Character Area 1 - Refer to Photo 6. The pattern of development and building form is varied. It includes a mixture of short terraces, with strong and uniform building lines, detached dwellings, and free standing commercial and community buildings which frequently are set back further from the road edge than some of the more traditional buildings in the Village Core. There are opportunities for consolidation of this area. There is also scope to provide a new 'village green' on undeveloped lands on the south and east side of the village, framed or surrounded by a more compact development form, that would compliment the existing pattern of development in the vicinity.

Character Area 3: The Manulla River Corridor

– this is a riverside amenity area that encompasses the Special Area of Conservation and a small tributary of the river. The area is predominantly free from development and is characterized by an open agricultural landscape. It is highly valued and appreciated by the local community. This area should be protected

CHARACTER OF THE SETTLEMENT



Photo 11: Character Area 3 - open and undeveloped lands along the Manulla River corridor.



Photo 12 (Above Right): View towards Character Area 4 - The Drumlin which acts as a backdrop to the village.

and kept free from development.

Character Area 4: The Drumlin – this is a hillside area that provides a strong defining edge to the western side of the village (Character Areas 1 & 2). This hillside provides an attractive backdrop to the village. The lower slopes on the eastern side contain a significant number of mature tree groups that also provides an important landscape element and setting for the village. It is an area that is highly sensitive to inappropriate development – development of any kind could severely impact on the character of the village.

Character Area 5: Barra Road

– The typical character of this area has emerged over recent years. It is now typified by predominantly low density, detached dwellings in the form of ribbon development. These houses typically have continuous dry stone wall boundaries with grass verges providing a positive edge treatment to the road. An intermittent row of trees is evident on the western side of the road. In urban design terms, high quality places depend on a balance between an element of continuity and element of variety. In this character area, continuity is maintained by the presence of stone walls, grass verges, street trees and a fairly standard approach to building setback distances, while variety is introduced through individual house designs. This pattern should be maintained, while the backland areas could be considered for more ‘in depth’ developments. Traffic speeds along this approach to the village is a concern to local residents. Therefore, some traffic calming measures, such as a chicane or road pinches, could be considered in the vicinity of the speed limits so as to deal with this matter.



Photo 13 and accompanying inset map showing the tight urban grain and enclosure of Character Area 1 in the village core.



Photo 14 and accompanying inset map showing the pattern of development associated with Character Area 5 on the Barra Road.



Other Areas

The above are the principal Character Areas in the village, other potential character areas might include the older historical areas associated with the Elmhall Church and Graveyard, including the famine cottages to the north of the village; or the narrow meandering country lane at Fairhill/Knockbaun. Most other areas surrounding the village are typified by quieter, semi-rural places with a mixture of modern ribbon development and older farmhouses and yards.

CHARACTER OF THE SETTLEMENT



Photo 15: Common character of many roads leading into the village, with typical features such as stone walls, grass verges and in some cases street trees. Example shown is the Barra Road. Good straight stretches of road such as this are unfortunately conducive to high speeds raising concerns among local residents and requiring attention.



Photo 16: The occasional pothole is evident on road edges and road junctions. Otherwise roads through the village are in very good condition.



Photo 17: Significant trees throughout the village provide a sheltered, attractive and enclosed character to the village.

The nature and character of these places are all likely to come under pressure for development of some form or another. An understanding of their established or evolving character should be carefully considered prior to new development occurring.

Road hierarchy and Street Pattern

The principal route through the village is the Castlebar to Ballyglass Road. A number of secondary routes run from this, including the Elmhall Road, the Balla Road and the Ballinafad Road. Other local routes running from the main through road, include the Old Dublin Coach Road (An Sean Bothar) and the boreen to Fairhill/Knockbaun.

Relationship between buildings & spaces Important open spaces

The more traditional building form in the centre of the village, together with some of the mature trees there, creates a strong sense of enclosure and defines the space in between as the centre of the village. The edge of the buildings at the junction with the Balla Road also define the space in the immediate vicinity.

The more discordant building lines and development pattern elsewhere in the village, fails to define any other significant 'urban' or built spaces, though the village has a number of smaller open spaces of

interest and importance to the community. These include:

The Common – a small green close to the village centre and adjoining the Manulla River. A riverside walk provides a small loop from the Balla Road, through the Common and back onto Main Street.

The Butterfly Garden – This is a small area adjoining the River and the Community Centre. A wildflower garden was planted to attract butterflies. The area is in need of some maintenance.

The Basketball Court – This was the site of the former national school and has been converted into a basketball court. There has been suggestions to upgrade the area with additional landscaping, tree planting and street furniture so as to provide a small pocket park in the village.

The Playing Fields – Lands behind the Catholic Church and close to the River are used for field sports and ball games.

