

Challenges for Cork

European Cork has no vision or strategy and a problem delivering high-quality development



By Michael Smith

The story of Cork City’s long and rich history is written in the buildings and urban landscape that make Ireland’s second city, arguably, its most appealing.

History and Character

The city began as a monastic settlement, founded in the sixth Century by Saint Finbarr. Vikings arrived in the early tenth century and by the seventeenth century the city has become a major export centre to the Caribbean.

Hanging in the Rijks Museum is a painting by the seventeenth Century artist Gerrit Berckheyde ‘View of the Golden Bend in Herengrachtm Amsterdam’. It shows



Could be Cork

classical houses with external steps up to the first floor on quaysides with open canals in front. It could be of Cork. What’s notable is that the view still exists almost fully intact in Amsterdam but only remnants remain of such scenes in Cork. A once beautiful trading city of the Northern Renaissance period, planned on classical principals within a watery context, Cork is now suffering an identity crisis. Cork has more in common with the architecture of Northern Europe and the English West Country than with most of the rest of Ireland. It has suffered much dilution of character since the post

war period. The loss is a national loss. Cork is now floundering to re-establish an identity within the limitations of a modern centralised political system.

“Every place must identify its strongest most distinctive features and develop them or run the risk of being all things to all persons and nothing special to any.” While the burning of Cork and slum clearances from the

1920s began the losses for Cork, road widening schemes and ill-conceived property development in the historic centre has caused untold recent damage, yet the City still seems on a path to dilute everything and become “the nothing special” that Robert Merton has warned us about. That special character of historic cities is what economists dream about for regeneration and prosperity. Cork seems concerned with everything but.

Nearly 100 businesses and homes were destroyed or badly damaged by fire and looting when the Black and Tans burnt Cork in 1920.

Cork’s inner city slums were cleared by the municipal authority from the 1920s onwards, and their denizens were re-housed in housing estates on the periphery of the city, principally on its north side.

Economy

Cork’s economy dipped in the late 20th century as the old manufacturing industries in Cork declined. The Ford car factory and Dunlop tyre factory closed in 1984. Shipbuilding in Cork also came to an end in the 1980s, when there was serious unemployment.

The Cork region contributes 19% to the national economic output in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Cork has been ranked second by the *Financial Times* in the admittedly slightly obscure category of ‘small cities in Europe for economic potential’.

Modern Developments

In the 1990s more modern industries came to Cork. Marina Commercial Park was built on the site of the old Dunlop and Ford plants, and Cork Airport Business Park first opened in 1999. Little Island Business Park followed shortly afterwards. Cork, like other cities in Ireland benefited somewhat from the Celtic Tiger

economic boom, with growth in industries such as information technology, pharmaceuticals, brewing, distilling and food processing.

Larger office buildings in the city include Half Moon Street, Penrose Wharf and the Elysian in the city centre – the tallest building in Ireland - with Linn Dubh and The Atrium in Blackpool, and City Gate Park in Mahon.

The Port of Cork is also a busy and important port.

New Development

Over a million square feet of offices are under construction or in the planning stages in Cork. This includes the proposed €150 million development of accommodation, offices, retail and an event centre at the old Beamish and Crawford brewery site.

Developments underway in the city include a €90 million office scheme at “Navigation Square” on Albert Quay recently purchased by French fund, Corum; a 250,000 square foot office development on Penrose Quay; a €400 million office, hotel, retail and residential development at Horgan’s Quay and Cork Kent railway station of which Apple is taking three floors. In 2017, following other docklands development programmes, including proposals for works at Custom House Quay, Cork City Council announced plans to further develop Cork’s Docklands with over 200 hectares of land identified for possible redevelopment.

In support of these plans for Cork Docklands, the government is providing €350 million to support regeneration with a further €46 million being made available for a makeover of the Grand Parade quarter. These allocations are part of a package of supports that An Taoiseach, Micheál Martin described as a “game changer” for Cork city and county that would “transform the recreational, residential and commercial areas, and prime the docklands for significant follow-up private investment”. The announcement also includes funding for projects in Mallow and the Passage West/Ringaskiddy/Carrigaline Harbour Cluster.

However, there is some concern that a combination of no clear strategy and a post-Covid retreat from commercial development may cause problems delivering at scale.

Population

According to the 2016 census, the population of Cork City is almost 211,000 and that of the metropolitan population over 305,000 people.

