

## Chapter 1 Introduction & Vision

### 1.0 Preamble

This plan is a land use plan and overall strategy for the development of County Offaly over the period 2009 - 2015.

#### This plan contains...

##### Volume 1 - Written Statement.

This is divided into twenty chapters and sets out the vision, aims, goals and strategy for the county over the plan period in addition to the Council's policies and objectives under various headings. It also contains development standards / guidelines, a summary of the County Housing Strategy, a summary of the County Retail Strategy and a Wind Energy Strategy for the county. It contains the written land use zoning categories which are read in conjunction with the land use zoning maps contained in Volume 2.

##### Volume 2 - Settlement Plans (includes Town plans, Village plans, Sraid plans).

Exceptions are the Tullamore Town and Environs Development Plan, Birr Town and Environs Development Plan (including Crinkle village), Clara Local Area Plan and Edenderry Local Area Plan. These are adopted by way of a separate statutory process but must be consistent with the overall context, policies and objectives of the County Development Plan.

##### Offaly Local Authorities Housing Strategy to 2015.

This document projects forward to 2015 the estimated housing needs of the county (including Tullamore and Birr), examines the availability of zoned and other land to facilitate this identified need and prescribes that 20% of land **zoned** for residential use or a mixture of residential and other uses be reserved for the provision of social and affordable ("Part V") housing.

##### Offaly Local Authorities Retail Strategy to 2015.

This strategy identifies future floorspace requirements to 2015 and outlines an approach which:

- Reinforces and extends the high order retail functioning of Tullamore as a linked Gateway, enabling it to: effectively reduce retail expenditure exported from the county to other centres and further develop its retail influence in the Midlands consistent with its linked Gateway designation

- Supports the roles identified for Birr, Edenderry and Clara by encouraging retail floorspace provision commensurate with their anticipated growth

- Promotes balanced retail provision throughout the county of a scale appropriate to the size and function of the various settlements.

##### Offaly County Council's Record of Protected Structures\*

The Council's Record of Protected Structures comprises of a list of all protected structures within the county and includes identification of the location, description and appraisal for each individual structure.

\*The Town and Environs Development Plans for Tullamore and Birr contain the Record of Protected Structures for the relevant Town Council's functional area.

### 1.1 Introduction

This County Development Plan was adopted on the 19<sup>th</sup> January 2009 and outlines an overall strategy for the **proper planning and sustainable development** of County Offaly over the period 2009 - 2015.

Put simply, **proper planning** is:

**The right development or land use.....**

**in the right place...**

**at the right time!**

and **sustainable development** is:

**"..development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"**

(1987 'Bruntland Report')

This plan is set within a framework of **National and Regional policy**, as is a requirement of the Planning and Development Acts 2000 – 2006.

This plan replaces the Offaly County Development Plan 2003–2009. It has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Planning and Development Acts 2000–2006 and will remain in force until January 2015, unless varied or reviewed in the interim.

## Functional Area

This plan relates to the functional area of Offaly County Council, which is County Offaly, excluding the Town Council areas of Tullamore and Birr, as these are separate Planning Authorities. This plan is, however, relevant to those Authorities as it sets out **an overall vision, strategies, policies and objectives for the county as a whole** and its successful implementation will have a positive impact on all areas within the county, including the Town Council areas.

Statutory development plans are in place for Birr and Tullamore, and future reviews should have regard to and aim to be consistent with this County Development Plan. Local Area Plans are in place for Edenderry and Clara. These must be consistent with the objectives of the County Development Plan. Settlement plans for all other towns, villages and sraids (which are very small settlements - Refer to Chapter 4) are contained within Volume 2 of this plan. One exception is Crinkle, a village plan for this settlement is contained within the Birr Town and Environs Development Plan.

In the preparation of this plan, regard has been given to the development plans of adjoining planning authorities.