In addition to the foregoing, the riverside walk provides access to much of the river. An area north of the butterfly garden has traditionally been used as a local fishing spot. Should any future development be provided alongside the river in the future (while protecting the Special Area of Conservation designation), development should ensure that the riparian zone is free from development so as to enable public access right along the river. Where



Sketch 2: A consistent front boundary treatment, such as the construction of this natural stone wall, made from local materials, enhances the public realm and allows for individuality to be expressed through individually designed dwellings. It acts as a unifying element to village.

CHARACTER OF THE SETTLEMENT



Photo 18: Except in the village core, footpaths are generally only found on one side of the street.



Photo 19: Church car park.



Photo 20: Attractive nameplate with planter on approach to Belcarra.



Photo 21: Traditional water pump near the 1916 Commemorative Trees.

possible future development should be orientated or faced towards the river, so as to provide for natural surveillance and overlooking.

Characteristics of local roads and streets

Roads are generally in good condition throughout the village, though, as to be expected, there are a few potholes, most evident along the road edges or near the occasional junction. The community workshop identified speeding as a problem in and through the village. The approach roads are generally attractive – specifically the Balla Road and Ballinafad Road – which are defined by well-maintained grass verges and natural stone walls. In a number of cases, notably on the Castlebar Road and on the Balla Road there are street trees – birch being predominant on the Balla Road and a mixture of species including copper beech and rowan on the Castlebar Road (Refer to Map 5 – Urban Design Appraisal). Trees are an important component of the village structure in Belcarra and street trees can provide a unifying element in the streetscape. Opportunities for extending the street tree planting programme, either through the Council or local community, or jointly, should be encouraged. (Consistent or similar species should be considered on alternative roads, so that the growth rates, colour, shape and form remains relatively consistent on each road/street).

The treatment of boundaries is important, as they provide an important interface between the public and private domains. A consistent or common approach to boundaries can provide an important element of continuity and a harmonious, unified approach. Therefore careful attention to existing characteristics should be considered in planning for new sites or refurbishing existing ones (refer to sketch 2).

Footpaths and parking

A footpath exists on the east side of Main Street, from near the national school running south to Carra Caravans. This path is generally in good condition, though on the south side of the village, near the commemorative trees for those who were executed in the 1916 Rising, it reverts to a gravel surface. Elsewhere footpaths tend to be constructed on concrete. No notable characteristics, such as local stone for

kerbing, is evident in the village footpaths.

A second footpath runs from the centre of the village to the Church on Balla Road.

On-street car parking is provided throughout the village. Off-street car parking is provided at the Church on Balla Street. Given the scale of the commercial enterprise in the village, on-street car parking should be able to provide for most of the community's needs, however a key issue identified in the community workshop was the lack of safe and convenient car parking. There is a conflict between traffic speed and safe and convenient car parking.

Delineated traffic bays within an extended footpath system should be considered as part of environmental improvements in the village centre, near the existing retail units (Refer to Photo 24). In the future, all zoned areas should be served by a comprehensive system of footpaths connecting back into the village centre.

Street Furniture

Street furniture refers to the range of objects and equipment installed in a street or road, to cater for the public's amenity. It can include seating, litter bins, bollards, railings, planters, lighting, signposts and other notable features such as traditional water pumps or post boxes.

Belcarra displays a range of street furniture features. Most of these are



Photo 22: Existing street lighting does not really contribute to the character of the village.

BUILDINGS AND DETAILS



Typical lights that could be suitable for Belcarra (the suggested samples are from Abacus Lighting limited)

identified on the Belcarra Urban Design Map (Refer to Map 5). All approach roads have attractive nameplates identifying the name of the village. These are accompanied by flower planters which are well maintained. A number of other locations, such as the village's central junction, the basketball courts, the Common and the entrance to Carra Caravans are also provided with planters.

A number of green metal benches are provided in the village. Many are in need of repainting, maintenance or replacement. There are no public litter bins provided in the village; all appear in private ownership and the village is generally kept clean and tidy. One of the most attractive features is the traditional water pump situated amongst the 1916 Commemorative Trees.

The street lighting in the village is of a modern type, consisting of a round globe fixed to a pole. The design is not particularly well suited to the character of the village and the community workshop identified it as a weakness from a visual as well as practical aspect – as light is radiated upwards, providing poor illumination of the street. Elsewhere in the village – particularly on its edges, an even more functional lighting system on tall poles is provided.

Established planting

The provision of street trees has been identified above (See Characteristics of Local Roads and Streets) and includes the 1916 Commemorative Trees on the south end of the village. Flower beds accompany these commemorative street trees and are to be found elsewhere on verges throughout the village (Refer to Urban Design Map).

Buildings and features of interest

A building condition survey (Map 6) reveals that most buildings are in good physical condition throughout the village.

