

FEASIBILITY STUDY FOR SLIGO GAOL

- *Executive Summary* -

August, 2019

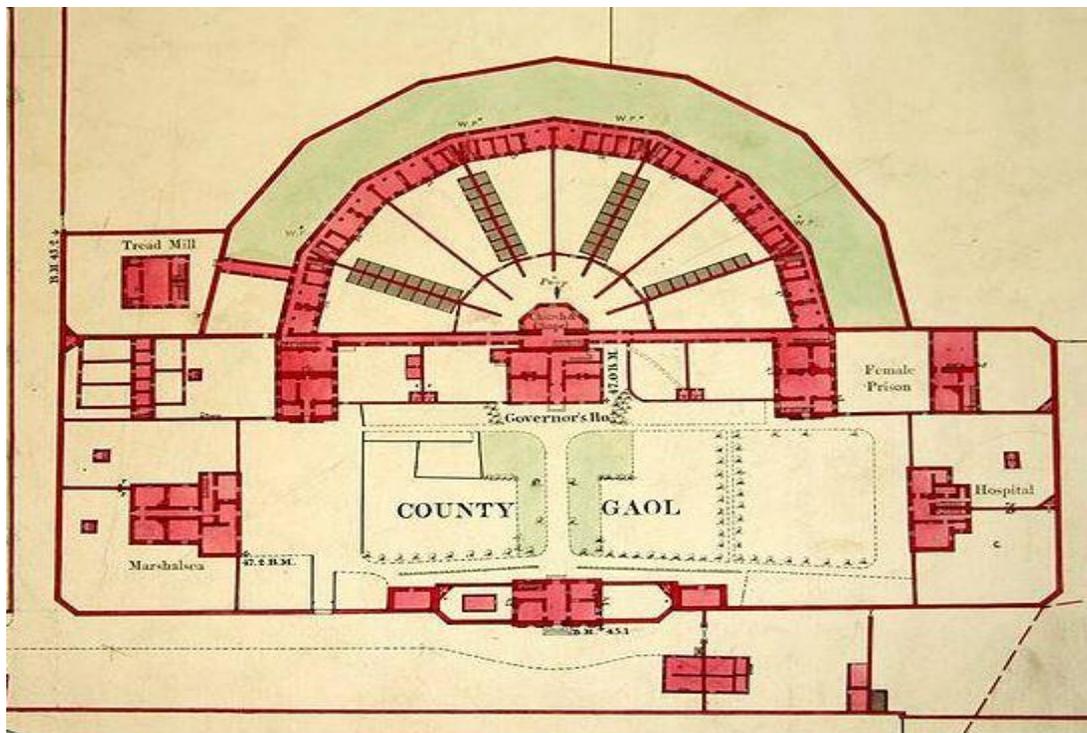
1. Introduction

Sligo Gaol is an important historical landmark in Sligo and a valuable heritage asset for the town and surrounding region. Built between 1814 and 1828 on a riverside site to the east of Sligo town centre, the Gaol is a panopticon, with the cell blocks extending in a semicircle around the centrally located Governor's House.