## 1.2 Brief County Profile

### 1.2.1 Location and Population

Offaly is situated in the Midlands of Ireland and shares boundaries with counties Westmeath, Meath, Kildare, Laois, Tipperary, Galway and Roscommon. See map 1.1 which indicates the county's position within the country and region. As at Census 2006, the county's population was 70,868 persons, having increased from 59,117 in 1996 and 63,663 in 2002. Much (approximately 40%) of this population is contained within larger towns such as Tullamore (County Town), Birr, Edenderry, Clara and Portarlinton. However the county remains largely rural in nature, with approximately 60% of its population residing in rural areas comprising a well-developed network of smaller towns and villages of less than 1,500 population (approximately 30% of population) and the open countryside (approximately 30% of population).

### 1.2.2 Physical Features

Offaly's land extent is approximately 493,985 acres (199,981 hectares). It is primarily a county of flat and undulating lands. Approximately one fifth of the county comprises **peatlands** and the majority of the

remainder of the land is in agricultural / forestry use. Peatlands have traditionally been a significant asset to Offaly in terms of an energy resource and a source of employment through extraction and power generation, but also as an amenity and educational resource. The international scientific importance of **Clara Bog** and the success of the **Lough Boora parklands** are recognition of this amenity value.

Exceptions to Offaly's predominantly level topography are the **Slieve Bloom Mountains**, situated to the south west of the county and their attractive foothills. A comprehensive system of **eskers** also exists in Offaly, mainly concentrated in the northwest and centre of the county. The most comprehensive of these eskers is the **Eiscir Riada** which runs in a more or less continuous line from Shannonbridge to Clonmacnoise and onto Clara, Durrow and Rahugh, Co. Westmeath and dominates much of the landscape in the north west of the county. Other significant landscape features include the **River Shannon** which runs along the western county boundary and its callows, the **Grand Canal** which traverses the county, important archaeological and historical landscapes such as **Clonmacnoise** and **Durrow** and **Croghan Hill**, an extinct volcano.

Offaly has a well-developed network of moderately scaled **market towns** and **attractive villages**.

## 1.3 Main Policy Considerations in the Preparation of this Plan

This plan has been prepared having regard to National, Regional and Local Plans and policies.

### 1.3.1 National Spatial Strategy

In the preparation of this plan, Offaly County Council has recognised that the vision for the county must extend beyond the year 2015, in line with the **National Spatial Strategy (NSS) (2002)** which runs to 2020. The NSS is a twenty-year planning framework designed to achieve a better balance of social, economic, physical development and population growth between regions and to inform decisions as to where development (and Government investment) should take place. Its focus is on people, on places and on building communities and sets a framework for the balanced development of Ireland with ambitious targets for the development of the Midlands Region.

The NSS recognises the need for the closer matching of where people live, with where they work, thereby sustaining:

- A better quality of life for people
  - A strong, competitive economic position
- and
- An environment of the highest quality
- (NSS Section 1.1)

**'Core messages' of the NSS are:**

- a wider range of work opportunities
- a better quality of life
- effective urban and rural planning

(NSS Summary Guide)

The National Spatial Strategy sets out that the Midlands Region (Offaly included) should, by means of harnessing key drivers, compete with other regions, most notably the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) for comprehensive development (i.e. jobs, services, housing). The alternative would be to continue the trend of providing a housing or 'dormitory' function to serve the GDA with commercial and enterprise potential in turn 'leaking' eastwards out of the region.

### 1.3.2 Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines (MRPGs) (2004)

The Council has subscribed to the principles of the NSS by adopting, in conjunction with Laois, Longford and Westmeath County Councils, the **Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines (MRPGs) (2004)** which are consistent with the NSS.

The MRPGs (2004) planned for an increase in population within the region from the 2002 level of 225,000 in 2002 to 325,000 in 2020 and a considerable strengthening of the larger urban centres of Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar, to attract economic development, services and to sustain this increased population which otherwise might gravitate towards the Greater Dublin Area (GDA), or indeed other regions. This figure has been revised upwards in the light of the results of Census 2006 and optimistic government forecasts for national population growth. Offaly's important location within the Midlands region, coupled with Tullamore as part of the ATM (Athlone, Tullamore, Mullingar) Midlands Linked Gateway means that the county has a pivotal role in the achievement of the development aspirations of the region.