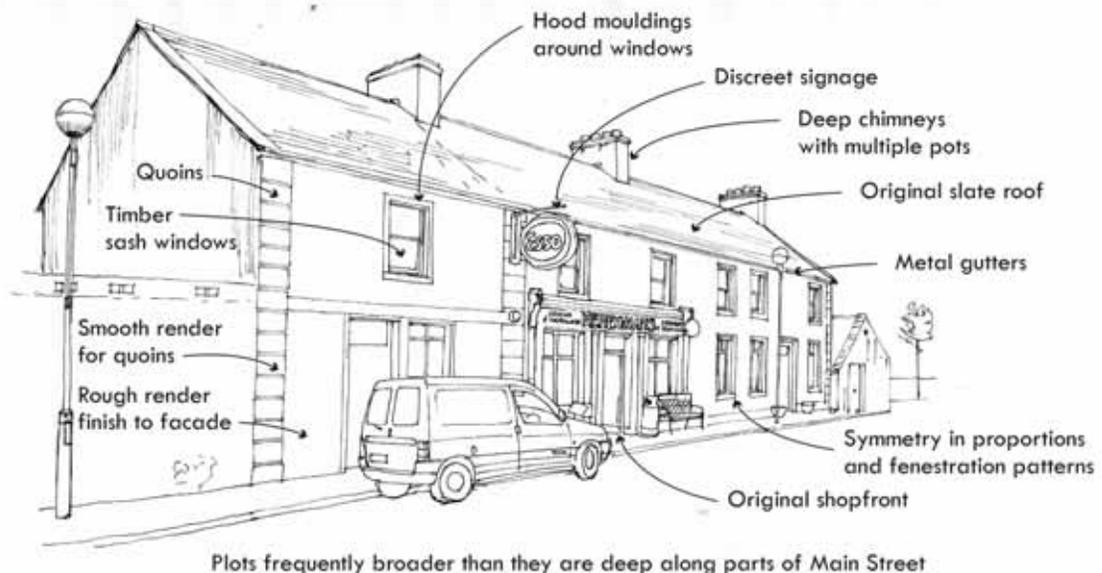
There are few buildings of outstanding architectural character in the village – buildings that could be classified as 'landmark buildings'. Nonetheless, the community identified a number of buildings that they consider to hold some architectural character or are important to them from a historical or social perspective.

The most important buildings in the village, include -

The Catholic Church – a fine structure constructed of cut limestone and likely to date from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century.

Heneghan's Shop and adjoining buildings – A group of predominantly two storey structures that includes a traditional

Sketch 3 (Below): Characteristics of traditional building design in Belcarra.



BUILDINGS AND DETAILS



Photo 23 (Above): Information Board at start of Riverside Walk.

An attractive information board and amenity sign for the riverside walk is situated on the Balla Road. (refer to photo 23)

shopfront and adjoining dwelling and outbuildings. It retains a significant amount of its original features and is one of the few remaining examples of traditional buildings, that have not been altered through modern refurbishment.

The Forge – a building which has been significantly extended and refurbished since its original construction, but includes horseshoe motifs on entrances facing Main Street.

Riverside House – a three bay, two storey dwellings constructed in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century with stylistic influences from the late Georgian period.

Traditional Building Design

A very significant number of the traditional building stock have been radically altered over the years. Few buildings retain any original features such as windows, doors, original slate roofs, etc. Many reveal new fenestration patterns, windows and window openings, new doors, new roofs, new plastered finishes and even new building heights.

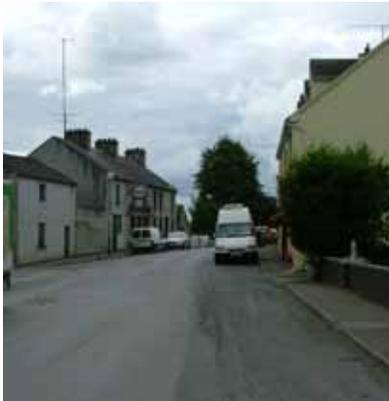
The traditional building design was best conveyed through Heneghan's – which displays a typical two storey structure, a vertical fenestration pattern (windows being typically longer than they are wider), hood mouldings surrounding windows, traditional hardwood framed sash windows (two over two or as in Heneghans, one pane over another) and a pitched roof of traditional slate. Heneghan's also reveals deep chimneys with multiple chimney

pots that served most rooms of the house. Buildings would have traditionally been constructed of natural stone and finished in a lime rendered plaster finish, though Heneghan's today, reveals a rough cement rendered finish, except for pseudo quoins which are finished in a smooth plaster finish.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES BASED ON DISTINCTIVE LOCAL CHARACTER

Sketch 4 (Right): Sketch 4, VDS 7 - Example of possible village green that could be provided to provide a focal point to the centre of the village, providing an attractive new civic space for the inhabitants of Belcarra.