The growth targets set out for Cork City up to 2031 aim to increase the existing population and housing base extraordinarily - by over a third and over a half, respectively. The housing targets require an average annual delivery of over 2,000 new units to be sustained during the period to 2031 to meet the supposedly overarching but toothless National Planning Framework



population target. The recently announced Our Rural Future seems to undermine the long-standing sense of a strategy to put cities other than Dublin first, by promoting a badly-considered vision of “towns first”.

To support this predicted increase of 6,250 more people per annum on average 3,750 jobs and 2,000 new residential units will need to be provided every year for the next 20 years.

In the broader Cork Metropolitan Area expected population growth of 105,000 people by 2031 will require commensurate growth in employment in the order of up to 65,000.

It is not clear how Cork will embrace this increase. It needs apartments but must not compromise existing neighbourliness and quality or its maritime orientation. Clearly the City should draw up local guidelines prescribing attractive mixed-use developments throughout the city, centred on spacious family apartments.

Industry

Cork came late to large-scale industry, but driven by its port, is now a centre for Irish industry. This dates to Ford’s establishment in the city in 1917. Henry Ford, was the descendant of Irish émigrés and confessed in his autobiography that his reason for choosing Ireland was largely personal and that his ambition was to “start Ireland along the road to industry”.

Located within Greater Cork are Pfizer (Pharmaceutical, famously including Viagra), GlaxoSmithKline (Pharmaceutical), Johnson & Johnson (Pharmaceutical), EMC (Data Storage), Apple Inc. (European HQ, employing 6,000 directly), Avery Dennison (Financial Shared Services), Siemens Group (Third party multi-lingual tech support) and the Marriott Group (Customer Service Contact Centre), Clearstream and Amazon (Customer Services – On line Retail Activities).

There are two key third-level institutions in the city, Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) and University College Cork (UCC), which are the sixth and third largest employers in the city respectively - the latter employing approximately 2,800 people.



The English Market, Cork

Planning

Despite a national spatial strategy introduced in 2002 which was intended to consolidate cities outside of Dublin, the core populations of Cork and Limerick actually fell during the following decade, while almost half of the total urban growth took place in commuterlands around towns that were neither “gateways” nor “hubs”. There is a danger that recent Green Party intervention in the discourse will favour towns over cities.

The challenge for Cork City Council is to manage the future development of the city to preserve its unique character and European feel, particularly its neighbourhood-village sense, its walkability, the accessibility of its artisan shops and the famous English Market, its vibrant local communities and its maritime orientation now being promoted by Bord Fáilte, while providing its people with the urban infrastructure that they need. There is little sign that decision-makers have a sense or vision of Cork, or a strategy for its development. Overall its recent development seems driven by the arbitrary discretions of the City’s Chief Executive and, overridingly, by developers and their profits. Cork needs small-scale, mixed-use developments to the highest quality, including more apartments but its neighbourliness is fragile, and industrial-scale residential or even commercial development can cut across its native charms and characteristic finer mixed-use grain.

A number of recent planning decisions show that the Council has not struck the right balance and gives rise to worries that, if they persist in their current approach, they will end up doing irreparable harm to the city and its residents.

Transportation

The lessons learnt from past housing failures show that residential construction plans must be fully integrated with a well-designed transport plan. If this can be achieved, then there is considerable capacity for redevelopment along the existing transport corridors that would allow Middleton and Carrigtwohill to grow considerably as recognised in the Cork Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy (CMATS).



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It is nevertheless imperative that this does not divert energy from the fragile city centre.

CMATS takes an evidence-based approach to this problem and builds on preceding transport studies such as Cork City Centre Movement Strategy; Cork Area Strategic Plan and the Cork Metropolitan Cycle Network Plan. The overall aim is to increase the modal share of public transport to 26% by 2040. The Light Rail System (LRT) will serve a catchment reaching 32% of the Cork Metropolitan Areas population and 60% of job locations.

The LRT will run from Ballincollig to Mahon, via the city centre and will complement major upgrades to the capacity and frequency of the city-wide bus services and commuter rail services. CMATS also aims to increase the number of walking trips by 63% by 2040 and will provide appropriate infrastructure and facilities to allow cycling replace 56,000 car trips. Meanwhile a central plank of the Government's recovery plan is €184million for metropolitan rail to run through Cobh, Midleton and Mahon, and eventually Tivoli, Blarney and Kilbarry – “transport-led planning”. Cork needs to recognise a sense of place on its traffic-choked quays, potentially the focus of the city. They should become a destination more than a route.

