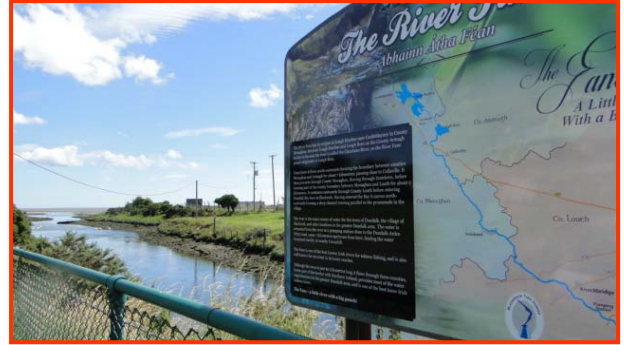


OVERALL WINNER

BLACKROCK



General Cleanliness

It is difficult to put into words just how impressive your cleanliness rating is – it hits the visitor from entering to leaving the village that an exceptional standard of litter and weed management prevails throughout – 100% perfection! Lack of clutter is a feature of your presentation which adds to the neat and tidy appearance and the absence of overhead wirescape is admirable and also contributes to the fresh and crisp appearance. Not alone was the Bring Bank site spotlessly clean but it serves the dual purpose of an outdoor information centre on sustainable living as a result of the fantastic tableau of information signs and, of course, the information panels exhibiting the work of pupils from the Green Flag schools in the community.

Landscaping Works & Floral Displays

Where do we start? The first 'Douze Points' go to the enchanting Blackrock Park where formal landscaping and wildlife provision are neatly intertwined to add to the amenity value provided by the playground, adult exercise equipment and multi-use games amenity. The single colour pansies in planters at the entrance from the Car Park light up a formerly dark corner and the sound of flowing water as one enters is a therapeutic delight. The avenue of lime trees has delightful appeal and what a lovely idea to include local families in the tree planting programme which is a great way of giving them ownership of the wealth of trees that is now so apparent in the village. The provision of a sign acknowledging this is a lovely touch. Your superb biodiversity garden, intergenerational garden, cottage garden and medieval garden, among other planting schemes in the Park, give a nostalgic feel to your presentation and charmed the adjudicators immeasurably as it did the many butterflies that were fluttering from plant to plant in joyful abandon. The Sensory Garden, sitting comfortably on its elevated site, has compelling appeal and we can say, with upmost honesty, that its excellence in design, planting and maintenance is unequalled in the county. The irresistible splendour of lacecap hydrangea, pink poppies, cranesbill, geranium, roses, elephants ear, Siberian bugloss and purple snapdragon defies description with the enchanting picture completed by the beautifully painted seated area and elegant hornbeam trees that add an architectural dimension to this divine piece of landscaping. We cannot leave the Park without mentioning the fabulous wildflower area where vetches, poppies, thistles, feverfew and the quite rare corn marigold vie for attention in their willow surround enclosure. The composting demonstration site is an excellent amenity - everybody in Blackrock must be master composters by now given the practical examples and information signs on display. Your holistic approach to landscaping throughout the village is working a treat and illustrates the awareness that prevails to balance sustainable planting with bursts of summer colour despite the challenges posed by your salty seaside environment. The promenade was splendidly presented with just the right amount of seasonal colour from hanging baskets, which are gentle on the eye and blend beautifully with the sky and sea views without being over showy. The tubs along the tiered promenade wall are a delight with deep magenta, purple and white petunia sparkling in the sunshine. The gravelled bed in front of Centra has been refurbished with overgrown shrubs removed to give an understated but pristine outcome. The fingerpost signage attractively indicates local amenities/facilities and attention to detail here extends to specifying the time it takes to reach the various amenities. Deep pink roses are very much a feature of your landscaping and while they had gone slightly off bloom for our visit this year they nevertheless presented a charming and consistent approach which was further enhanced by your flags fluttering gently in the breeze. The Sun Dial, of course, is an iconic feature in the village and looked resplendent creating powerful impact highlighted as it is by a combination of permanent and seasonal colour. The Bradán sculpture is another arresting feature set in an exquisite shrub bed that highlights it to perfection.

The beach was idyllic on adjudication day with children playing in the sand to the backdrop of the mountain vista, the views of which are made more accessible to the visitor by your conveniently placed telescope in its lovely seated area. Information panels along the promenade highlight the variety of flora and fauna in your marine environment. The new Heritage Plaque on the Credit Union is a wonderful if sobering addition to your heritage trail as one reflects on the young life lost in the Mary Stoddard disaster. The new fingerpost sign at the entrance to the Fane River Walk entices the visitor to stroll along “A little river with a big Punch” where a number of swans were swimming elegantly on the peaceful river whose estuary was swarming with further swan life. What a lovely natural environment where cattle can graze uninterrupted on the other side of the river while the human visitor enjoys a leisurely walk taking in the view and admiring your lovely signage and silhouette features. Hamilton Marsh, with its new gravelled pathway, was glowing on the day of our visit. You have so many landscaped areas, so many treats for the visitor and such a huge workload, under this category, executed to perfection, that we simply couldn't mention all the delights experienced during our visit or this report would be as long as Tolstoy's War and Peace (it nearly is!!) so please don't be offended if we haven't managed to comment on some of your staggering range of projects.