Photo 24 (Below): Existing parking arrangements in Belcarra are largely dependant on on-street spaces. This arrangement while practical could be made more attractive with the provision of environmental improvements with new street trees and delineated parking bays as shown in Sketch 5, below.



VDS 1

Ensure the **protection of the Manulla River** and its traditional floodplain as an important ecological and amenity asset in the village. Restrict development encroachment into this area.

VDS 2

Promote, in so far as is feasible and practical, the principle that **new development along the Manulla River corridor is faced or orientated towards the river**, so as to ensure that there is adequate natural surveillance of the existing riverside walk and amenity areas.

VDS 3

Promote the continued development and extension of the existing **Manulla Riverside Walk**, specifically so as to make a direct connection from the existing footbridge back alongside the river to the village centre.

VDS 4

Promote the **protection of the existing drumlin ridge** to the immediate west of the village and explore with landowners the possibilities of creating a public walkway along its ridge, with connections back into the town.

VDS 5

Promote access to and knowledge of local archaeological monuments close to the village. This initiative could supplement the existing knowledge and access to the Eviction Cottage north of the village.

VDS 6

In keeping with the current pattern and character of the village, promote significant additional **tree planting on the lower slopes of the drumlin ridge** in association with any new developments that are

granted in the area.

VDS 7

Consider the creation of a **new village green** (or village square) in the centre of the village, to act as a focal point within the community. It is the interrelationship between buildings that defines the special character of civic spaces and village greens, therefore consideration should be given to extending the existing terraced development around the new proposed civic space (Refer to Sketch 4 for suggestions on location and form). This housing could provide for a greater socio-demographic mix, i.e., for the elderly, starter homes, etc.

VDS 8

Promote the planting of **additional street trees** on all approach roads. Different species could be selected for different roads.

VDS 9

Ensure the **extension of footpaths** to serve all future zoned and developed areas of the village.

VDS 10

Consider, in consultation with the Roads Section of Mayo County Council, initiatives to **reduce traffic speeds** on approach roads. Possible solutions include – gradual narrowing of carriageways on approach roads to the village; signage and the introduction of chicanes.

VDS 11

Encourage particularly **good architectural designs on all focal sites** identified on the Urban Design Map (Map 5). Focal sites are prominent sites that tend to have good road frontage; they include sites that would

DESIGN PRINCIPLES BASED ON DISTINCTIVE LOCAL CHARACTER

terminate a view or vista and tend to be situated at road junctions (T-junctions) or road bends. Such sites are important as they can strongly influence 'first impressions' of the village from approach roads and therefore should be designed to a high architectural standard.

VDS 12

New development should consolidate and strengthen the core of the village by promoting compact and sustainable growth of the village through a **tighter village grain**, with short terraces and two to three storey developments in the village centre.

VDS 13

Promote the **retention and rehabilitation of old stone walls** on all approach roads to the village. Where road widening may be required in association with new developments, encourage the repositioning and reinstatement of the wall at a suitable distance back from the road, maintaining the emerging character of grass verges and street trees. On the village fringe and in semi-rural areas, where one-off dwellings may be permitted in exceptional circumstances and in accordance with local planning policy, existing boundaries such as hedgerows, should be ideally retained or suitably replaced if a set-back is required.

VDS 14

Replace, as resources permit, the existing street lighting with an alternative style.

Given the extensive range of modern designs, neo-traditional styles may not be the most appropriate, as there are many modern styles that would enhance the village of Belcarra.

VDS 15

Encourage the protection and **conservation of the few older buildings** that remain in the village in preference to demolition and modern infill.

VDS 16

New development should only take place concurrent with the necessary supporting **infrastructure (physical and social) and amenities.**

VDS 17

The extent and pace of **new development on the edges of the village should be strictly controlled** so not to impose a

character and style that is at odds with the existing character. A development cap may need to be considered.

VDS 18

Consider the provision of **environmental improvements** with a series of delineated car parking spaces set within an area defined by street trees and associated hard landscaping.

VDS 19

Protect, in situ, the existing **water pump** on south Main Street in the vicinity of the 1916 Commemorative Trees.

VDS 20

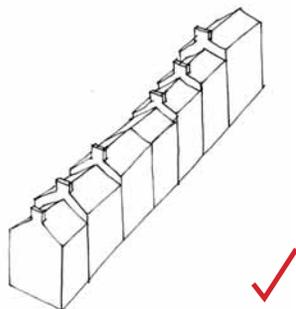
Consider **Tree Preservation Orders** for those trees identified on the Urban Design Map (Map 5).

