

# Unelected officials treated the people with contempt. It can't happen again

**KILKENNY County Council has finally succeeded in ramming through its concrete motorway bridge to nowhere, past St Francis Abbey and the surviving city walls and into the heart of the medieval Cathedral precinct. To do so, it persuaded the elected councillors that: 1) the bridge was needed to save Greensbridge from collapse; 2) that it could be delivered for little more than €10m; 3) that a sizeable chunk could come from State grants and 4) that the bulk of the work could be completed in a single summer. All of these claims were grossly misleading.**

THE CAS project, formerly known as the Inner Relief Road, had been on Kilkenny County Council's 'to-do list' for decades. In its earlier incarnations, the council had maintained, with some justification, that it was necessary as a route for brewery trucks. However, with the brewery closed, the council executive insisted that the €10.7m CAS must proceed for traffic-management purposes and to open up the publicly owned brewery and privately owned mart sites for development.

According to the council, Greensbridge was 'deficient', 'not fit for purpose'. Planners unequivocally declared that the old bridge wasn't fit for two-way HGV traffic; that it was unsafe. The CAS, the executive maintained, would reduce HGV traffic on Greensbridge by 50% and allow it to be restored to its former glory while simultaneously making it more pedestrian and cycle friendly.

However a total turn around on this position was presented in council chambers in September. The executive, in a report on the HGV Management Plan, recommended that councillors consider a new option. Officers proposed that, once the CAS was up and running, Greensbridge should not alone continue to carry two-way HGV traffic but that the current volume of such traffic should be increased by 10%. Far from relieving Greensbridge, the CAS - recently renamed 'The Greensbridge Replacement Scheme' by the council - will now do anything but. The same report confirmed that without the long-overdue ring road extension, the CAS would simply move traffic from one part of the city to the other.

While both of these concerns had been raised by citizens at earlier stages in the project, they had always been vehemently denied by the executive and

the majority of councillors and many members of the public had accepted the executive position as fact.

In the context of the brewery site, council planners persist in showing a road from the CAS directly into the brewery site, as if it were part of the approved CAS development. However the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht continually points out to KCC that An Bórd Pleanála has not granted permission for any such road. Constant misrepresentation of the approved project means that many councillors and members of the public people accept the road through the brewery site as being part of the approved project.

THE same meeting also confirmed, according to Cllr Breda Gardner, that the cost of the CAS had escalated to €16.7m and rising - a €6m increase over the €10.7m the councillors signed up to. The figures presented assigned €2.1m of the additional cost to the fact that in-river works were not completed in one summer because of delays caused by protesters. This is arrant nonsense. Work on the CAS did not start until June 30, 2014. Planning restrictions demanded that in-river work cease, at the latest, by the end of September. So the maximum time for in-



▲ The new, unsympathetic bridge dwarfs Greensbridge and wrecks one of the city's most important vistas

river work available in 2014 was 12 weeks.

The October council meeting confirmed that in-river work finished on September 11 this year, having commenced at the beginning of June - 15 weeks, during which six pillars were completed. Last year, two pillars were completed, along with all site-access and preparation. As only 12 weeks were available in 2014, it was never possible to complete the work in one summer. Yet the executive has repeatedly maintained the assertion that, if had not been for the protest, the in-river work could have been done in 12 weeks. Again, the majority of councillors have accepted this assertion without question.

The capital budget estimate presented to the councillors for approval in October 2013, proposed €2.7m (one fifth of the €10.7m total) in State grants as a possible funding mechanism, with the great majority of the remaining €8m coming from various local funds. On this understanding, the councillors approved the estimate.

Dr. Seán Brady, who conducted an independent

review of the CAS project in August 2014, 10 months after the budget estimate had been approved, confirmed the same €2.7m level of State grant. He clarified that 'the funding for the current €4.13m contract with the contractor is in place with funding coming from development contributions, State grants and future development income'. Dr Brady noted that his report was based on information provided locally. The councillors accepted this report.

