

## Chapter 3 Overall Strategy and Goals

### Aim

This chapter follows on from the vision for the County Development Plan 2009-2015 contained in Chapter 1, and having regard to the context set out in Chapter 2, shows the Council's overall goals and strategy for the period.

The policies and objectives of this plan will follow from the main goals and strategies. The Council will seek to secure the objectives as set out in this plan. However, such actions may be constrained by the economic climate together with the allocation of funding to the Local Authority throughout the period of the plan.

### 3.1 Area Based Strategy

#### 3.1.1 'Centre' of the County [Gateway and Surrounding Areas]

The Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines (MRPGs) 2004 prescribe that much of the development, which is to take place in the 'Central Area' of the Midland Region, should be centred on the Midlands 'Gateway', which comprises Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar. These towns are to form a strong, linked urban centre and 'driver' for the Midlands Region, which will enable it to compete for development, for people, for jobs and for services at a national and international level. Tullamore will continue as the largest settlement within Offaly, providing most employment and sustaining a large portion of the population of the county and the Council's strategy is to ensure this. Clara, as a town within the Gateway triangle and identified for population expansion, employment opportunities, business, industry, tourism and infrastructural development by the 'Strategic Development Framework for the Midlands Gateway', will be a focus for development as a supporting town to Athlone, Tullamore, Mullingar and as an urban area within the gateway. In particular, employment-generating development and commercial development, services etc. will be encouraged and promoted in Clara.

#### 3.1.1.1 Balanced Development

However, to function as envisaged by the National Spatial Strategy (NSS), the Gateway must be linked intrinsically to the moderate growth and appropriate balanced development of the other towns and villages as well as the rural areas within the county. One rationale for the Gateway is that the spin-off benefits it will provide to the **entire** county far outweigh the benefits of allowing a small number of urban centres (particularly in the east of the county) to grow unrestrained. A contention of the NSS and the MRPGs is that the west of the county would be likely to experience much lower levels of growth under this scenario than if the Gateway was successful.

The MRPGs stress that small urban centres must be strengthened to act as local service centres of adequate scale to serve their immediate rural hinterland. This can be achieved by adequate zoning of lands, provision of services and a facilitatory approach towards appropriately scaled urban development.

#### 3.1.2 'East' of the County

The potential development levels i.e. available 'zoning' in the east of County Offaly (which is within the 'Eastern' development area of the Midlands Region) have been examined in light of the National Spatial Strategy and the Midland Regional Planning Guidelines (MRPGs) (2004) which aim for 'balanced development' within the region **and within the county**. It is recognised that if the 'eastern' area continues to grow unrestrained in terms of population, it will exacerbate the existing concerns being experienced i.e. long distance commuting, unsustainable travel patterns, 'dormitory'-type towns, potential lack of community involvement etc. It will also have the potential to divert development away from the Gateway town of Tullamore, resulting in insufficient 'critical mass' to attract further services and development to allow it to become a 'driver' of development for the county and the region.

Therefore, the strategy is for careful management of population growth potential in this eastern area of Offaly, coupled with a positive outlook towards the provision of employment which would act as an alternative to long distance commuting.

### 3.1.3 'West & South' of the County

The Midland Regional Planning Guidelines (MRPG's) 2004 identify the 'Western' development area of the region (and consequently the county) as an area where the urban centres need to be strengthened. This can be achieved by adequate zoning of lands, provision of services and a facilitatory approach towards appropriately scaled urban development. It is important to note, however, the significant weight that the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) and the MRPGs give to the necessity of ensuring that development is in keeping with the character and carrying capacity of attractive rural towns and villages, such as Banagher, Ferbane, Cloghan, Shinrone, and Moneygall.

The strategy therefore is for the facilitation of moderate population growth and a positive outlook towards development which will strengthen / consolidate the urban centres and villages and which will aid the diversification of the rural economy and facilitation of appropriate rural enterprise.