VDS 21

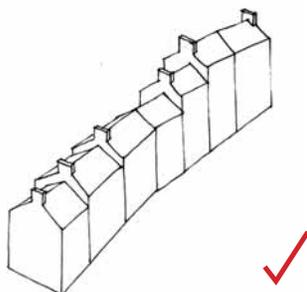
Promote future development proposals which display designs and layouts which **have regard to the local context and environment**, and clearly relate to the local vernacular and/or site characteristics. The imposition of suburban style developments in the village centre should be avoided and standard detached or semi-detached house plans and elevations imposed on traditional plots should be avoided. Refer to Sketch X

DESIGN GUIDELINES

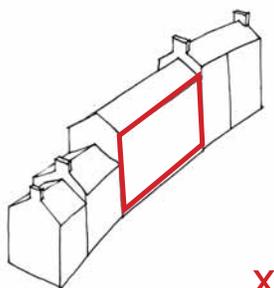
New development in the centre of the village should generally seek to achieve the pattern reflected in sketches 1 or 2, reinforcing the traditional streetscape with narrow plot widths and subtle variations in building heights



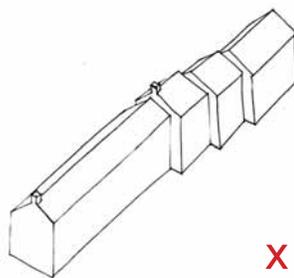
Sketch 6: Traditional straight building line similar to those historically evident in Belcarra



Sketch 7: Traditional deflected building line also evident in Belcarra



Sketch 8: Plot amalgamation and associated redevelopment can result in a disruption of scale of vertical emphasis in streetscape. The cumulative impact of this over generations can significantly erode the inherent character of the traditional streetscape



Sketch 9: Stepping of building lines in new infill development should be avoided

VILLAGE CENTRE DESIGN GUIDELINES

Good streetscape design requires a certain harmony in the interrelationship between buildings. New buildings should therefore try to respect or have regard to the existing building fabric which contributes so much to the existing character of the village. This requires a sensitive approach which has regard to local context. This existing context can relate to a number of streetscape elements, such as plot width, building height, building line, roof type/pitch, fenestration pattern, materials, detailing, etc.

Few buildings in Belcarra retain all or much of their original traditional characteristics. Even if the village had a greater concentration of traditional buildings, it would be inappropriate to slavishly copy each of the streetscape elements referred to above. These elements – the plot dimension, the height, building setback, roof type, materials, etc., offer a cue from which the modern designer can select so as to produce a modern building and/or innovative design that has regard to the



Photo 25: While there are some very positive attributes in this design such as the vertical emphasis in the facade design, the scale of the development and continuous building lines, some variation could be introduced in either plot width, facade design, deflection of building line or building height

existing character and context. This is sometimes referred to as 'context design'. The following elements are offered as guidance for new buildings in the village centre.

Plots

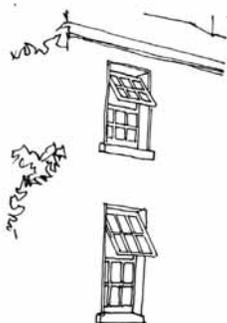
Unlike most Irish towns and villages, the plots in Belcarra's centre tend to be much shorter than in other villages. This has emerged from the presence of the esker to the immediate west and to a lesser extent, by the presence of the river on the east side of Main Street. The lack of depth would appear to be compensated in some cases by broader plot widths and therefore the continuous terraces and streetscapes found in many other Irish villages, is not as well developed in Belcarra. Nonetheless, the building forms on these plots have repeated the pattern found elsewhere in other settlements, with three and four bays being typical.

Building Lines/Building Set-backs

Building line or building set-back refers to the position of the façade of a building relative to the street. Traditional streets usually display fairly consistent building lines which can be straight, curved, deflected or meandering. In Belcarra, there is some consistency in the older building pattern with short straight building lines and some minor or subtle deflections echoing the changes of the road (see sketches 6 & 7). A few older buildings show a more deliberate set-back, but a more discordant pattern emerges where newer bungalows have been permitted close to the more traditional buildings. Newer terraces have maintained a standard and consistent building line, to the south of the village. While these terraces echo the traditional streetscape, they do not display the subtle deflections that can create great interest and variety along the streetscape (Refer to Photo 25 and Sketches 8 & 9)).

Windows and Doors

In the traditional Irish village, as evident in Belcarra, the doors and window openings are vertically orientated and aligned. It is important that this pattern is maintained and therefore the pressure for larger openings should be resisted. In modern infill buildings, larger windows can be introduced while maintaining the vertical emphasis and traditional fenestration



Sketch 10: Inappropriate uPVC windows with outward opening has replaced traditional hardwood sliding sash window. Where possible original windows and doors should be conserved or re-instated.



Sketch 11: Overly horizontal emphasis for traditional streetscape

Such minor relatively alterations to individual buildings on a street may seem trivial, but their cumulative impact can be quite significant



Sketch 12: Excessive steep pitch roof

In typical terrace, the angle of the roof pitch is generally consistent, even though building heights may vary. New infill developments (or refurbishments that include new habitable roof space) should ensure that the pitch or angle of the roof is consistent with neighbouring properties.

pattern.

