

## All eyes on Carlow



## Co. Carlow connections are key to business success

BY GRAHAM CLIFFORD

Canvas of opportunity where companies can develop and grow – that's how Dan McInerney, deputy chief executive of Carlow County Council, has described the county's commercial potential.

"2016 has seen a significant level of public and private developments which will bear fruit in the coming years and establish Carlow as the gateway to economic development for the South East," said McInerney.



Dan McInerney, deputy chief executive of Carlow Co Council

dall College Campus by the Kilkenny Carlow Education and Training Board and the development of a variety of services and supports which give Carlow unique traits in terms of business support and development.

"The backdrop for business is very attractive and Carlow benefits from a highly edu-

ated workforce with its two institutions of higher education, as well as the National Crops Biotechnology Research Centre at Teagasc, Oak Park," said McInerney.

"If we look at a variety of sectors, from small-scale craft, technology, food and engineering, we now have a broad range of companies operating at a local, national and international level such as Netwatch, Burnside, Autolaunch, Seerys, Carlow Brewing Company and Walsh Whiskey, to name but a few, all of whom have become ambassadors for what Carlow has to offer."

The county's location is important too. "Companies choose Carlow due to its proximity to Dublin and its ability to attract both graduate talent and individuals who want to locate in a rural setting with

the benefits of the proximity to major centres," said McInerney.

"This, coupled with the inspirational VISUAL Centre for Contemporary Art, together with social, cultural and culinary establishments, makes Carlow an ideal place in which to visit, live, work and play."

Speaking about the retail sector, McInerney believes that "Co Carlow has a strong retail sector, with key developments such as Fairgreen Shopping Centre, Shaw's and Arboretum".

He said: "We in Carlow Co Council continue to support the retail sector in a variety of ways, given the changing marketplace."

And what of the role of the council in developing the business ecosystem?

"We are leaders in economic development and work in

collaboration with a variety of community and business interests to ensure that the county provides the investor, entrepreneur, worker, resident and visitor with a positive and enriching experience," said the deputy chief executive



County Carlow's Next Generation of Ireland's Best Young Entrepreneurs

Supporting start-ups is an essential part of the supports from Carlow Co Council. Kieran Comerford, head of enterprise with the Carlow Local Enterprise Office (LEO), told *The Sunday Business Post*: "Local business is the lifeblood

of our economy and the local authority has a crucial role to ensure that small businesses and start-ups are given every opportunity to succeed.

"I am delighted that our Local Enterprise Office in Carlow is proactively and successfully

encouraging and incentivising entrepreneurship.

"Financial supports provided by the Local Enterprise Office Carlow can be crucial in helping start-ups to flourish in their first year of operation," said Comerford.

## Carlow IT competes on a world stage

BY GRAHAM CLIFFORD

Take a walk through the IT Carlow campus and you'll hear so much more than accents from the Midlands. Fast gaining an international reputation for excellence, the Institute has welcomed students from over 90 countries across the globe, from China to Saudi Arabia and on to the US.

"We work on building relationships with governments and universities across the world, explaining to them what Carlow has to offer and why this is the perfect location for their young people to study," said Declan Doyle, vice-president for development and research at IT Carlow.

And the considerable efforts of Doyle and his colleagues have borne much fruit. "Our total full-time student population is just over 4,000 and in keeping with government guidelines, just over 400 of those are international students," said Doyle.

While students attend from almost every EU state under the Erasmus programme, there are also attendees from across Asia, the Middle East and North America. Indeed in one corner of South East Asia, IT Carlow has developed a reputation in one specific area of expertise.

"Yes, each year we get about 40 students from Malaysia who come to study Aerospace Engineering. It's proven so popular that every January, we actually have a conferring ceremony in Kuala Lumpur for graduates," said Doyle.



Pictured at the recent memorandum of agreement signing between Arizona State University, Institute of Technology Carlow and Carlow College St Patrick's in Arizona were, from left: Declan Doyle, vice-president for Development and Research, IT Carlow; Dr Stefanie Lindquist, Deputy Provost and vice-president for Academic Affairs, Arizona State University; Dr Thomas McGrath, vice-president for Academic Affairs and Registrar, Carlow College St Patrick's; Councillor Fintan Phelan, Mayor of Carlow Municipal District

So what is it about the Institute that attracts so many overseas students to the south of Leinster? "The fact that IT Carlow is close to Dublin, but not in Dublin itself, appeals to parents. As a result, the cost of accommodation is less and over the duration of a course that can make all the difference for families," said Doyle. "They like the fact that this is a town designed for students. And, of course, the standard of our internationally-recognised courses speak for themselves."

Some international students, such as Xuemei Germaine from China, like it so much, they start their own businesses here. Dr Germaine obtained a PhD in bioremediation from Carlow IT

in 2006. She set up MicroGen as a spinout at IT Carlow where she had access to the state-of-the-art research and development facilities. The company, which employs five full-time and four part-time staff in Carlow and five full-time staff in China, is working on groundbreaking biotechnology capable of turning contaminated arable land back into fertile fields.

And in line with new national guidelines, IT Carlow will increase its international student population to just over 600 by 2020, said Doyle.

"Donal McAlister, our international affairs manager, will spend 15 to 20 weeks each year attending international educa-

tion fares and I will also spend much of the year travelling trying to convince international bodies to consider Ireland as a location to study. Once they look at Ireland, we then must get them to focus on Carlow. It's difficult, but we have such a great product to sell."

And the impact for the home-grown student population in Carlow is also so very positive.

"When our Irish students go out into the world beyond our shores, they'll be working and problem-solving in multicultural locations. So for them to share ideas with international students is very important. Our international body bring so much to the Institute from a cultural perspective and long may that continue."