Arising from this MRPGs target, it is estimated that County Offaly could potentially develop from its 2006 population of 70,868 to approximately **93,000** by the year 2020, or approximately **85,000** by 2015 - an increase of approximately 14,000 over 2006 population figures.

The MRPGs prescribe that **Tullamore**, as part of the 'Central Development Area' of the region and part of the Linked Gateway should account for a very significant proportion of this growth with the balance going to Birr, other towns, and the rural area in progressively lower proportions.

This means that Tullamore is targeted to grow to a population of approximately 30,000 by 2020 from 13,000 in 2006. Offaly and Westmeath County Councils have commissioned a **Strategic Development Framework for the Midlands Gateway - Developing a World Class Knowledge-Based Competitive Gateway**, (The 'Indecon Report').

The strategy is designed to create an integrated, linked Gateway comprising Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar together with the other towns in the region to realise its potential as an internationally competitive gateway. The Council will work with Westmeath County Council to implement the strategy.

Population growth over the past decade and ongoing pressure for development in Offaly is largely concentrated in the 'east' of the county. The primary reason for this is this area's proximity to the Greater Dublin Area (GDA), and the rapid growth reflects a trend throughout Leinster for commuter driven development. To allow development over this plan period to follow the current trends and pressures would result in a considerable imbalance of development in the county and would represent failure to implement the MRPGs. Furthermore, the potential for a successful Midlands Linked Gateway, supported by a strong network of towns and the intervening rural areas would be diluted. For the Region, it could mean a lost opportunity to develop as a sustainable and complimentary alternative to the GDA for economic development and high order services.

In recognition of the foregoing, Offaly County Council has looked towards the 2020 MRPG targets and worked back to 2015 to (i) try and secure the NSS/MRPG

objectives and (ii) try to ensure that growth is measurable against the MRPGs over this plan period.

### 1.3.3 National Development Plan 2007-2013

In preparing this plan, the Council also had regard to the **National Development Plan 2007–2013 (NDP)** which sets out a programme for national investment in infrastructure, community development etc. The NDP aims at further increasing quality of life in Ireland and strengthening the country's economic success within the overall planning framework as set out by the National Spatial Strategy. Harnessing the investment which is directly beneficial to Offaly through a planning framework which allows the greatest potential for the sustainable development of Offaly is a challenge for this plan.

The County Development Plan must also link closely to the Offaly County Development Board Strategy entitled *“Bringing the Future into Focus – A Strategy for Economic, Social and Cultural Development”*, which is in place for the period 2002–2012 and focuses on quality of life.

The Council has regard to the BMW (Border Midlands and Western) Regional Assembly Operational Programme 2007-2013.

## 1.4 Overall Vision

The Offaly County Development Strategy and the Offaly County Council Corporate Strategy share the same “vision statement”, and the Council aims to follow this through in terms of its land use and planning implications through the implementation of this County Development Plan. It reads:

*That all people in Offaly will enjoy equal opportunity and a good quality of life – that they will look forward to the future with confidence while cherishing the past.*

For the County Development Plan, this means having regard to:

- (i) How land use and planning decisions will impact on quality of life for the people of Offaly.
- (ii) How such decisions will impact on Offaly as a location to live and work of choice, not necessity.
- (iii) How such decisions will impact on the need to protect Offaly's natural and built assets.

It is intended that this vision acts as a ‘prompt’ for all strategies, policies and objectives of this plan.

The policy framework and ‘targets’ mentioned above give rise to significant planning challenges for the Council over the plan period and beyond. Chapter 2, Context and Challenges lists these challenges, and is preceded with an examination of some ‘context’ and demographic issues which act as supporting information and rationale for the challenges.