In general, windows and door frames should be set back or recessed from the face of the building. This was traditionally important to protect the natural wood frames from the elements, but it also gives depth and character to the building.

Traditional windows were constructed of hardwood and were of the traditional sash type (with one, two or four panes over a corresponding number below). In general, original windows and doors should be refurbished in preference to their replacement with modern materials and uPVC materials.

Building Height and Scale

The village still displays a significant mix of building heights—ranging from single to two and half/three storeys (two storeys with dormers). Traditional building heights were one and two storeys.

Historical maps indicate that the traditional pattern of development consisted of a series of short terraces and detached dwellings. In recent years there have been a number of newer short terraces developed along the Main Street. A feature of these modern terraces and the large detached dwellings that are found around the village, is the deeper floor plan. This has a corresponding effect in relation to the scale of the roof, which in the modern building tends to be larger.

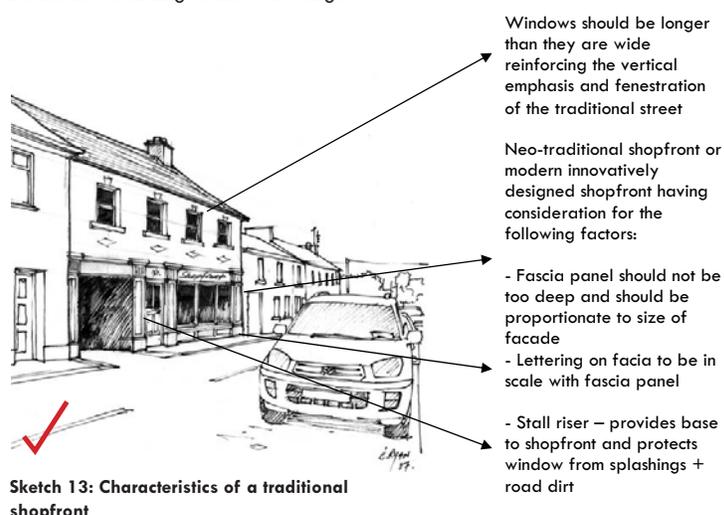
Street Roofline

Given the varying building heights in the village and the varying building lines (building setback from street edge), there is a corresponding difference in roof lines. This fact however, should not preclude a more consistent approach being taken in respect to new infill development opportunities, particularly along the village centre. It should be noted however, that it is common in the Irish village for building heights and the ridges of roofs, to step up and down continuously within a limited range. This adds visual interest and rhythm, and avoids the monotonous rigidity of overly standardized roof lines.

For new pitched roofs, the angle of the pitch should be generally consistent with its neighbours and should not be excessively steep (or shallow). The scale of dormer windows should be in keeping with the scale of the roof plane, and where a pitched roof is present, flat-roofed dormers should generally be avoided.

Shop fronts and Signage

There is only one traditional shopfront remaining in Belcarra. Every effort should be made to retain and conserve this shopfront at Heneghan's. It adds greatly to the character of the street. The special features of its design and proportion include the pilasters, nameboard, console, cornice and traditional signwriting style. Modern designs which echo its scale and



Sketch 13: Characteristics of a traditional shopfront

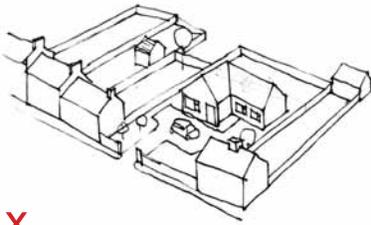
Windows should be longer than they are wide reinforcing the vertical emphasis and fenestration of the traditional street

Neo-traditional shopfront or modern innovatively designed shopfront having consideration for the following factors:

- Fascia panel should not be too deep and should be proportionate to size of facade
- Lettering on fascia to be in scale with fascia panel

- Stall riser – provides base to shopfront and protects window from splashing + road dirt

- Pilasters create vertical emphasis, reflecting traditional fenestration (window) pattern and 'frame' the shopfront.



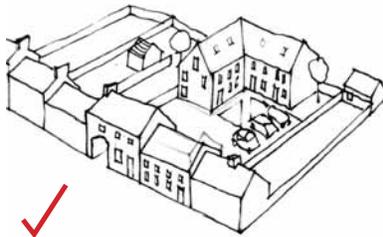
Sketch 14: Avoid: suburban imposition on traditional streetscape - inappropriate building design+setback

proportion and avoid excessively large nameboards would be suitable on other infill sites.