### 3.1.4 Midlands Gateway: Overall Approach by Offaly and Westmeath Local Authorities

Building on the National Spatial Strategy, Regional Planning Guidelines and ongoing investment under the National Development Plan 2007-2013, Offaly and Westmeath Local Authorities are working together to maximise the development potential of the Midlands Gateway triangle.

Offaly and Westmeath Local Authorities are working together to ensure that the linked Gateway will have the critical mass of population, services and infrastructure, the complementary strengths and attractions and the dynamic leadership to compete with other gateways in Ireland.

The Local Authorities agree that one of the key challenges that the Midlands region faces is generating self sustaining as opposed to commuter led growth and that creating more self sustaining growth drawing from the potential and capabilities of the region will be achieved through:

- Building up a strong critical mass of population within the linked gateway triangle at the heart of the region with an aim to reach a combined population of 100,000 in the period to 2020 and beyond through a prudent and structured approach to development of county wide land banks,
- Harnessing the potential of the Midland Region's third level knowledge and innovation infrastructure, including development of linkages with other regions third level facilities and to the enterprise sectors,
- Assisting the move towards a highly productive and diversified economic base with strong representation from the value added sectors including innovative property solutions such as a Strategic Development Zone,
- Improving the physical infrastructure of the towns in the Gateway triangle in preparation for their accelerated development including better roads and public transport links between the towns that will place the Gateway and the region at the heart of the physical territory of the state,
- Conserving the natural and cultural heritage of the region, its constituent counties and the gateway towns in particular including where appropriate, integration with necessary new development in order to offer a high quality of life and a distinctive basis for tourism based enterprise,
- Ensuring that the development of the Gateway is effectively linked to other parts of the counties and the region overall through enhanced local transport and the complementary development of other towns, villages and rural areas.

To energise the promotion and development of the Midlands Gateway, Offaly and Westmeath Local Authorities commissioned a Strategic Development Framework for the Midlands Gateway whose publication in November 2006 represented a major step forward in collaboration between the Local Authorities.

Looking to the findings and conclusions of the framework and what is required to implement those conclusions,

Offaly and Westmeath Local Authorities agree on three key implementation priorities for the Midlands Gateway:

1: The development of the Midlands Gateway will be driven forward by the relevant Local Authorities in a strategic and co-ordinated manner that clearly demonstrates vision, leadership and a regional perspective in vigorously implementing the concept. Specifically, the Local Authorities are establishing mechanisms to deliver such co-ordination through, for example, a joint Gateway Co-ordination Office to work within and between the various local authority structures, local stakeholders such as the private sector as well as Government Departments and Agencies.

2: Collaborative action in implementing the gateway concept will embrace a co-ordinated approach amongst the Local Authorities to key gateway issues such as the preparation of urban design frameworks for each of the gateway towns as well as a co-ordinated approach to Housing and Retail Strategies and combined efforts to secure funding for iconic gateway projects such as the early delivery of major improvements to the roads and public transport connectivity within the Gateway triangle.

3: A visionary and joined up approach to gateway development by the Offaly and Westmeath Local Authorities will be complemented by effective linkages with relevant private sector and community interests through the establishment of, for example, a joint Gateway Sub-committee of the Offaly and Westmeath County Development Boards. Private sector participation in the Gateway project is a vital component for success in winning investment and the Local Authorities will encourage a strategic approach by business and community interests in working with the Local Authorities to agree planning and development policies and investment priorities that will deliver the critical mass and complementary attractions across the towns in the Gateway triangle.

Therefore in overall terms the approach of the Offaly and Westmeath Local Authorities in implementing the gateway concept will ensure that;

- There is strong local driver for the Gateway concept and,

- There is agreement on the key complementary policies for the Gateway towns in matters such as housing, commercial development, transport connectivity and the treatment of intervening areas and,
- There is effective partnership between the policies of the Local Authorities and the community and private sector interests so as to maximise investment potential.