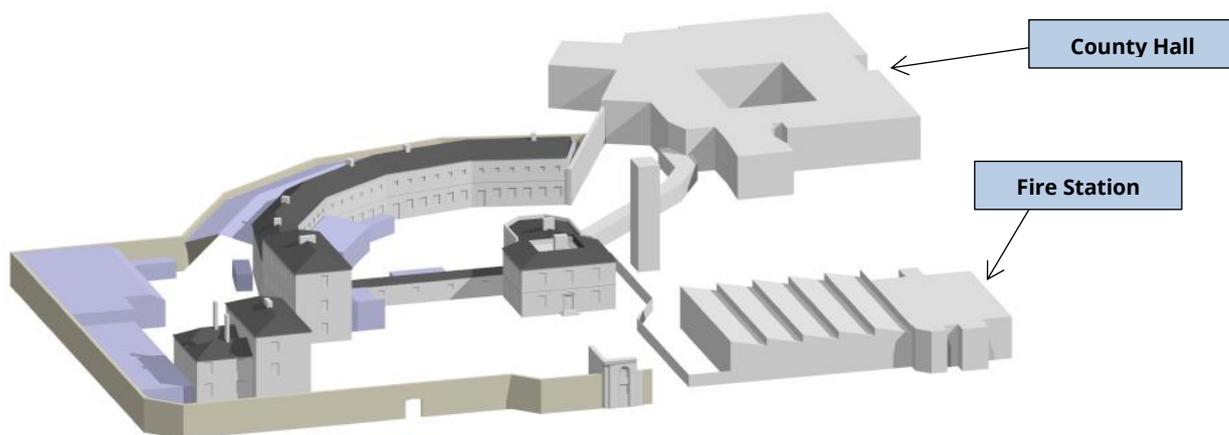
The Gaol was closed in 1956 and ownership was transferred to Sligo County Council. Today, half of the original Gaol complex remains, including the Governor's House, the Marshalsea, a 3-storey cell-block and five sections of the original 8-section 2-storey cell block, and several outdoor spaces. Some of these buildings and spaces are currently being used for a variety of purposes, including offices and storage. The rest of the original site – including cell blocks, the women's prison and hospital - was cleared and replaced by the County Fire Station.

The Friends of Sligo Gaol (FoSG) is a voluntary community group established with the aims of providing community support for the conservation of the remaining Gaol buildings and site, promoting the understanding of its heritage, and working towards opening it to the public. It works closely in partnership with Sligo County Council and other stakeholders, and is active in a number of areas including the delivery of heritage events and tours at the Gaol. FoSG commissioned CHL Consulting Company Ltd. to undertake this feasibility study of the potential future of use of Sligo Gaol as a publicly-accessible amenity for the local community and for tourism.

Original Plan of the Gaol



Site as it is today



2. Market Potential

Internationally, there are numerous instances of historic gaols that are open to the public - most serving a variety of community, civic and tourism purposes. Examples in Ireland include Kimainham Gaol, Wicklow Gaol and Cork City Gaol. Crumlin Road Gaol, in Northern Ireland, which was in active use as a prison up to 1996, opened to visitors as a tourist attraction in 2012. Historic gaols have proved to be popular attractions having many stories to fire the imagination of visitors. In addition, there is a growing niche market for dark tourism, that is tourism to places historically associated with death, suffering and tragedy.

Sligo has much potential as a tourist destination, and the County currently attracts close to half-a-million tourists a year, split almost equally between overseas and domestic visitors. While it has considerable resources of natural and built heritage, and a rich cultural history, Sligo has yet to fulfil its potential as a destination. It needs to strengthen its range of attractors, and the Gaol is an obvious prospect. There is a substantial market that Sligo Gaol can tap into if it develops a visitor experience that is sufficiently attractive to the main tourism segments in the County: the 'Culturally Curious' and 'Great Escaper' segments from overseas, and the domestic family market, as well as special interest history, dark tourism and educational markets.

3. Proposed Development Strategy

The ultimate ambition for a visitor experience at Sligo Gaol is to develop a flagship attraction that will not only share the stories of the historic site but also boost tourism in Sligo town as a whole and support community and commercial opportunities as a result. Holding this longer term perspective, we propose that the Gaol starts from where it currently stands and works through a series of one preparatory and four main development phases, summarised below. This phased approach will allow the project to start moving forward at any early stage, rather than waiting indefinitely for funding for a much more elaborate and high cost development.

3.1 Phase 1: Preparatory Phase

This first phase is a necessary preparation for the substantive visitor experience development phases that follow. It involves Sligo County Council removing the various uses that it has introduced to the site over recent decades. These include archive storage, which occupy cells in the Gaol, machinery and equipment stores, and car-parking in the exercise yard and in front of the Governor's House. Removal of these uses should be viewed as a short-term goal.