Car Parking

Where small scale infill opportunities present themselves in the village centre of Belcarra, it is unlikely that off-street car parking can be accommodated. On larger infill sites, every effort should be made to provide the car parking to the rear of the building (or failing that to the side) rather than incorporating an excessive building set-back with a car park to the front (refer to sketch 14)

with a stone face (except for some of the smaller cottages on the edge). Most buildings have a cement plastered finish, though traditionally would have had a lime based mortar. It is important to retain the renders on buildings that had originally been finished in this manner, as it protects the building from rainwater and damp. When removed, it can expose a rough rubble wall with a mix of materials that was never intended to be exposed (refer to sketch 15).

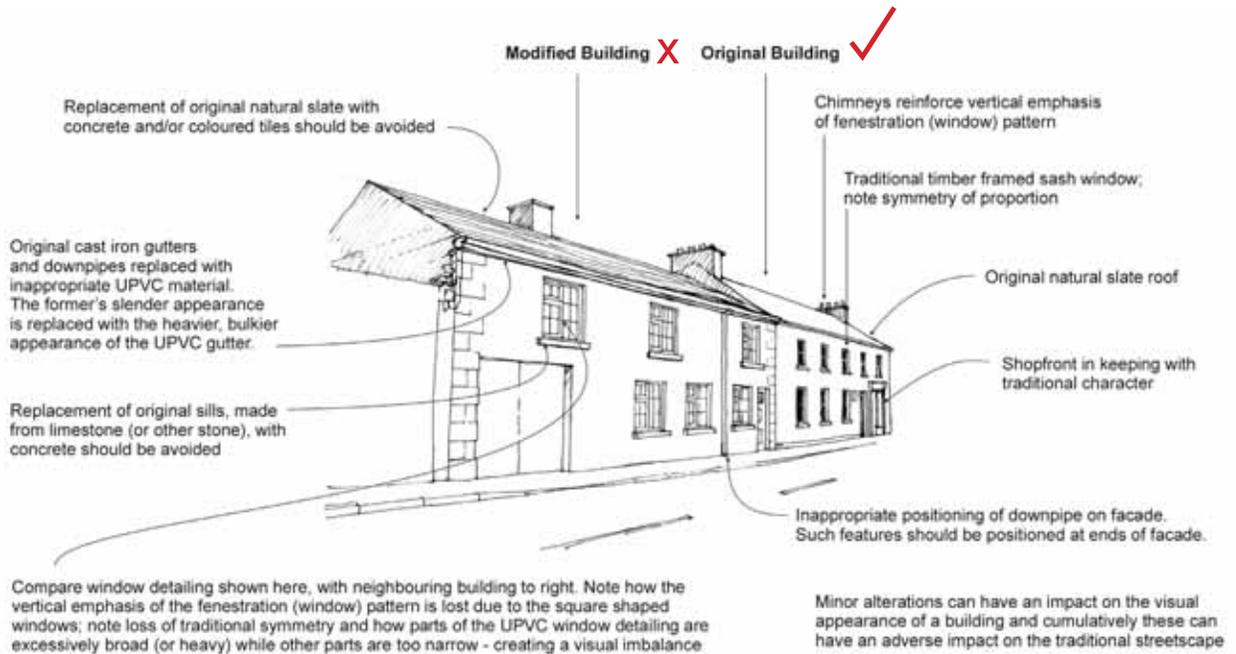


Sketch 15: Preferred: New infill respects traditional streetscape with potential for courtyard or backland development

Materials and Details

The retention or reinstatement of the traditional elements of a building, such as chimneys, cast-iron gutters, natural slate roofs, etc. should be encouraged. The modern trend of removing chimneys in the refurbishment of buildings can have a significant cumulative impact over time, as the street begins to lose some of its vertical emphasis.

Limestone is a traditional building material in Belcarra. Few buildings are finished



Sketch 16

Minor alterations can have an impact on the visual appearance of a building and cumulatively these can have an adverse impact on the traditional streetscape

SOME DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR NEW DEVELOPMENTS OUTSIDE THE VILLAGE CENTRE

For new development areas, it is important that development consolidates and reinforces the traditional structure of the village, rather than creating a dual settlement, physically disconnected to the village in character and form. The following guidelines should be considered.

Linkages and Permeability – Permeability is the relative ease with which people can move about and get to their destination. Linkages and connections between places and new development areas will be important. The imposition of cul-de-sac without adequate consideration to these linkages is likely to result in an unsatisfactory development form.

Natural Surveillance – In general, the front of the house should be orientated to face a public street and adjoining open spaces, while the backs of houses should interlock with each other. This ensures that all open spaces are overlooked by adjoining dwellings, providing natural surveillance and a sense of security. The provision of rear gardens along principal access roads should be avoided.

Landmark Buildings and Corner Sites

At key locations, such as at junctions, nodal points, focal sites and street corners, future developments and buildings should be individually designed so as to accentuate the special site features, i.e., two façades may be required of a corner building to address each adjoining street. Such buildings could be accentuated through stepping up building heights or through other forms of design articulation (i.e. fenestration etc.)