Public realm

Cork's public realm is evolving to better accommodate pedestrian and cycle routes, people with reduced mobility and play/recreation. In particular, the city's parks are crucial to the quality of life and well-being of people in Cork City.

Recent and planned projects have occurred at:

- the new Tramore Valley Park;
- the new Marina Park in the South Docklands;
- Fitzgerald's Park;
- the 'Shaky Bridge' connecting the northside of the city to Fitzgerald's Park;
- Bishopstown playground;
- Ballincollig Regional Park with associated pedestrian and cycle path;

All of these parks have multiple activities ranging from 'Summer in the Park' events, music, Park runs, playgrounds, yoga etc.

Over the past 10 years there have been development of sports pitches and associated



Dining out in Prince's Street during Covid



Overall, Cork's recent development seems driven by the arbitrary discretions of the City's Chief Executive and, overridingly, by developers and their profits.



Parklet, Douglas Street.

changing facilities, and various upgrades of the public realm.

Proposed greenways, the Lee2Sea and Euro Velo, are opportunities to allow people to walk, jog or cycle to and from work, school, shops and for recreation.

There is a sense of vibrancy among Cork's senior planners that often isn't matched by management.

Nevertheless sterling efforts have been made, post-Covid, to enhance Cork City Centre with dramatic outdoor dining and a number of ad hoc new 'parklets'.

Modern Commercial Property Developments

The growing demand for commercial property spaces from the 1990s onwards, saw the construction of new commercial developments at locations such as Marina Commercial Park; Cork Airport Business Park and Little Island Business Park. This extra commercial property capacity helped to attract companies in modern industries to Cork.

In addition to these business parks this period saw individual large office buildings spring up at locations ranging from Half Moon Street; Penrose Wharf; The Elysian in the city centre, Linn Dubh, and The Atrium in Blackpool. There is a fear that the city, one of the world's most charming, has not recognised this Unique Selling Point. Cork is intimate, neighbourly, walkable with all urban facilities available within reach to those lucky enough to live at its heart. Its history is also *maritime* though there's little sign of this in future plans. It is vulnerable to industrial-scale residential and commercial development. It also needs to orient on its quays currently a human-hostile dual-carriageway.

Current Development Patterns

Most of the development patterns in Cork city are worrying: too much dereliction, too

much inappropriate development at the wrong scale, notable high-rise, dismantlement of city walls, lack of attention to detail in particular schemes and areas.

Derelict sites

The precedent is deeply concerning in the context of the number of derelict sites that could be mismanaged in the same way if lessons are not learned. Up to 200 houses are derelict within 2km of Cork city centre. In 2019 it was reported that the City Council's 100 derelict sites were worth €30m.

For example, 42 Cornmarket St has been on the Derelict Sites Register since 1993. It's part of a large surface car-park between the Bodega and the Cornmarket. The Council has entirely absolved itself of civic responsibility for its restoration.

And as with many local authorities, enforcement in Cork City is desultory.

The developers of Cork's first city-sleeper hotel project on MacCurtain Street illegally demolished a fine nineteenth-century house last year, signalling their intention to seek planning for the erection of "replacement facades" on the western and southern flanks of the development site.

They destroyed the former Windsor Inn, a 19th-century four-storey building which had traded as a bar and guesthouse.

Cork City Council said it was in "active discussions and correspondence" with the developer to address the planning violation.

A spokesperson said that process is ongoing and declined to comment further pending the outcome – which will be no action.

Betraying a propensity to boorishness, during the Covid lockdown, the City Council splashed out €200,000 on a plastic footpath for McCurtain Street. Irrespective of the aesthetic qualities of the plastic footpath, it perfectly represents the inadequacies of decision-making and ultimately Cork City Council's ability to waste money. The plastic footpath is entirely unsuited to its locations and actually detracts for the enjoyment of the area, especially as customers who had been parking on the street to use local restaurants' click-and-collect service have been left without any space.

Inappropriate Planned Developments

Unfortunately Cork is focused too much on quantity over quality. Two of the manifestations of this are a fetishistic high-rise policy and a reckless approach to its heritage including its river walls.

High-Rise

The Celtic Tiger period saw Cork again bagging

the tallest building in Ireland with the Elysian tower which took years to let after the crash,

Now, again in the 2020s, Cork City Council is in a race to upstage Dublin in the high-rise stakes with the continued help of An Bord Pleanála.

