

# Chapter 4 Settlement Strategy

## Aim

To provide for sustainable growth and to manage development pressure within both the urban and rural environment, in accordance with the county's settlement hierarchy whilst promoting quality of life in achieving a balance between social, economic and environmental factors.

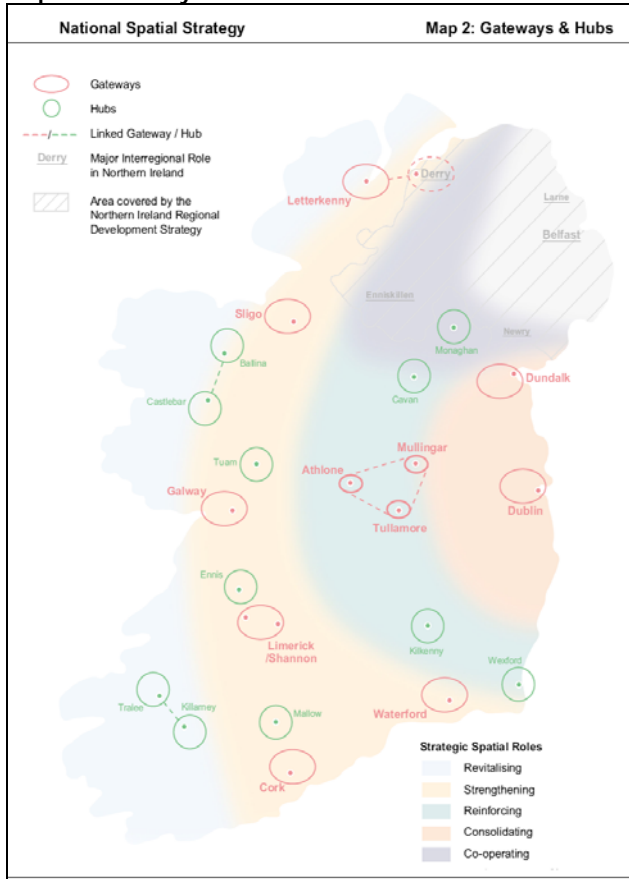
## Context

Settlement policy guides where new development should appropriately take place in County Offaly, having regard to national and regional policy, current and projected population levels, development pressures and physical constraints.

## National and Regional Policy

The National Spatial Strategy (NSS) 2002-2020 provides a planning framework on delivering more balanced social, economic and physical development between the regions of Ireland. This national planning framework has been translated at a regional level in the Midland Regional Planning Guidelines (MRPGs) (2004).

Map 4.1 Gateways and Hubs in a National Context



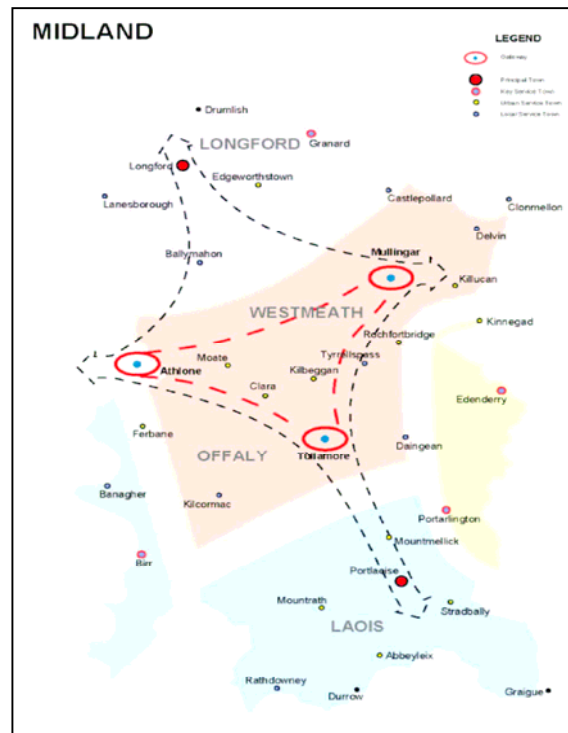
Source: National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020

In terms of settlement policy, the MRPGs; -

- Divide the Midlands Region into 'Development Areas', namely central, eastern, northern, western and southern areas.

Put Forward 'Population Targets' for the Midlands Linked Gateway and each 'Development Area'. The guidelines when first adopted (2004) contained a population target for the entire region of 325,000 by 2020 (i.e. c.108,000 persons increase during the period 2002-2020). As mentioned in Chapter 1, Introduction, **this figure has been revised upwards** in the light of the results of Census 2006 and optimistic government (Note: Population for the Region increased by approximately 27,000 persons (11.64%) over the last Census period 2002-2006).