However, the Oireachtas Public Accounts Committee flatly contradicts this narrative, confirming last month that no State grant was allocated to this project in the past five years and, further, that officers of Kilkenny County Council were fully aware that no State grants would be forthcoming, since the Department of Transport was allocating all of its local-road fund to maintenance. The PAC is unequivocal in this.

IN October, councillors were told by the executive that all the cost of the project would have to be borne locally - except for €800,000 in State grants! The councillors accepted this.

The CAS, then, neither does nor happened as promised on the tin. Few voices have flagged this. This raises issues.

The rising and misleading figures point to issues of governance, due diligence, accountability, transparency and responsibility. The figures are also troubling in and of themselves because they will affect the ability of the council to provide services and invest in homes and infrastructure into the future.

That the public don't know about any of this speaks to issues of democracy, the limitations of the public voice and the duties and role of councillors. Part of the problem is that many councillors seem all too willing to accept the changing narratives outlined above as facts without question.

The other part of the problem is structural. A tremendous amount of information and power lies in the hands of the unelected executive. Councillors respond to this with a mixture of awe and deference. They have to work with the executive and things can be difficult

◀ The council claimed sights like this on Greensbridge would be a thing of the past. Alas not!

▼ No cameras, no recording devices... Kilkenny County Council operates behind a veil of secrecy



when they contest the executive position on something. Citizens can support and reinforce councillors' efforts on their behalf but only if citizens can see what happens in the council chambers and can identify what support is needed.

Media rarely hold power to account on these issues. It has been possible to write this article only because some people have been in the lucky position of being able to attend council meetings on a regular basis. Nothing on these pages is secret. It is available to all if all could attend council meetings. But people can't. This screams democratic deficit because recording and transmission of what happens in the democratically elected chamber is banned. If people do not know what happens, they cannot make judgments, they cannot contribute, support or contest.

A great benefit of the CAS controversy has been a citizen awakening, a desire to be involved in local government and an intense demand that what happened and is still happening with the CAS must never happen again.

To this end Kilkenny citizens are co-ordinating a petition, requesting that council meetings be streamed live and that fully transcribed minutes be made available to the public. This is a step in the right direction. The CAS debacle, still ongoing, ought never to have happened and should never happen again. Open, transparent, citizen-friendly local government in Kilkenny will help ensure that it doesn't.



## EDITORIAL

KILKENNY County Council meetings can be dull, informative, amusing and sometimes shocking. But whether they are hilarious, serious or just plain boring, they are always important. These meetings take votes and make decisions. They decide how the county and city will develop and on how your household charge will be spent. At meetings, choices are made that effect how people live. Council meetings are open to the public because it is recognised that democracy is best conducted in the light, where all can see and power can be held to account. In the light, we know who speaks and votes on what, what is raised, what is not, how our representatives and executive conduct themselves. In Kilkenny, meetings are held usually on Monday afternoons. Few members of the public ever attend, presumably at least in part because the time does not suit them. Minutes, therefore, become important but, in Kilkenny, meetings are not minuted as such. Only a summary is kept. This summary focuses on decisions. It is not a verbatim account. It does not provide someone who was not there the detail needed to understand what actually happened, who said what, was there a debate or wasn't there. There is no official audio, video or written transcript of the complete proceedings of the meetings available. Individual citizens are banned from electronically recording meetings. Therefore, it is simply impossible for the public to know how and what views are represented. In 2015 it is absurd that full video, audio and written transcripts of all council meetings are not available to the public. Democracy is best conducted in the light.

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## GENERATION NEXT

THE Malthouse on the brewery site is to be extended, restructured and converted to office space.

Although the public offered many imaginative proposals for the use of this building and for the wider site the council has chosen office space. It seems an odd choice seeing as there are already many empty offices and buildings in the city.

The public also asked that the brewery site development would be shaped by archaeological investigation and by whatever that might discover. They asked that the archaeology happen first, then take it from there. But the council decided against this approach. Except in a few small areas, this won't now happen.