For example in 2019, An Bord Pleanála permitted 201 rental apartments built in a development ranging in height from 8 to 24 storeys on the site of Carey Tool Hire and the now demolished Sextant Bar (bottom) on Albert Quay to the east of Cork City Hall.

An application by New-York-based Tower Holdings for 140 metres and 34 storeys of Marriott hotel and commercial development, with no residential component, on Custom House Quay. Ireland's tallest building was granted permission by An Bord Pleanála in March. Located on the eastern junction of the city's river channels and beside the Georgian Custom House, if built, it would dominate the centre like the Tower of Sauron, eclipsing the triple-spired St Finbarr's Cathedral and Shandon Church tower as the city's defining skyline image.

Ubiquitous Penneys announced that it is set to double its floor-space at its Patrick Street premises.

And a planning application was lodged in late March by Carra Shore Hotel Limited for the former McKenzies Circuit Courthouse site, latterly an arts centre, on the bank of the River Lee, directly opposite Cork Opera House on Camden Place and Pine Street. The site had permission for 70,000 square foot of offices, but – contrary to the views of some as to where the market is going - it may now be redeveloped as a two-to-six-storey, 194-bedroom hotel.

There is anecdotal evidence that these developments are half-cocked and that many of them will not proceed. Tourism has been severely affected by Covid-19 auguring badly for rampant hotel permissions.

Co-living is has been hammered for lacking social viability. High-rise apartments lie empty, particularly in Dublin as they have been designed as financial products and cost too much to be affordable. This will be all the more the case in Cork where rents are lower than in Dublin. Build to rent may be threatened by restrictions on large-scale purchase by cuckoo funds.

Evidencing this recently has been the abandonment of the 25-storey Albert Quay/Sextant

Bar (sadly demolished) apartment in favour of an office scheme which would be double the height of any previous offices schemes in Cork city centre, and just a floor under the height of the 2008-built Elysian apartment tower. Cork Chamber has long noted the financial precariousness of apartment development in Cork City. According to the *Business Post* in May there where only four commercial lettings (for only 3,070 sq m) in the city in the first three months of 2021. Vacancy rates had risen to 12.7% by March 2021.

It has also been reported that Amazon, which had been looking for new offices is no longer in the market.

Nevertheless the City CEO seems strikingly bullish about offices. Ann Doherty told the *Irish Times* in April: "speaking to office block developers with product to offer in Cork, they remain confident that there will be demand for the 100,000 square metres or so of office accommodation which has or is just about to come on stream, primarily in the Cork Docklands". The likes of the *Financial Times* have not been so optimistic in recent assessments of global trends.

The contention that the Council is arriving at flawed planning decisions is confirmed by the manner in which it commissioned a report from KPMG - *The KPMG Land Use Study*.

A tender for a contract to make proposals for the revitalisation of the city centre was advertised over the 2020/2021 Christmas break but received only four responses largely because the terms of reference were regressively over focused on economics and construction. In the end the City Council engaged KPMG, best known as an accountancy firm, to study land use and economic patterns in the historic city so as to "guide the ongoing efforts of building the City Centre's attractiveness as a place to live, work and visit".

In June 2020 Cork City Council issued a separate tender notice for management consultants to undertake a report that would provide "new thinking" and a "robust evidence base" for the city's development plan for the period 2022 -2028 "in order to ensure the council has a coherent policy in relation to urban density, building height and tall buildings".

Again it is clear that there is too much emphasis in the terms of reference on economics and construction, and little focus on sustainability or social or environmental criteria. There is also evidence of a lack of attention to urban grain.



Photomontage image of planned 34-storey hotel and commercial complex at the east river channel junction between the Georgian Custom House and warehouses. The Horgan Quay tower is to the left and the Prism to the right. The spires of St Finbarr's are in background.

Grand Parade

Perhaps most egregious is the 1.3 acre site on Grand Parade where a €300m scheme of offices, apartments and a city library, planned since 2002, is substantially derelict.

Bishop Lucey Park

Bishop Lucey Park was developed by carving an open space from the derelict parts of Cork's medieval core in response to the perception of a lack of public spaces in the city center. While the additional green space in the city centre is welcome, it has come at the cost of ruining the Grand Parade's definition as an urban space and disrupted the continuity of South Main Street (The medieval high street of Cork).