Under the National Development Plan (NDP) 2007-2013, an unprecedented level of capital investment is ongoing across the country and in the Midlands Gateway the Offaly and Westmeath Local Authorities recognize that there is now a need for co-ordinated planning and investment strategies to deliver long term and self-sustaining growth. Funding under the NDP Gateways Innovation Fund (GIF) has been sought by the County Managers of Offaly and Westmeath for specific measures to release blockages in the development of strategic sites within the Gateway towns, for urban regeneration and consolidation projects on key sites in the three towns and enhanced connectivity improvements between the towns additional to the Transport 21 investment programme.

### 3.2 Main Goals of the Offaly County Development Plan 2009-2015

**1:** Drive forward and encourage the growth of County Offaly to its full potential both economically and socially, having regard to environmental constraints, with a focus on quality of life.

Ireland's living environment, including that of County Offaly has improved markedly in recent decades, resulting in an increased workforce, improved living conditions together with improved amenities and access to services. The focus of this goal is to assist in the continuance of this trend with appropriate planning, forethought and recognition of the following planning issues:

- Location of employment in proximity to where people work and improved work-life balance, less requirement for commuting resulting in increased spin-off benefits for the county.
- A **clear hierarchy** of settlements where towns of different sizes attract a level and scale of development which is appropriate to their needs and character.
- A distinction between urban and rural areas and the preservation of Offaly's largely unspoiled rural environment.
- A sustained, vibrant rural economy and population with a strong service base.
- Protection of the environment, in particular air and water quality.

The key to achieving this goal will be in facilitating investment in the county, facilitating the improvement of indigenous businesses and services, promoting and facilitating investment in critical infrastructure, being proactive and facilitatory towards employment generating development and in ensuring the success of Tullamore as part of the Midlands linked Gateway for the benefit of the county as a whole.

**2:** Fully support and promote the development of the Midlands Linked Gateway, as a 'driver' of development in

co-operation with Westmeath Local Authorities and Tullamore Town Council, in order for Tullamore and all of County Offaly to attract people, jobs and services to compete on a national and international stage.

As outlined in Chapter 1, Introduction and Vision, the Council must have regard to the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) which aims to counter balance the draw of the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) for development through job-creating development and services in regions outside of the GDA. The Midland Regional Planning Guidelines (MRPGs) target that the Midlands Linked Gateway (Athlone–Tullamore–Mullingar) must combine to a population of approximately 100,000 to attract development at a national and international level and to provide a level of employment and services to rival and compete with other regions. Delivering a successful Linked Gateway in the Midlands will contribute to the balanced economic, social and cultural development of County Offaly as a whole.

This plan will therefore support the location of large-scale development in Tullamore.

**3:** Act to direct development throughout the county in a balanced manner by implementing the Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines (2004) and carefully **managing** the potential for further rapid population growth of the county's urban centres.

Parts of County Offaly have grown at a faster rate than others over the past 10 years. Population growth in the urban areas in east Offaly have expanded at a rate considerably greater than the linked Gateway town of Tullamore, Offaly's traditional second town - Birr and other smaller towns. This is partly due to the east of the county's proximity to the Greater Dublin Area.

The Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines (MRPGs) 2004, which this Council has adopted in conjunction with Laois, Longford and Westmeath County Councils recognises that the eastern portion of the Midlands Region has grown at a faster pace than other parts. It advocates a moderate level of population growth in the east of the region (including the eastern part of Offaly) between 2002 and 2020. Much of this envisaged level of population growth has **already been harnessed** by

the eastern constituent parts of the Midlands counties. Whilst this is welcome at a county level, this rapid population growth has meant that adopted MRPG 'targets' for the remainder of the county, in particular the Gateway town of Tullamore, will not be achieved, without positive management.

Offaly County Council aims to 'sell' the benefits of developing the remainder of the county, with a focus on the Gateway, and a clear intention to ensure that the west and south of the county reap the benefits from sustainable levels of development.

It is an important aspiration of this plan to ensure that different parts of Offaly develop in partnership according to their strengths and that a strong Gateway town (Tullamore) assists in the balanced development of the remainder of the county and also that the other areas do not inhibit the development of the Gateway.