Kilkenny County Council has apparently decided that next generation brewery site will be dominated by office space.

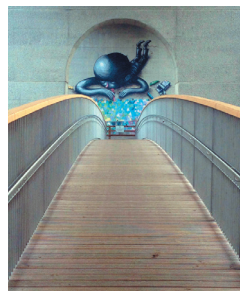
The Malthouse Plan is available to see on the council's website. You can make submissions on it there or in writing to County Hall.



## COMMUNITY NEWS

**STREAM council meetings live:** A public petition requesting Kilkenny County Council to make full transcripts of meetings available to the public and to stream council meetings live is now in circulation. Volunteers will be on the streets from this weekend with copies of the petition ready for your signature. Also available at: [www.change.org/p/kilkenny-county-council-make-our-local-government-meetings-available-online-to-all-kilkenny-citizens](http://www.change.org/p/kilkenny-county-council-make-our-local-government-meetings-available-online-to-all-kilkenny-citizens)

**DELIGHTED** to see the new Ossory Pedestrian bridge has been shortlisted for the Local Authority Engineering Initiative Award - a well liked addition to the Canal Walk, in sharp contrast to public opinion of the Lady Desart bridge, which links John's Quay to the Market Yard.



**WELL** done to Taxi Watch for the great work they are doing in Kilkenny in helping save lives from suicide. If you or anyone you know needs help, call 087-6665050, 24 hours a day. See [www.facebook.com/taxiwatch.ie](http://www.facebook.com/taxiwatch.ie)

**KILKENOMICS'** opening event in St Canice's Cathedral, David McWilliams in Conversation with Yanis Varoufakis, has sold out. Now in its sixth year, Kilkennomics features its biggest programme to date, comprising more than 40 events over four days.

## TIMES PAST



**THE** grand old lady that is Greensbridge remains unvanquished but struggles against deliberate neglect.

In 2016, a year of commemorations far and wide, this grand old lady will celebrate a milestone of her own. Unlike WWI and the Easter Rising, it is an anniversary that is little talked about. But it should be because in 2016 this unique old lady will be 250 years old.

The history of this magnificent bridge tells a tale of decline, fall and resurrection, of triumph in the face of adversity, of industrial development and progress, of the glorious and frightening power of nature. She speaks to us of humankind's ingenuity, of a DNA desire to leave something beautiful behind.

She was born in the Age of Enlightenment. She is older than the French Revolution. The year of her birth, 1776, saw the publication of Gibbons' Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire and Adam Smith's Wealth Of Nations. It saw the Declaration of Independence signed in Philadelphia and welcomed James Watt's steam engine. It saw Captain James Cook embark on his third voyage and Thomas Paine write 'these are times that try men's souls'. It saw William Flood, of Kilkenny, sit on the Privy Council and a young Dominican, Michael Vincent Meade, begin to rebuild the Back Abbey priory, using stone from the ancient ruins.

Her story is the story of Kilkenny itself, the story of the great wide world, the story of civilisation. Phoenix like, she rose from the torrent that destroyed her mother, The Great Bridge of Kilkenny. Her birth and the foresight, determination and skill that conceived and delivered her, remind us that we can renew, progress and develop magnificently and elegantly with vision, commitment and care.