It is rare for cities to clear medieval city blocks and this was an opportunity to repair the scarred urban landscape of Grand Parade, the 17th Century Tucky Street, and the medieval high street.

The project could have followed well-established international norms by erecting buildings in the gaps of a broken urban landscape which created safe, overlooked and complete urban space.

Instead, the unsightly blank gables exposed by demolition gives the park the feel of a leftover space from the type of slum clearances that occurred in many cities in the 1980s.

The project resulted from an architectural competition. Generally these are judged by a jury. As so often, too much was left to the regressive discretion of City Management.

Perhaps the real opportunity for a park is on Sullivan's Quay on the former Tax Office site.

River Walls

The Lower Lee Flood Relief Scheme is the project being carried out by the government's Office of Public Works to protect Cork from river flooding, as happened in 2009, and tidal flooding, as happened in 2014 and 2020. The OPW plans to build flood defences along the River Lee downstream of Inniscarra dam and through Cork city into Cork Harbour near Páirc Uí Chaoimh.

The proposal is for flood walls with over 15 kms of flood defence walls, walls with gaps, demountable structures, embankments, deep excavations and pump chambers. All this would represent a



Sextant: no longer Extant

stark failure to safeguard the city's rare and characteristic stone wall with their associated heritage character.

The scheme has been strongly opposed by the Save Cork City campaign group, which says the scheme is over-reliant on walls, will reduce access to the river and will not protect the city centre against flooding. It calls the scheme "the largest planned destruction of heritage in the history of the State".

Save Cork City is advancing what it claims are economical solutions to protect Cork including a Tidal Barrier which would keep Cork open for business.

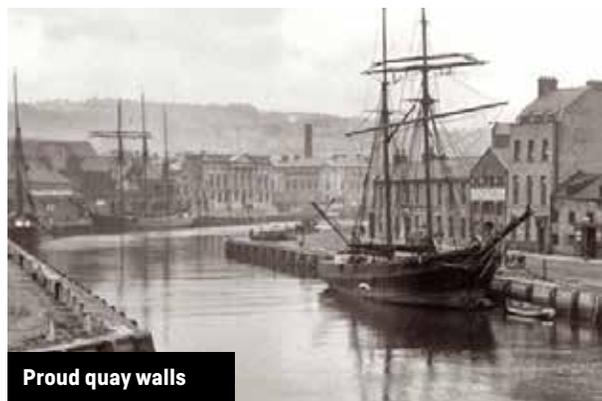
It is promoting improved ESB dams on the Lee with a tidal barrier (similar to the Lagan Weir and tidal barrier in Belfast), at any of four appropriate locations.

Save Cork City say this will:

1. Save half the cost of the OPW scheme;
2. Protect a much greater area of the city from fluvial, tidal and groundwater flooding;
3. Avoid the conversion of the Central Island around the main shopping district into a building-site, for the second time in a generation;
4. Conserve the character of the 800-year-old port city with its open quays;
5. Enhance the amenity and environmental quality of the urban waters of the Lee by actively controlling water level within the City, for example, to facilitate passage under bridges and landing from pleasure boats, to cover anoxic mudflats at low Spring tides as in Belfast, or to exclude sea-water and tide entirely, as in Singapore, where a constant level is maintained for all kinds of recreational activities such as boating, windsurfing, kayaking and dragon boating, on a coastal freshwater-supply and flood-control reservoir.

Save Cork City says that the OPW's flood protection scheme make no financial sense. The OPW proposes to spend €120,000 per property protected. The scheme began with a budget of only €24,000 per property. The proposal for a tidal barrier which could protect 16,000 additional homes in the dockland area could protect the city for between €14,000 and €5,500 per property, it claims. It says that the OPW flood walls have already "stagnated" the city and would lead to widespread losses in local property values, an inability to attract investment and lasting harm to the wellbeing of citizens. Save Cork City has asked why the first phase, the Morrison's Island proposal, should not be a heritage-repair proposal instead of Tesco-style stainless steel, concrete and cladding.

