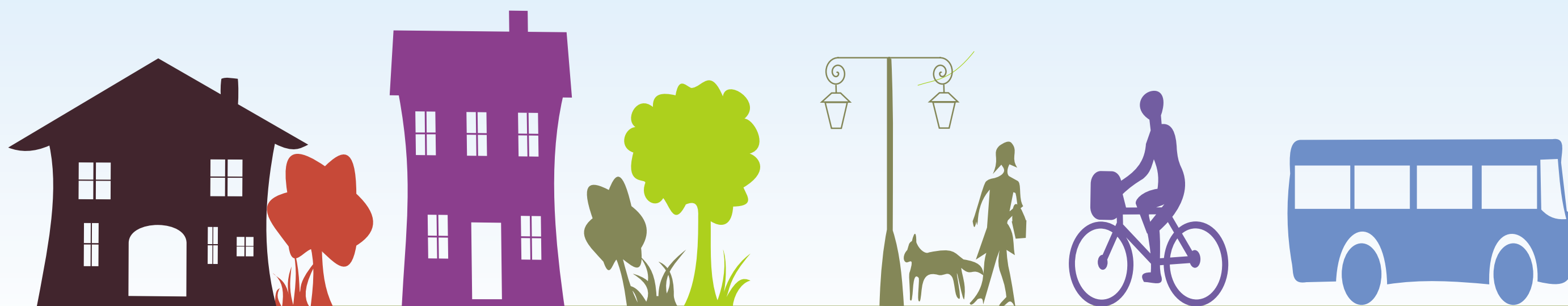




# The best place to live in Ireland

'The Irish Times' is running a competition to find the best place to live in Ireland, and we want your help. Below, our judges explain how to pitch your place and what they'll be looking for. Inside, journalists give examples of the kinds of pitches that could help your place win



EDDEL MORGAN

WHERE'S THE BEST place to live in Ireland? An *Irish Times* search for the ultimate place to live starts today, and we're inviting people who believe they've found it to nominate it in our competition. The place could be a town or city suburb, a village or remote rural spot, a tiny community halfway up a mountain, a street, a road or a housing estate – anywhere you feel supremely lucky to have landed.

The reason could be the great neighbours, the sense of community, the vibrant social life, the ease with which your children have made friends, the beautiful scenery, the parks and playgrounds, the great local facilities – or something else entirely.

I like the part of north Dublin I live in. Sometimes I look at the greener grass of the neighbouring suburb, which has a good choice of restaurants, a seafront and a great deli, but I know that many of the people who live around me thrive on our area's community spirit and on the fact that people on our road take an interest in their neighbours.

If you're living in your ideal place, and believe it could win, go to [irishtimes.com/bestplace](http://irishtimes.com/bestplace) and tell us in no more than 500 words why it's the best place to live in Ireland.

To help us form a clearer picture, the website has questions about everything from the local schools to the local environment. But don't be put off if you live in an area that doesn't meet all these criteria.

Ultimately, it's the strength of your pitch that will count with the judges, of whom I am one. The others are the psychologist Maureen

Gaffney, the architect Paul Keogh, Gerard O'Neill of Amárach Research and my colleague Frank McDonald, *The Irish Times's* Environment Editor.

As my fellow judges explain, we all have different ideas of what makes a good place to live. For me it's a feeling of ease that you've arrived and can't do any better. For Maureen Gaffney, the best place to live is one where you feel you and your family can flourish. Frank McDonald, a committed urbanite, says it's a street designed for people rather than a road designed for cars. Gerard O'Neill, a "romantic pretending to be a realist", says it's about the people as well as the place.

The winner will be announced in June. *The Irish Times* will mark the accolade with a plaque and a short film for [irishtimes.com](http://irishtimes.com).

Here's what our judges consider important.

## Maureen Gaffney, psychologist

For me, the best place to live is one where you feel you and your family can flourish: where you feel safe and happy, competent and fulfilled, free to be your best self; where you feel you matter and what you do matters; where you belong. Some of the elements needed to make that possible are easy to identify: access to work, to good public services, to sports, art, entertainment and shopping; and to opportunities to be of real service to others.

But other quality-of-life issues are harder to measure. The most interesting question for me in judging the best place to live in Ireland is how we will factor in attachment to place as a criterion, because I believe it is crucial to our sense of belonging. That intimate sense of place is bound up inextricably with how we feel about where we live.

Of course, you can measure some aspects of belonging: the social bonds that tie people together in networks of friendship and support. This includes groups that depend on each other to get things done: to organise sports, arts, fundraising or volunteering or just to have a good time. It also includes more formal

networks, like residents' groups, that link the community to those who should or could help them – to local and national government, say.

But that is not the whole story. In the course of my work, I have been in many deprived communities that seem to have little enough going for them: no beautiful open spaces, no theatres, no inspiring public buildings.

Sometimes, they seem to have little in the way of social capital. And yet the people living there will often have a very powerful sense of their own place and community. They love where they live. They would never want to move, and even if they have moved to a better physical environment they often pine for the old community, for "home". This is where they know everybody and, even more importantly, where they are "known".

Measuring that will be harder.