To address the foregoing, this plan aims to set a planning framework of moderately scaled land zonings and adequate services available in urban centres of the county to ensure that settlements evolve and develop in an attractive manner, which makes them sustainable places where people can enjoy living in, working in and visiting.

One main key to the success of this goal is the appropriate response to proposals for further significant and rapid increases in population growth in the east of the county and appropriate facilitation and encouragement of population growth in urban centres in the remainder of the county. Implementation tools include a complete set of settlement plans for towns, villages and 'sraids' in the county which are reflective of their existing size and their position within the county's settlement hierarchy, thus giving positive direction as to what level of development is considered appropriate in scale for each level in the hierarchy.

**4:** Encourage, facilitate and respond to proposals for employment creation and services provision / improvement in the eastern portion of the county which

has experienced a rapid increase in population growth in recent years.

A considerable number of people, including returning natives have been attracted to this part of Offaly in recent times, in association with unprecedented national economic growth. Much of this development is commuter driven. Therefore, a need has been established to attract suitable employment for this increased population to work in the immediate area and services for this population to enjoy. This is essentially a goal of "bringing people and jobs together", which is commensurate with the National Spatial Strategy. However, the foregoing should not be allowed to prejudice the key 'driver' role of Tullamore as part of the Midland Linked Gateway.

Edenderry's place within the county's settlement strategy is that of a 'Large Town'. It has experienced substantial population growth in recent times (54% for the town and its immediate environs) since 1996. The Council's strategy over the plan period 2009-2015 is one of consolidation, in order to ensure a balance in development throughout the county and encouragement of employment generating development and services development for the newly expanded population.

Portarlington is defined as a 'Large Town' in the settlement hierarchy. While the population of Portarlington town within County Offaly is approximately 1600, taken with the population within County Laois, this town falls into the Large Town category. The Council's strategy is for moderate scale consolidation rather than large-scale growth of the population base within County Offaly and the promotion of employment-generation and services provision.

The Council intends to facilitate proposals for employment generation and services improvement in this part of the county. One important action in this regard is to work closely with Bord na Mona to investigate and facilitate (where appropriate on planning grounds) the re-use and alternative development of cutaway bogs within its ownership for development which will give an employment and economic boost to the county. Working with community based development groups is also seen as a priority. Town and village plans which contain adequate zoned lands and which can accommodate

employment-generating development, are also a necessary component in the securing of this goal.

**5: Encourage population growth and development in west and south Offaly.**

Traditionally, those parts of Offaly to the west and south of Tullamore have remained more rural and have developed less rapidly than the area around and, in recent years, east of Tullamore. Significant population decline has been less of a feature in recent times (see Chapter 2 Context and Challenges), however the disparity in terms of rates of population increase between this part of Offaly and the remainder of the county has increased. West and south Offaly has a very well developed network of towns, villages and very small nucleated settlements, known as 'sraids', in addition to impressive rural scenery and topography related to the Slieve Bloom Mountains, an impressive esker network and the River Shannon.

The Council's strategy for this area is one of promotion of development at a scale which is appropriate, having regard to the 'carrying capacity' of the settlements, environment and landscape of the area. Tourism is a key opportunity for this part of the county and this sector will be encouraged. This part of the county's proximity to two of the three Linked Midland Gateway towns (Tullamore and Athlone) can also be harnessed to stimulate population and economic growth in west and south Offaly.

Co-operation with Bord na Mona in identifying and facilitating the beneficial after-use of cut-away boglands, including uses for energy production, employment and amenity / tourism, in addition to working with community based development groups is seen as key to achieving this goal. Implementation of the Tax Incentive scheme for the Mid-Shannon region will also boost this part of County Offaly. Finally, moderately scaled land use zonings within facilitatory town and village plans will encourage development at an appropriate scale.