Appearance of Approach Roads

We first of all must say that your decision not to cut grass verges too severely on approach roads is an excellent one and choosing to trim the outer road edge and leave the inner edge as a wildlife friendly habitat is an example of best practise – your sparkling new Wild for Wildlife signage explaining your rationale perfectly and providing added interest on approach roads. While they wouldn't suit all locations your entrance beds prove it doesn't always have to be about colour – the seaside themed beds are a perfect introduction to the delights that lie ahead with wonderful movement of grasses and charming planting of angels fishermans rod, catmint, penstemon and agapanthus, among others, creating a lovely sense of arrival that is further highlighted by the Blackrock Flag flying high at all entrances. Silhouettes on field gates are another charming presentation of approach roads.

Individual Contribution – Residential/Business

The Beautiful Blackrock campaign has no doubt created friendly rivalry among estates, residential properties and retail premises and has resulted in the ever improving performance under this heading which was so evident once again this year. All properties along Main Street are now contributing very well with a number of real show stoppers! The Bay View delivered its usual WOW factor performance with its radiant façade highlighted by clipped box in ground level planters and creeping jenny stealing the show in displays at upper level. The Brake looked sublime on adjudication day - not only did the well painted façade catch the eye in its own right but it was beautifully embellished with profuse summer colour at both levels that complemented the flags waving gently in the breeze. The Neptune looked terrific with its elegant colour scheme, exuberant window boxes along the front and vivacious hanging baskets to add cheer to the portion of the building along Sandy Lane. The butchers shop has toned down somewhat in terms of advertising which was not as overwhelming as a number of years ago. The renamed Uncle Tom's Cabin (back to its origins!) caught the eye with large wooden planters overflowing with dashing nasturtiums. The Black Wok was looking its best with its classic shop front adorned with window boxes of deep pink and purple petunias while Blackrock Flowers caught the eye with fantastic window boxes of blood red geraniums.

The Stone House looks well but why, oh why, is the letter “e” still missing? The Credit Union was an absolute delight this year and, as always, Danny Hughes Seaside Shop, Café Acqua, The Home Bakery, Mace, Mullens, Crosscause and After Sybil contribute hugely to the stylish appearance of the main commercial area. Belle’s Tearooms delivers a unique charm although flower displays were not as good as previous years. The same could not be said about The Clermont where contrasting vibrancy was the order of the day with showy begonia at upper level and more subtle lobelia and petunia at lower level combining to create exquisite impact. The remains of the former Darcy’s building have been brightly painted and, even in its now disused, state blends much better with the streetscape. It is very rewarding to see that a number of private residences along the Main Street have been newly painted or touched up and quite a number of residents are now displaying floral enhancements to great effect. Along Sandy Lane, Vivo appears to be somewhat cleaner than usual, the Legion of Mary Hall has been freshly painted in a more delicate colour scheme and with its hanging basket displays is hugely improved in presentation. We never saw the Garda Station looking as well – freshly painted with lovely vibrancy from ground level planters. St. Oliver’s School looked extremely well with attention drawn to the neatly presented complex by the satchels of flamboyant colour at the entrances. The bed in front of Happy Days Crèche has been refurbished and looked terrific this year with catmint and yellow and pink roses creating a lovely warm vibe that was absent in previous years. The house opposite Rock Celtic is, as usual, a pure visual delight with pretty hydrangea, smiling sunflowers and radiant roses vying for attention in the informal, but beautifully maintained garden. Space prevents us from documenting in detail the excellent standard of presentation that was in evidence in so many of your housing estates with Rock Court, Mariners Court, Elm Park, Ard na Mara, Fane View, Beech Park and The Links contributing hugely to the overall standard of residential presentation. Sandfield Gardens, Sandy Grove, Wallace’s Cove, Hamilton Marsh, Rathmount and St. Fursey’s Terrace are also all making extremely worthwhile contributions. More than worthwhile is the contribution being made by St. Francis’s School where one can only marvel at the variety and standard of planting schemes and look in envy at the stunning outdoor classroom and mosaics. Finally we paid an unexpected, but delightful, short visit to the Golf Club where we admired the lovely avenue of trees along the entrance and the sophisticated name bed in well clipped box hedging – charm personified!

Overall Impression

It has been a real privilege to witness the development and transformation of Blackrock over the last few years. Your creativity and work ethic has delivered a delightful streetscape, complemented by high quality amenity features to enhance the quality of life opportunities for the entire community. That all of this has been achieved while at the same time respecting the needs of wildlife and facilitating biodiversity is highly commendable! Even during a very hectic adjudication day the hard pressed adjudicators found that Blackrock became a holiday destination as we took in the many delights that have been created for the visitor. We could also appreciate the well-deserved pride you take in your achievements reflected in the wonderful array of framed certificates, medals and awards so decoratively displayed in the window of a centrally located vacant property. The commitment of your committee is immeasurable and the work of your volunteers priceless and it is this that will ensure you continue to take your place as a leader in this competition and, ultimately, make your mark in the National Tidy Towns Competition. You are a worthy and inspiring winner of Louth Looking Good 2016!