## Trading places for a slower pace

BY GRAHAM CLIFFORD

In many ways, Eric Osborne has come full circle. From the far side of Mount Leinster to Canterbury, then London and back to the foothills of the Blackstairs Mountains again. The project architect traded the fast pace of London for the slower rambling tempo of life in the Co Carlow village of Rathanna.

Working for the prominent modernist architect Sir Nicholas Grimshaw, he was involved in the design of the ExCeL Convention Centre, a number of large-scale commercial buildings, train stations and the New Maritime Research Building for the University of Southampton.

He'd been away for 14 years by the time he returned to Ireland to take over Osborne's, built in the 1800s, after his great-aunt Marie passed away.

"In its day, it had every possible role going in the village. It had a bar, grocery shop, it sold hardware, drapery and there was a post office and banking facility there; it really was the heart and soul of the community," said Osborne.

"Even the old petrol pump is still outside. It more or less closed around 2002 as Marie's health deteriorated and she got older. I loved coming to see her and spending time in the house and so when the opportunity came, I decided it was time to move home and give the business a go."

And that, he and fiancée Catherine have done in some style. The couple spent two years renovating the building while maintaining its historic core. The tiny Victorian mountain bar was carefully restored to its former glory.



Osborne's in the Co Carlow village of Rathanna

"It can sit 13 people inside and altogether can hold about 30 comfortably. In many ways, it seems trapped in a time warp; locals and visitors love it that way," said Osborne.

Using his wealth of experience, Osborne was able to carefully create stunning, luxurious and bright self-catering accommodation for visitors – a 'bunkhouse' style based on those Osborne found while rambling in the North Welsh Brecon Beacons over the years.

"We can sleep up to 12 people so the house, which was opened last year, has already proved to be very popular with those visiting the area to walk, hike, fish, play golf or just roam the nearby mountains," said Osborne.

Working as an architect during the day and manning the bar and catering for visitors during the evening and weekends, he said that without the support and mutual respect of the local community, the rebirth of Osborne's would have been impos-

sible to achieve.

"Everyone has been so helpful to us, it really has been a wonderful project from that point of view. When locals mingle with visitors in the bar, their pride of place really shines through."

Located just 75 minutes away from Dublin city centre, this restored gem, nestled between the rolling hills of south Carlow, is something of an oasis of calm and comfort.

And for Osborne, the decision to exchange London for Rathanna is one he already believes was very worthwhile.

"We love it here. Carlow really is quite magical and we're so delighted with how the business is developing. The Blackstairs and Barrow Valley is stunning and a hidden gem within easy reach of Dublin."

"There's a buzz back at Osborne's again and we're delighted to welcome visitors to share in this unique setting."

## Carving out a business in a hidden gem

Sculptor Martin Lyttle works with stone from his local quarries in Carlow to create quality and unique pieces for his LithicWorks business

BY GRAHAM CLIFFORD

It's slow and contemplative work and there is nowhere better to do that than here in Carlow," said Martin Lyttle. It's the limestone found in local quarries which Martin, a passionate stone sculptor, likes to work with best.

"As stone goes, it's easier to work with and doesn't wear the tools down. And when

polished up, it goes jet black. It really is something special."

Lyttle works only with local stone from local quarries, or found stone, and his business LithicWorks is fast developing an impressive reputation for the quality, variety and uniqueness of its stone pieces.

His sculptural organic forms are deeply inspired by nature with an emphasis on seed, nut, fruit and bone forms. The smaller works are sensuously

smooth and tactile as they are finished by hand-sanding.

Born in Kenya, where he lived for the first three years of his life, Lyttle's family moved to Ethiopia where his father worked with the UN's World Food Programme.

"When I was nine, we moved back to Killeadmond. I was always a bit of a doodler and dreamer and there was an artistic vein running through the family. My mother

and my brother Anthony is an established artist. I always loved the physicality of a stone, a pebble," he said.

Lyttle studied mineral engineering in Athlone and then engineering geology and geotechnics in Portsmouth before spending almost a decade in South Wales where he worked as an engineering geologist.

In 1999, he returned and took up a full-time position working with engineering consultants in Bagenalstown, Co Carlow, but deep down he wanted to focus on stone sculpting and was greatly encouraged by his wife Cathy Fitzgerald and his friend and



Sculptor Martin Lyttle

renowned stone sculptor, Eileen MacDonagh.

"There's wonderful stone heritage in Carlow, in the buildings, even in the countryside farms. I find that the environment and the local

community contributes to how and what I sculpt. I suppose the essence of what I do is that everything is carefully handcrafted, that every piece I make is unique and there's something about where I live

that just helps that process."

In 2007, LithicWorks was chiselled out. In Carlow, there is a strong community of artists and makers. Lyttle is a member of FORM Design – made in Carlow, a group of designers and makers supported by the Local Enterprise Board which includes ceramicists, jewellers and textile artists. He is also part of the Blackstairs 9 Stones Artists group who live in the local area.

"There's good support for the Visual arts in Carlow and, of course, we have a superb state-of-the-art facility and exhibition space at the Visual Centre for Contemporary Art in Carlow town," said Lyttle.

Among many recent commissions completed by Lyttle was a large, 8ft granite Ogham

teaching stone commission for Blackstairs Ecotrails.

"I was delighted to have been asked to do it. What was particularly pleasing was that it was actually placed in the grounds of the house where I grew up when we came home from Ethiopia," he said.

While Carlow's beauty and serenity appeals to Lyttle, he admits he's oft-times miffed that more aren't aware of its charms.

"When you look up the Lonely Planet, Carlow doesn't feature. In many ways, it's off the radar. Sometimes that suits artists like me, but it is important too that we tell the world of this hidden gem."

To see Martin's works, visit [lithicworks.com](http://lithicworks.com)

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