Landscaping

The landscape structure of Belcarra is a very notable feature. In particular the existing tree groups provide a very positive contribution to the character of the village. Future development areas should give due consideration to landscaping and tree planting so as to ensure the newer and older areas are in time unified. Native tree species will be particularly encouraged due to their greater ecological value (they support and sustain a greater variety of insects, birdlife and mammals). All future

developments should be accompanied by a landscape plan that outlines the approach to be taken. Landscaping should address not just the common, public area or open space, but should also give consideration to the private domain.

Landscaping and treeplanting can be used to successfully address the transition in building types and set-backs that emerge from the village centre to the village edge.

COMMUNITY SWOT ANALYSIS

Belcarra SWOT Analysis - An examination of the village's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats, as identified by the community.

Strengths

- Riverside walk
- The drumlins
- Great sense of community
- 'The Common' – area of public open space in village centre
- Self-contained
- Compact
- Sheltered
- Trees
- The Crows/ Rookery
- Traditional shopsfronts
- Community centre
- Sports centre
- Practically crime free
- Links with Tidy Towns

Weaknesses

- Road surfaces + footpaths
- Falling walls
- Demolition of existing stone walls
- Lack of a village plan
- Inadequate lighting
- Lack of facilities for the youth
- Lack of indigenous tree planting
- Problem with on-street parking – safety and convenience
- Lack of local employment
- Lack of social inclusion with non-nationals
- **Poor bus service**

Opportunities

- Community building
- River Development – river access (can't see water)
- Open up bridge and river area (redesign / overgrown)
- Creation of a drumlin walk way
- Development of a Village Green
- Playground development
- Recycling centre
- In-depth development – on lower slopes of drumlins rather than just on main roads
- Development of local football ground
- Retain village character
- Provision of childcare facilities
- Encourage school cycling
- Sewerage expansion – to facilitate more development
- Keep all public utility services underground

Threats

- Old trees – need of new planting to replace older trees.
- Traffic (speeding)
- Accelerated population growth
- Lack of opportunity to build communities
- Lack of opportunity to work with developers
- Development balance
- Over – Development / Excessive development
- Waste water / sewerage at capacity
- Poor planning
- Lack of broadband
- Sewerage – pollution treat?

BELCARRA QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY ANALYSIS & COMMUNITY WISH LIST

22 questionnaires were completed.

The consulted members of Belcarra community who responded to the survey questionnaire stated that they enjoyed the VDS Workshop and also found it beneficial.

3. Belcarra's most distinguished characteristics were:

- Sheltered location
- Drumlin
- River
- Shop fronts
- Traditional/rural character
- Rural but yet close to Castlebar
- Community spirit
- Compact
- Peaceful
- Variety of detached residences (and no estate housing)
- Good mix of young and old population

4. Most people agreed that the majority of Belcarra's population age group ranges between the middle aged and older groups.

5. 58% of those surveyed people agreed that the character of the village centre is different from the surrounding areas. The differences they cited were:

- Village core's older residents.
- Village core's buildings with continuous facades while the outskirts display a more dispersed building pattern
- The village is expanding from the outside into the village instead of expanding the village from the centre – little consistency in the house design.

6. The community suggestions for the village included:

- Sport centre for the youth
- Childcare facilities
- Playing fields
- Development of the Village's core
- Road and footpath improvements
- More trees on the streets
- Recycling facilities
- Youth Art Centre
- More housing – preference for detached residences

7. The favorite buildings are:

- Church
- Village core buildings
- Community centre

8. The favorite streets/streetscapes are:

- Triangle in the village centre
- Main Street/Village centre
- Church Street

9. The favourite spaces were:

- Riverside
- Post office
- The Common
- Fisheries

10. 65% of those consulted visit the Riverside Walk on a regular basis.

11. 71% of those consulted agreed that Belcarra has car parking problems, and cited the area near the school as the most problematic.

12. 71% of those consulted indicated that they did not like the way in which the village is growing. The main issues relating to the village's growth included:

- Growth good and necessary for a vibrant community
- Fear of over development
- A need to develop the village core

13. Dislikes:

- Lack of thought on infrastructure and provision of services
- New houses too near to roads
- Residential Estate Development
- Too many houses – urban sprawl
- No public transport to Castlebar
- Lack of provision for pedestrians and cyclists
- Lack of water pressure at times
- Parking at school and main junction

15. There is a general consensus that Belcarra is a safe village

16. Wish list:

- Sports Centre
- Recycling Facilities
- Arts centre
- Play areas
- Riverside walks
- Footpath improvements
- Youth facilities
- Restoration of derelict buildings
- Street lighting
- Footpaths
- Roads (road surface)
- Surface water drains
- Lighting
- More funding
- Continuation of the Riverside walks
- The need to plant indigenous trees along streets