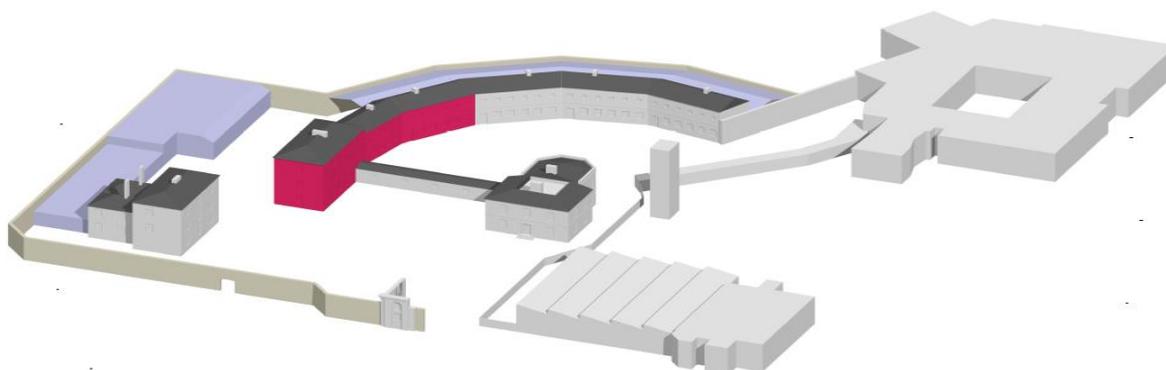
It would be desirable in the medium term to remove modern structures that have been added to the site since it was taken over by the Council. The Conservation Plan, 2010, identifies the following buildings as incongruous and visually intrusive, and recommends their removal:

- Temporary office accommodation (cabins) in various locations
- Machinery workshop and store
- Metal truss roof between two-storey cell block and boundary wall
- Canteen
- Glazed extension to west of Marshalsea.

There is substantial space available elsewhere on the overall site that is in the ownership of the Council. Some or all of the uses currently being accommodated in the Gaol buildings could be relocated within this site. What is required is a practical master plan for the site, inclusive of a schedule and budget for implementation as a single project.

3.2 Phase 2: Interim Phase

Interim Phase (focal area marked in red)

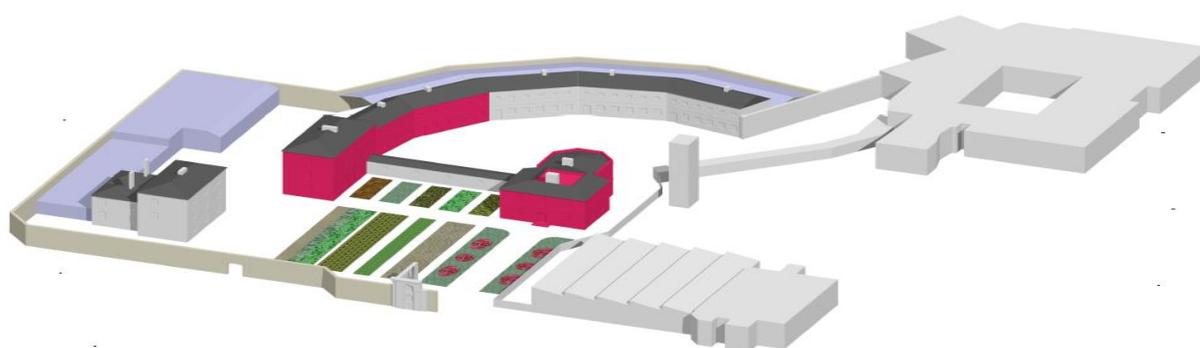


With limited investment and within a relatively short period of time, a consistent and regular visitor experience could be established that builds on the existing tours and events. This would start with the process of tidying up the site and buildings, and also help to build awareness and support for the long term project. The basic visitor experience would include the following:

- Regular guided tours for visitors of the Three- and some of the Two-Storey Cell Blocks, potentially led by costumed guides at peak times. These would run during the main tourism season of May to end-September, and would also be promoted via direct contact with tour operators
- Basic static interpretative elements within the relevant Cell Blocks
- The development of a year-round events programme, including 'dark tourism' events, in conjunction with external partners, e.g. the Hawkswell, Sligo Co. Co. Arts Officer, community groups, etc.
- The development of a schools' programme
- The development of strategic partnerships with third level institutions (art and history) to create innovative interpretative elements
- This basic experience could be supplemented with the development of an Augmented Reality app.