## Paul Keogh, architect

In *The Architecture of Happiness*, the writer and philosopher Alain de Botton describes the deep-seated need for our homes to provide both physical and psychological sanctuary: "Although this house may lack solutions to a great many of its occupants' ills, its rooms nevertheless give evidence of a happiness to which architecture has made a distinctive contribution."

For me, this happiness can be found in a house or an apartment, in the city or the country. The essentials are similar: well-proportioned rooms and spaces; good sunshine and daylight; pared-down and uncluttered interiors; well-designed furniture and fittings; a space outside for sitting and for planting.

But when it comes to "where", the issues become more complex: the ideal is a balance between places where one can enjoy the best quality of life and where one can do so in an ecologically sound environment. Is this a one-off house in the country? A semi-D in the suburbs? A town-centre terrace? Or an inner-city apartment?

Most evidence points to urban living as the most responsible choice. In the US, the

lifestyles in cities like Boston and New York have been shown to generate half the carbon emissions of the national average, a statistic corroborated by research on European cities such as Barcelona and Paris. But in recent UK surveys, the ideal for more than 80 per cent of people is a house in the country or a small village, though we can't all live in those.

In assessing the best place to live, it seems to me there are two fundamental questions to be answered. First, where are the places that balance a high personal quality of life with the ethics of sustainable living – social, economic and environmental?

Second, where are places that combine the attributes people find attractive in suburban and rural locations – conviviality, identity, safety, continuity and closeness to nature – with those only urban places can provide: convenient access to education, health, leisure, employment and culture?

## Gerard O'Neill, statistician

I'm a romantic pretending to be a realist. (It's the reverse for women, by the way.) So if you ask me what makes a great place to live I'll likely point to local amenities, the unemployment rate or even the crime level. Certainly such things shape what makes one place more habitable than another, and can be measured and compared reassuringly logically and objectively.

But if you ask me what kind of place I would like to live in, well, that's different. And it's personal. We each collect impressions of places and people from childhood onwards. These seep into our subconscious, from where they shape our likes and dislikes about the new places and people we encounter.

What's more, we mostly collect good impressions (filtering out the bad), which is why we remember that the sun always shone when we were children and, even as adults, remember the good bits about our holidays and forget the bad.

I have a lifetime of such experiences, of course. From growing up in Northern Ireland

to studying and working in the East End of London to settling down and raising a family in Dublin. What stands out about the places I really liked? The people come first, whether it was the neighbours, friends and cousins in my home town who looked out for one another or the East Enders who welcomed my wife and me into their community in the 1980s.

People make places just as places make people, and even the toughest of places can be softened by the bonds of neighbourliness and community, as I witnessed myself, growing up with a 25 per cent unemployment rate.

So I will be judging the submissions in terms of what each tells me about the people as well as the place: the romantic as well as the realistic.

## Frank McDonald, journalist

The best place to live is on a street that's designed for people rather than on a road designed for cars. As well as creating a safer environment for children to play, a street also encourages more contact between neighbours and thus a greater sense of community; the popularity of Coronation Street shows we still hanker after these "old" values.

Diversity is also important. Many of our suburbs are ghettoised, even in middle-class areas – as exemplified by the gated-communities phenomenon. An ideal community should contain young, old and those in between; well-off and poorer people, students, foreigners.

The place should also bear evidence of being loved and looked-after. By this, I don't mean it should be prettified with window boxes and hanging baskets: it should be relatively free of obvious signs of antisocial behaviour, such as graffiti, littering or shabby public spaces.

Ideally, it should also have a range of recreational options, for both active and passive uses, as well as a variety of shops (not just an out-of-town Tesco!) and services.

I can think of several towns in Ireland that would score well in this category as well as many that wouldn't.

## The judges Who they are



Dr Maureen Gaffney is adjunct professor of psychology and society at University College Dublin. Her book *Flourishing* is published by Penguin Ireland



Paul Keogh is the founding partner of Paul Keogh Architects, which specialises in urban design, architecture and interiors. He was president of the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland for the 2010-2011 term



Gerard O'Neill is chairman of Amárach Research and a cofounder of Hireland.ie, the job-creation initiative. His book *2016: A New Proclamation for a New Generation* was published recently by Mercier Press



Frank McDonald has been Environment Editor of *The Irish Times* since 2000 and is the author of *The Destruction of Dublin*, *The Builders* (with Kathy Sheridan) and *Chaos in the Crossroads* (with James Nix)



Edel Morgan is an *Irish Times* journalist who has written extensively about property and planning, including on her blog, *Home Truths*, [irishtimes.com/blogs/home-truths](http://irishtimes.com/blogs/home-truths)

## How to enter

Go to [irishtimes.com/bestplace](http://irishtimes.com/bestplace) and "pitch your place" in not more than 500 words.

For examples of the kind of thing we're looking for, read John Waters, Conor Pope, Rosemary Mac Cabe and more, on pages 2 and 3, overleaf



The best place is one where you feel you and your family can flourish



Where are the places that balance quality of life with sustainable living?



Even the toughest of places can be softened by the bonds of community



The best place is a street for people rather than a road for cars