Map 4.2 Midlands Region in Context (MRPGs)



Source: Midland Regional Planning Guidelines (2004)

In general terms, the **'Development Areas'** which directly relate to County Offaly include:

#### 'Central Area' of the Midlands Region

This area, which includes the 'Midlands Linked Gateway' and in particular the linked gateway town of Tullamore and the town of Clara, are identified as the **focus for much of the anticipated population growth**. The 'Midlands Linked Gateway' is to account for an estimated **55,000-60,000** additional growth targeted for the region during the period 2004-2020. Tullamore, located within this Central Area and identified as part of the 'Midlands Linked Gateway', will continue in being the largest settlement within Offaly and will remain as the 'driver of growth' within the county and a similar linked role within the region as a whole.

#### 'Eastern Area' of the Midlands Region

This area is closest to the Greater Dublin Area and has experienced the most rapid population growth within the region over the period 1996-2006. It includes the towns of Edenderry and Portarlington. The MRPGs estimate that in order to achieve strategic goals as set out by national and regional policy, this area in its entirety would need to grow by **7,000-9,000 persons** over the period 2004-2020, with the bulk of this growth to be channelled into Edenderry and Portarlington.

#### 'Western Area' of the Midlands Region

This area comprises those parts of the Region associated with Birr and with close links to the Mid-West region. In order to achieve strategic goals as set out by national policy, the MRPGs estimate that this area would require population growth of **3,500-5,500 persons** over the period 2004-2020, with the bulk of this growth to be channelled into Birr.

#### Local Policy Context

County Offaly is a largely rural county and in broad terms, its population distribution is as per Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1 Population Distribution within Urban / Rural Areas of County Offaly.**

| Settlement Type                        | Population Distribution within County |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| Open Countryside                       | 30%                                   |
| Local Service Towns and Villages       | 30%                                   |
| Towns with a Population >1,500 Persons | 40%                                   |

Approximately 30% of new houses within the county are single dwelling house developments, with the majority of these sited within the open countryside. This currently provides approximately 350 new "one-off" dwellings per annum within the county. The on-going process of evolution and change in settlements throughout the county must be directed in ways that are sustainable: economically, socially and environmentally.

#### Population

The most recent census (Census 2006) indicates that national population figures have increased very significantly over the past decade. During the period 2002-2006, the national population increased by 8.2% i.e. from 3,917,203 persons in 2002 to 4,239,848 persons in 2006. County Offaly experienced strong growth rates and in fact exceeded the national growth rate during the same period, increasing by 11.3% i.e. from 63,663 persons in 2002 to 70,868 persons in 2006. Table 4.2 illustrates population and population change at sub-county level during the period 1996 to 2006. This 10-year period provides a good baseline in which to carry out analysis on population change both at county and sub-county level.

**Table 4.2 Population Change at Sub-County Level 1996-2006**

| Geographic Area  | Persons 1996 | Persons 2002 | Persons 2006 | Actual Change 1996-2006 | % Change 1996 - 2006 |
|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Offaly County  | 59,117       | 63,663       | 70,868       | 11,751                  | 19.9%                |
| Tullamore -County Town and Part of Midlands Linked Gateway |              |              |              |                         |                      |
| Tullamore & Environs                                       | 10,039       | 11,098       | 12,927       | 2,888                   | 28.8%                |
| Large Towns  |              |              |              |                         |                      |
| Birr & Environs  | 4,158        | 4,411        | 5,053        | 895                     | 21.5%                |
| Edenderry & Environs                                       | 3,825        | 4,559        | 5,888        | 2,063                   | 53.9%                |
| Portarlington North  | 1,158        | 1,245        | 1,609        | 451                     | 38.9%                |
| Medium Town  |              |              |              |                         |                      |
| Clara  | 2,464        | 2,704        | 3,001        | 537                     | 21.8%                |
| Local Service Towns  |              |              |              |                         |                      |
| Banagher   | 1,414        | 1,553        | 1,636        | 222                     | 15.7%                |
| Ferbane  | 1,270        | 1,198        | 1,164        | -106                    | -8.3%                |
| Daingean   | 670          | 777          | 1,056        | 386                     | 57.6%                |
| Kilcormac  | 889          | 879          | 847          | -42                     | -4.7%                |
| Villages, Sraids and the Open Countryside                  |              |              |              |                         |                      |
| Rest of the County   | 33,230       | 35,239       | 37,687       | 4,457                   | 13.4%                |

Source: Central Statistics Office, Census 2002 & 2006

## Strategy

This strategy seeks to achieve balanced development within the county, whilst supporting both urban and rural settlement in accordance with national and regional policy. The settlement hierarchy set out hereunder informs the settlement strategy.

