**Ballinahown set to represent Ireland in Entente Florale this summer**

Preparations are in full swing in Ballinahown as the picturesque village prepares to participate in the Entente Floarale Europe competition next month.

Ballinahown village, which is representing Ireland, is one of 11 participants taking part in the awards scheme this year and local people are very hopeful of a positive result. Entente Florale aims to promote the sustainable development of European towns, cities and villages and enhance the quality of life of their citizens.

Every effort is being made to ensure the village is presented to the highest possible standard in advance of the visit of the international jury planned for Saturday, July 13th. The presentation of the awards will take place in the city of Szekesfehérvár, Hungary, on September 7th.

While no major developments have taken place on the back of the event, Ballinahown Community Development has enjoyed great support from the county council in completing many long-term projects it had planned as part of its Ballinahown 2030 vision document.

These include a new walkway through the village, which acts as a central artery connecting all of its facilites; zero-cost LED lighting along the walkway; traffic calming measures outside the primary school; 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 focuses has been on water and 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.

One of the major projects completed in the village this year was enhancing a walkway known as Slí na hAbhainn. This is a central artery through the village, which connects the village hall to the school and Sportspark 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. It cost approximately 30% of the regular installation price compared to standard street lighting and will have zero operating costs.

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

The village pergola has also been enhanced this year with history panels installed. These tell the story of Ballinahown 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 has also assisted Ballinahown NS with some projects this year, with the children showing great interest in community involvement and caring for our environment. Projects undertaken this year range from 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.

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.”

He added that every project undertaken by Ballinahown Community Development over the past 30 years has had the improvement of the community at its heart. Entente Florale aims to promote the development of communities in a sustainable way. Ballinahown Community Development is hopeful that the international judges will see first-hand just how that very approach has worked successfully for the village.

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 13th and that they can fully appreciate the sustainable approach we have taken in the development of Ballinahown.”

Ballinahown Community Development is extremely grateful for the ongoing support the village is receiving from Westmeath County Council, both from councillors and staff. It appreciated the attendance of Cathaoirleach of Westmeath County Council, Liam McDaniels, at an information night held earlier this year.

The community groups also appreciated the support it has received from the Department of Community and Rural Development, the Irish EFE jury mentors and the local parish in the lead-up to the jury assessment.

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NOTE TO 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)

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