**6: Act to protect/preserve Offaly's Environment.**

The need to preserve and manage components of Offaly's environment, including urban and rural landscapes, waterways, boglands, small attractive villages, eskers, monastic landscape and heritage as a resource for all of Offaly's existing and future population and visitors is inherent in this plan. This will contribute to the enjoyment of the county and quality of life. However, there are also components of the environment which sustain health and well-being and so, the protection of the air to breathe and the protection of water to drink are of paramount importance to this Council, and will be taken into account in assessing development proposals. The Council recognises that both surface waters and ground water in County Offaly are under threat and policies contained in this plan incorporate a precautionary approach in this regard. In addition, EU Directives specify that water bodies, both above and below ground level must be protected from deterioration / further deterioration.

The protection of the environment is the key element of the Strategic Environmental Assessment, which has assessed the County Development Plan's policies and objectives against the carrying capacity of the environment.

**7: Act to encourage sustainable rural development, agricultural diversification and tourism.**

Offaly is a largely rural county, and approximately 60% of its population lives in areas outside of towns greater than 1,500 population i.e. in villages, sraids and the open countryside. Facilitating the appropriate and orderly development of the county will continue to assist in achieving balanced development. The Council recognises the need to maintain vibrancy and vitality in rural Offaly. Rural development needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century include agricultural enterprise, tourism creativity and craft /small-scale commercial enterprise and these are best located in rural areas, adjacent to rural resources and rural people. However, siting of individual proposals must have regard to the principles of proper planning and sustainable development, in particular within visually or environmentally sensitive landscapes and settlements.

Maintaining the relationship of towns, villages and the open countryside to each other is important to this Council, in particular by ensuring adequate delineation between them.

The provision and facilitation of services in rural areas by both the public and private sector, including transportation services is important in maintaining the vitality of rural areas, as is the facilitation and promotion of rural diversification and in this regard, the Council aims to take a positive approach where possible.

**8:** Act to facilitate, maintain and improve critical infrastructure including transportation, water, energy and communications within the county.

Such infrastructure, whether on a large scale or at a local level is necessary to facilitate new development and the improvement of the living standards of Offaly's population. Large scale infrastructural investment can facilitate large scale employment-generating development and Offaly County Council will facilitate such investment where appropriate.

The provision of high quality infrastructure serves the county's needs, creates employment opportunities and contributes to a high quality of life for the people of Offaly.

**9:** Actively promote and facilitate improvements in quality of life for Offaly's population through the facilitation and provision of social and community facilities throughout the county.

Economic development and employment growth must be coupled with the necessary provision of social and community facilities and while Offaly County Council may be perceived as not having a direct role as a provider of such facilities, it is through the County Development Plan that the Council can identify needs, identify lands and include policies to support such provision.

Facilitation of the provision of community and educational services i.e. schools, open spaces, community facilities,

childcare services etc. by Offaly County Council will assist in achieving this goal, as will such other actions, for example; continue in implementing the Councils play policy, continued efforts to secure an Arts Centre for Tullamore and continued improvement of the County Library service.

The Council will endeavour to co-operate with the Health Service Executive and providers of health care in the county to ensure a quality service for the county's population.

**3.3 Overall Methodology and Considerations for Directing Development over the Period 2009-2015**

<p><b>How many people do we plan for in Offaly?</b></p>	<p>We consider the Midlands Regional Planning Guidelines Population 'targets' and the Offaly Local Authorities' Housing Strategy</p>	<p><b>National/ Regional Policy and decisions</b></p>
<p><b>Where will these people live?</b></p>	<p>We consider the County's Settlement Strategy</p>	<p><b>County level decisions</b></p>
<p><b>We consider how a plan or a proposed development will provide for...</b></p>	<p>Employment Infrastructure / Energy Community Facilities Transport Rural Development</p>	
<p><b>We consider the protection of.....</b></p>	<p>Environment Heritage and Conservation</p>	
<p><b>We consider how the people of Offaly and visitors will enjoy.....</b></p>	<p>Landscape / Tourism Built Form Culture / Recreation Amenity</p>	
<p><b>We give guidance on individual proposals through...</b></p>	<p>The County Development Plan Standards / Guidelines.</p>	<p><b>Individual Decisions</b></p>

