**Westmeath village to represent Ireland in Entente Florale Europe**

Preparations are in full swing in the picturesque Westmeath village of Ballinahown as it prepares to participate in the Entente Florale Europe competition next week.

Westmeath County Council is supporting the initiative and has been working in partnership with the community to support the delivery of many long-term projects outlined in a 2030 Vision Document for the village.

The Entente Florale competition aims to promote the sustainable development of European towns, cities and villages and enhance the quality of life of their citizens. Ballinahown is one of 11 participants from across Europe taking part in the awards scheme this year and was chosen to represent Ireland due to its high levels of achievement in recent Tidy Towns national competitions. An international jury for Entente Florale will visit Ballinahown on Saturday, July 13, with the awards presentation to take place in the city of Szekesfehérvár, Hungary, on September 7.

Accomplishments to be presented to the judging panel include a new walkway through the village; zero-cost LED lighting along the walkway; traffic calming measures outside the primary school; rainwater harvesting; the installation of a history timeline and improvements in the village playground.

Chairperson of Ballinahown Community Development, Helen Conneely, explained: “Our ethos in Ballinahown has always been about sustainability and climate action. We find creative solutions to meet our needs. That is how the village has grown in the way that it has. While some of the items may not be typical of most Irish villages, we are happy to take donations of unused or end-of-line materials from the Council and upcycle them for Ballinahown.”

In recent years one of the group’s main priorities has been to find ways to improve our waterways. The group has introduced rainwater harvesting and this year hopes to meet 70% of the village’s watering needs for its plants and vegetables with harvested rainwater.

Another major project recently completed is the Slí na hAbhainn walkway, a central artery through the village, which connects the village hall to the school and sports park and the village’s housing estate. It has been resurfaced and new solar-powered, pedestrian-activated LED lighting has been installed along the route. This lighting system is a pilot project and the first of its kind in Westmeath and will have zero operating costs.

Several features around the village have also been enhanced, with an emphasis on upcycling. The playground was painted with brighter colours, chosen in consultation with an expert who devised a new colour scheme for the village.

A series of history panels have been installed in the village pergola, outlining Ballinahown’s rich history from 12,000BC right up to the 21st century. Members of the community collated the information and old panels that were no longer in use elsewhere in the community were upcycled for the project.

Ballinahown Community Development also assisted Ballinahown NS with a series of projects including growing fruit, vegetables and flowers in the community polytunnel; planting salad boxes in school; sowing a wildflower meadow in the school garden and the installation of bug hotels on the school grounds. The children showed great interest in community involvement and caring for our environment in undertaking these projects.

Vice-chairperson of Ballinahown Community Development, Cllr John Dolan, said: “The future is certainly safe when you see the interest the children have in their surroundings and how little changes can have a big impact. The children are blessed to have such fabulous facilities beside their school – such as the polytunnel, the amphitheatre in Ballinahown Biodiversity Park, the woodlands and the Astro Turf – and we are always delighted to see them making use of these facilities. Every project undertaken by Ballinahown Community Development over the past 30 years has had the improvement of the community at its heart.”

Cathaoirleach of Westmeath County Council, Cllr Liam McDaniel, who attended a preparatory  event held by the group said: “Ballinahown Community Development has achieved an outstanding array of projects, enhancing this village for the benefit of local communities and visitors alike. Westmeath County Council is proud to support this work and to wish the group well in the upcoming visit from the Entente Florale European jury on July 13.”

On the day itself, the judges will arrive in Ballinahown in the morning where they will meet members of the community group and council officials before a flag-raising ceremony. A presentation will then take place in the community hall before the judges visit 10 stops in the village and meet with community representatives and experts the group has worked with over the years.

“We have always taken an innovative approach in Ballinahown, developing the village in a way that puts people first but also one that helps to secure our future as we have climate mitigation to the fore of our decision-making,” explained chairperson Helen Conneely. “We are hopeful that we can showcase all of these projects and developments to the judges on July 13and that they can fully appreciate the sustainable approach that we have taken in the development of Ballinahown.”

Ballinahown Community Development is grateful for the support of Westmeath County Council, the Department of Community and Rural Development, the Irish EFE jury mentors and the local parish in preparing for the competition.

- ENDS -

Information for Editors:

What is Entente Florale?

Entente Florale Europe is a Europe-wide competition of villages, towns, cities, communities and public bodies.  In existence since 1975, it is administered by the international organization, Association Européenne pour le Fleurissement et le Paysage (AEFP).

AEFP is an international, non-profit association founded in 1996 in Brussels, but the roots of the association go back a little further as a competition which started between France and the UK in 1975.

Membership is open to all EU countries and this year there are six ordinary members: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary and Ireland. Each country selects its participants from its national competition. In Ireland’s case this is the Tidy Towns competition.

This year there are 11 entrants to the competition, two of which are Irish – Ballinahown (village) and Carlow (town). An international jury will carry out an in-situ assessment of each participating village, town or city.

Entente Florale raises awareness of the importance of the green environment to the quality of living in participating communities; in residential, urban and industrial areas.

The overall aim of the AEFP is social and cultural development and enhancing the quality of life of urban and rural dwellers in Europe, primarily through landscape development and improved sustainable environmental measures.

It supports these aims through the Entente Florale competition to promote a greener and more pleasant environment in European towns and villages and establishing international contacts among participants.

Participants are encouraged to beautify their towns and villages with the planting of trees, flowers and shrubs; developing and maintaining green spaces and parks; and fostering development that is ecologically and environmentally sensitive. This improves the quality of life for both inhabitants and visitors.

The jury will assess the towns and villages on set criteria, considering things such as the quality of landscape and vegetation; promotion of biodiversity and ecologically-friendly maintenance and management; quality of natural and built environments; participation by local bodies and organisations; contribution and role of local statutory bodies; education and schools-ecology and green dimension; attractiveness and presentation – tourism and leisure policy, information and communication to locals the public at large; and preparation and presentation of the village/town for the assessment visit.

The awards, based on overall marks achieved, range from bronze, silver or gold metal plaques.

More details are available on [www.entente-florale.eu](http://www.entente-florale.eu)