It wonders, if the Morrison's Island scheme can



Proud quay walls

County Cork Flood Relief Projects Outline Summary

	Developer	Consultant	Competitive Tender	2017 Cost	2019 Cost	2021 Cost	Current Fees*	Properties Protected
Cork City LLFRS	OPW	Arup	Y	(start €40m) €140m	€200m	€250m	€12.8m	2100 (if successful)
Morrison's Island	OPW/Cork City	Arup	No?	€6m	€10m	€14m	€.64m	Disputed (10?)
Midleton	OPW	Arup	-	20	€34m	€50m	€2.1m	580
Glanmire	OPW	Arup	-	€11.3m	-	€14m	-	103
Douglas (former)	OPW	Arup	Y	€6.8m	€8.6	€22.6m	€1.3m	221
Blackpool	OPW	Arup	No?	€12m	€20.5m (25m?)	-	-	293
Albert Quay	Cork City	Arup	Y?	-	-	-	-	none
Bandon*	OPW	Byrne Looby	Y	(start€11m) €16m	€31m	ongoing	-	260
Skibbereen*	OPW	RPS	Y	(start€12m) €18m	€37m	-	-	312
Fermoy*	OPW	T J O'Connor/DHV	Y	-	€38m	-	-	264
Little Island Tidal Barrier	Public Private Partnership PPP, Design Build Finance Operate and Maintain DBFOM					€200m	-	20,000 potential
Blackrock Tidal Barrier						€80m	-	16,000 potential

The initial budget for the OPW Cork LLFRS project started at €20 million and has now reached up to and over €200 million. The similar (but smaller) OPW Walls Scheme for the River Nore began at €13 million and rose to a real contract figure of €47 million (3.6 times), as noted in Chapter 4 of the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report on the Accounts of the Public Services, 2013. An increase to 360% is an alarming prospect for a Walls Scheme that could severely reduce the economic potential of Cork City. Although the OPW may have since then improved their budget management, it is noted that they have not yet embarked on a wall project of such complexity or scale, involving the challenging ground conditions and water regimes that are present in Cork and therefore it would be prudent to expect that significant cost overruns are not only possible, but probable. Groundwater issues still aren't dealt with and the circumstances suggest massive overruns in cost. **The estimates are now at almost €100,000 per property for the LLFRS and growing at a final highly conservative cost of €210m. Midleton is predicted at €58,000 per property. Skibbereen carried out at €120,000 per property far above estimates. Almost no properties flood on Morrison's Island in Cork and as a stand-alone project it has limited capacity to work. As stated by Prof R Devoey and Prof P O'Kane. See also Ground & Groundwater Report by A Beese. Estimates show cost at Morrison's Island could be up to €800,000 per property as many property owners demonstrate groundwater rising inside buildings in tidal events and do not recognise the claims of the scheme. *schemes in Bandon, Skibbereen and Fermoy have failed on different occasions. Figures are based on available information.**

protect so much of the vulnerable centre of the city, how could building the rest of the scheme make sense and as such why hasn't the Morrison's Island scheme been reduced in height accordingly?

Save Cork City queries why, given that the wall proposed at Morrison's Island is about 1m high when viewed from Georges Quay, the OPW's drainage department misleadingly say it's only 600m high.

And it is concerned that, given the Lagan Weir Tidal Barrier cost €14m in the 1990s, and a barrier at Tivoli, Blackrock or Little Island are all feasible, and said to cost less than the OPW flood scheme (€50m to €200m) the OPW and City Council seem to have misled people by claiming a tidal barrier would cost over €1bn.

Judicial Review

Save Cork City has mounted a number of legal challenges to the Lower Lee Flood Relief Scheme. The Council last year had to submit a fresh planning application as a result of one of these challenges in 2019.

Save Cork City currently has a judicial review pending in the High Court against a Bord Pleanála decision to grant permission for a part of the OPW flood defence project. The case centres on alleged project splitting to avoid environmental impact and financial assessment.

EU Complaint

Save Cork City has made an official complaint to the EU Commission based on habitat destruction, project splitting, inadequate public consultation breaching the Aarhus Convention, and damage to the economy. The September 2020 complaint was lodged following a campaign by the local authority and the OPW asking for the withdrawal of the Judicial Review. The Environmental Enforcement Agency of the European Commission now says that the group's concerns "are evidence of a wider failure by Ireland and the OPW".

Specifically, they have said that Ireland has failed to correctly transpose and comply with the provisions of the Water Framework Directive (Directive 2000/60/EC).

The Commission's Environmental Enforcement Directorate has said it is awaiting Ireland's formal response to this Reasoned Opinion.

Cork is a city on the brink.



Recent planning decisions particularly on high-rise and the city walls show that the Council has not struck the right balance and there are worries it will do irreparable harm to the city and its residents.