3.3 Phase 3: The Essential Sligo Gaol Experience

Phase 3 (focal area marked in red)

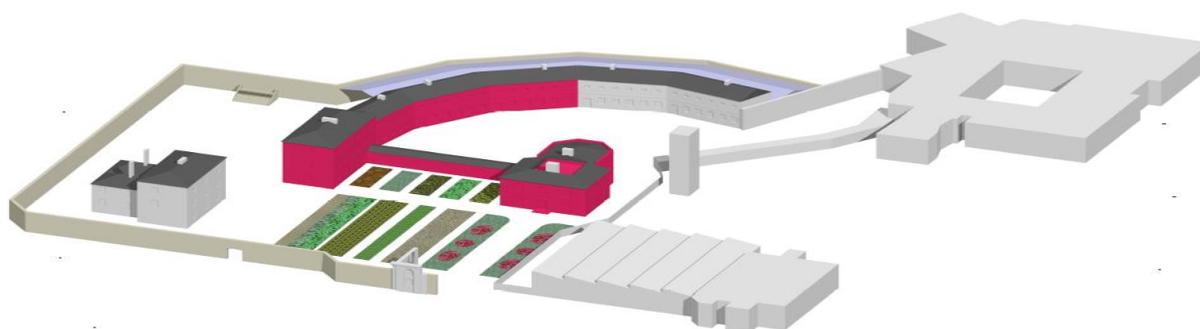


This would involve the development of the Governor's House as a visitor reception area and orientation point, as well as forming the first stage of the visitors' journey through the Gaol. This Phase of the project would include all elements of Phase 2 as well as the following:

- Visitor reception and ticketing on the ground floor of the Governor's House
- Audio visual presentation of the Gaol's stories and some introductory static interpretation, again housed on the ground floor in the former chapel space
- Toilets, retail and a basic café space on the ground floor
- Office and community spaces on the first floor
- Basic recreation of the former garden to the front of the House in keeping with the historic nature of the site.

3.4 Phase 4: The Expanded Sligo Gaol Experience

Phase 4 (focal area marked in red)

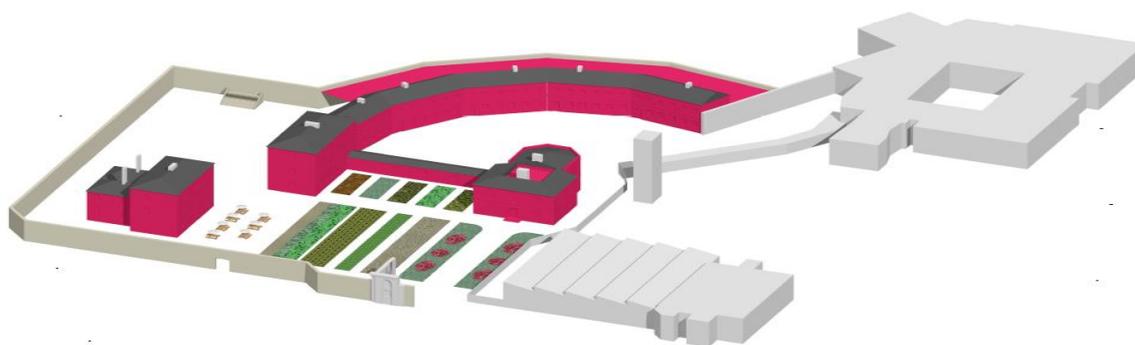


This phase incorporates all the previous elements, but with visitor movement between the Governor's House and the Cell Blocks now being accommodated by the restored Link Tunnel. It also includes the addition of two new elements of the Experience: the recreation of the Treadmill and the execution area. The additional elements of this Phase include the following:

- The one-way flow of visitors from the Governor's House to the Cell Blocks via the Link Tunnel
- More advanced interpretation in the Cell Blocks, to include appropriate use of technology to tell a greater number of interconnected stories
- The introduction of self-guided option for visitors alongside guided tours
- Removal of machinery workshop and store
- Refurbishment of Treadmill Yard (machinery store yard) to allow for two new areas: the Interactive Treadmill experience and the Executioner's area
- Refurbishment of the Exercise Yard as a circulation/rest space for visitors, as well as outdoor space for groups/events
- Orientation strategy across the site to ensure proper visitor flow under self-guiding option
- Production of maps/information leaflets in key languages to support self-guiding.

3.5 Phase 5: The Complete Sligo Gaol Experience

Phase 5 (focal area marked in red)



The Full Experience includes all of the previous elements as well as the development of a new exhibition and museum in the Marshalsea, and the development of a dedicated events space, in the space between the cell block and prison wall.

- An interactive exhibition based on My Tale Untold or similar in the Marshalsea
- A museum space in the Marshalsea
- Removal of steel truss and corrugated iron roof between the cell block and boundary wall, and creation of a glass-enclosed event space to be serviced either by the creation of an onsite kitchen or by contract catering arrangement.

This full expression of the project -The Complete Sligo Gaol Experience - would allow Sligo Gaol to cater for a larger number of tourists on site, where there will be more to do and see, and would enable it to attract related and unrelated events, including private events.

4. Governance and Operations

It is recommended that the Sligo Gaol visitor attraction is operated by a company limited by guarantee to be established by Sligo County Council specifically for this purpose. The board of the company would be appointed by the Council, and should comprise people with relevant experience and knowledge including representatives of the Friends of Sligo Gaol. It would be a not-for-profit company with directors appointed on a voluntary basis. The company would assume full responsibility for the management of the Gaol. Ownership of the site would remain with the Council.

The management team required to operate the project will be responsible for driving the development of the Gaol and for managing the operation of facilities, attractions and activities as they are developed. To provide for the operation of the Phase 3 level development, a minimum initial complement of the equivalent of 10 full-time paid staff, with additional volunteer support, is envisaged. The actual number of staff may be larger, due to part-time working.

5. Viability

The projected level of demand at Phase 3 runs from 15,000 paid admissions in year 1 rising to 55,000 by year 5.

This preliminary financial analysis indicates that, at the projected levels of demand, the Gaol Experience will achieve sustainable operations, but require continuing financial support from Sligo Council for at least the first 3 years of operation. Unless admissions reach at least the target indicated for year 5, the project will not be able to generate a sufficient surplus to provide for necessary periodic renewal of the exhibition and other features, and external funding will have to be provided to provide for exhibition development and expansion of the Experience. It is also evident that the project could not service any significant debt, nor would it provide a return to investors. This means that it will need to generate its capital finance from non-commercial sources - i.e. from grants and/or donations.

The projected level of deficit in the early years could be mitigated to some extent by raising admission prices, hosting additional events, room rental and generating sponsorship. Staff costs might be reduced by availing of employment subsidies under a Community Employment Scheme or similar support.

6. Next Steps

The Preparatory Phase is in the hands of Sligo County Council. There is substantial space available elsewhere on the overall site that is in the ownership of the Council. Some or all of the uses currently being accommodated in the Gaol buildings could be relocated within this site. What is required is a practical master plan for the site, inclusive of a schedule and budget for implementation as a single project.

In order to progress the development of the more substantive Sligo Gaol project, an organisation structure of some sort needs to be established which:

- has a range of skills relevant to the Sligo Gaol project
- has the Sligo Gaol project as its only task focus.

In the first instance this could be a Working Group established jointly by Friends of Sligo Gaol and Sligo County Council. Sligo County Council and Friends of Sligo Gaol could establish the role, purpose, and function of the working group, decide on the governance of the group (Chair, sub committees, etc.), and identify other stakeholders that might be invited to join the Group with a view to sharing their expertise.