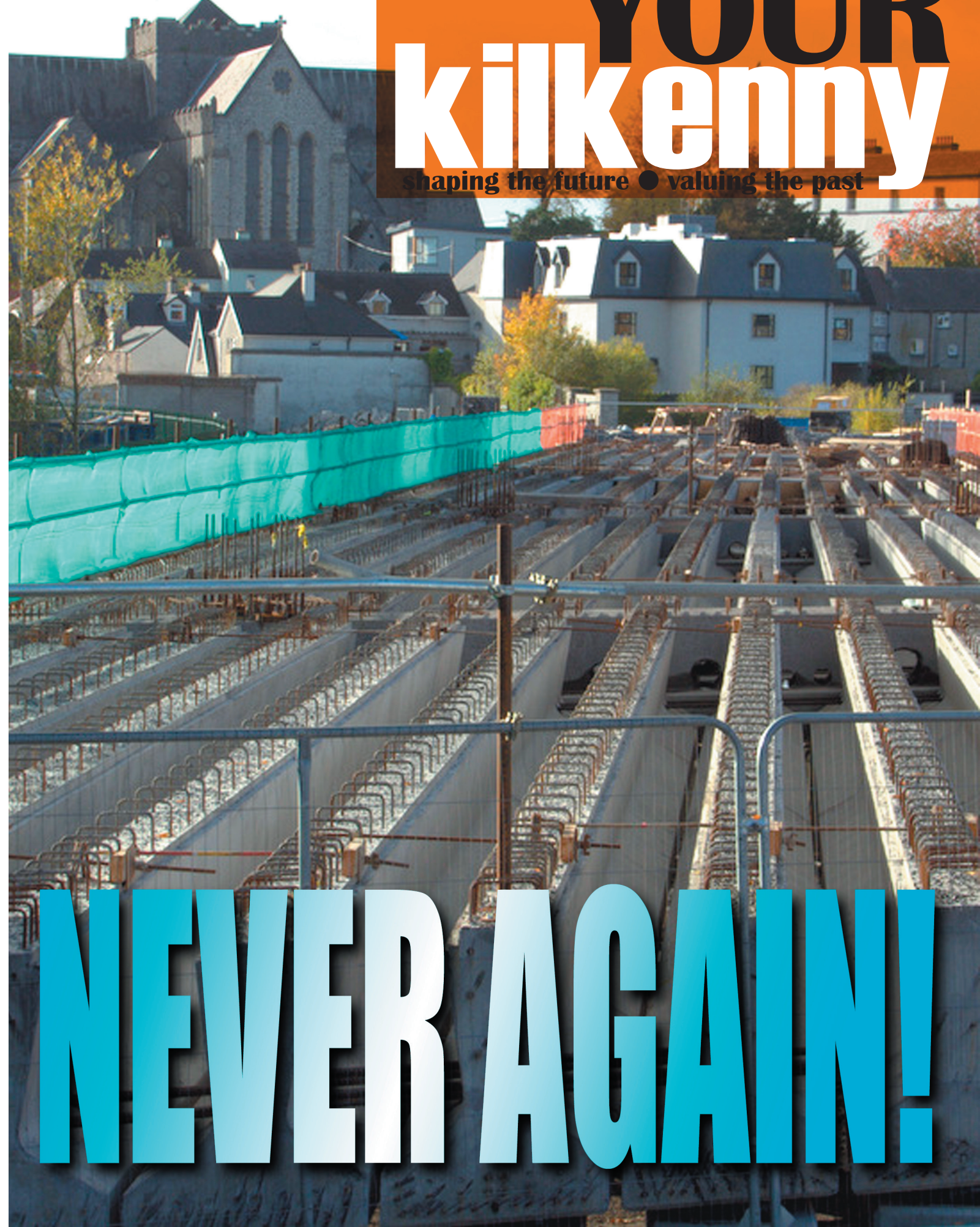
Yet as her quarter millennium approaches, she struggles against the destructive power of nature. Weeds embedded in her Palladian structure weaken and undermine her. Her great stones are left un-pointed, open to the elements. Nature is a powerful force.

We were promised by the council that as soon as the CAS was complete, that our lady would be closed for nine months and restored and conserved. We were promised that traffic on her would be reduced by 50%. It now seems that this will not happen, that in fact far from restoration, she will be forced to carry more than ever before.

If this happens she'll be consigned to photographs in museums and history pages. She will be no more, after 250 years.

# YOUR kilkenny

shaping the future ● valuing the past



# NEVER AGAIN!