### 4.1 Population ‘Targets’ for County Offaly

The preparation of this plan is premised on the idea that population ‘targets’ as put forward at a regional level, supersede ‘traditional’ population projections estimated solely by an individual Council in the preparation of a Development Plan. Having regard to the Midland Regional Planning Guidelines (MRPG’s) targets for the Midlands Region, a population ‘target’ of approximately 93,000 persons for County Offaly is estimated by 2020. Therefore, assuming an even distribution of population growth over the period (2009-2020), it is estimated that the population of County Offaly could potentially grow to approximately 85,000 by 2015.

### 4.2 Offaly’s Approach to Future Growth

The settlement hierarchy contained in Section 4.3 i.e. Linked Gateway Town - Large Town - Medium Town - Local Service Town - Villages - Sraids - Open Countryside, reflects the position of each settlement area type within the county in terms of **existing and envisaged scale** within the settlement hierarchy. The position of a settlement within the hierarchy coupled with the defined role of each tier, provides an indication of the potential likely scale of population growth permissible over the period of the plan.

The Council therefore will implement a ‘Plan - Monitor - Manage approach’ in ensuring compliance with national regional and local policy, in particular:

- To stimulate population growth in Tullamore in accordance with its identified role as part of the Midlands Linked Gateway so that it can form part of the driver of development for the region as envisaged in the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) and MRPGs (2004).
- To conserve, enhance and strengthen the town and village structure within the county
- To inform decisions on the management of growth patterns in accordance with the county’s settlement hierarchy.

It is considered that this approach is more appropriate in managing future growth and the development of the county’s settlements as opposed to providing individual ‘population targets’ for all settlements.

In light of the NSS and the MRPGs, Goal 2 of this County Development Plan is to fully support and promote strong Gateway (Tullamore) growth which will in turn provide growth opportunities at appropriate locations and scale throughout the remainder of the county. Therefore, development management decisions across the tiers of the settlement hierarchy will be strongly influenced by the success of the gateway, which itself is the key driver. The Council will monitor the growth of the gateway in nominal terms towards the 2020 NSS/MRPGs target of 30,000 persons and also its growth relative to the growth of the remainder of the county and in particular the share of county population attributed to the gateway and the other tiers after the 2010 census. Table 4.3 shows the approximate population across the settlement tiers as at the 2006 Census\* and the percentage share of the county population in each tier. A review of this table (including committed planning applications) following the 2010 census will give an indication of the relative growth of the tiers and in turn will inform decision making in the latter four years of the County Development Plan.

\* The figures for the towns and villages are approximated because of the unavailability of specific population figures for the urban areas in the census. The figure for the sraids and open countryside was worked out by subtracting the urban population from the county total.

**Table 4.3 Population Share by Settlement Tier, 2006**

| Category                    | 2006 Population | 2006 % Share |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Gateway                     | 12927           | 18%          |
| Large Towns                 | 12550           | 18%          |
| Medium Town (used ED)       | 3587            | 5%           |
| Local Service Towns         | 5155            | 7%           |
| Villages                    | 6971            | 10%          |
| Sraids and Open Countryside | 29678           | 42%          |
| <b>Total County</b>         | <b>70868</b>    | <b>100%</b>  |

It must be noted that Offaly County Council and Tullamore Town Council are committed to facilitating the targeted growth of Tullamore as a Gateway Town and varied the Tullamore Town and Environs Development

Plan 2004-2010 in August 2008 to further stimulate this growth.

Having regard to the amount of land zoned for residential development across the tiers of Large Towns, Medium Town, Local Service Towns and Villages and the need to ensure the growth of the Gateway as the key driver within the county, the Council will implement a strict 'sequential approach' when assessing development applications. This is set out in Policy P04-01.

As indicated in Chapter 2 Context and Challenges, the Council accepts that a lesser growth rate from that projected by the Midlands Regional Authority in 2004 **may** occur within the county over the plan Period. In this instance, the county's settlement policy must be considered within the context of ensuring that all settlements apply a 'sequential' approach to their future development in a proper and plan-led manner. That is, a positive presumption in favour of developing from the centre most point of a settlement outwards and a presumption against the development of isolated or outlying sites.

### 4.3 Settlement Hierarchy

This County Development Plan includes a settlement hierarchy which identifies all settlements within the county as per their existing and envisaged size within the plan period, and a strategy which provides for appropriate growth at each level in the hierarchy. Map 4.3 illustrates the county's settlement hierarchy.

This settlement hierarchy (Refer to Table 4.34) and associated settlement strategy was prepared having regard to broad planning issues associated with the county including:

- Existing settlement patterns.
- The need to adapt or alter settlement patterns, in order to achieve balanced regional development and balanced county development (in particular addressing development pressures arising from the last decade).
- The availability of and/or capacity to provide services including water services, education requirements and other socio-economic objectives relevant to planning considerations in accordance with their defined position within the settlement hierarchy.

Table 4.4 illustrates Offaly's settlement hierarchy. This 'hierarchical approach' is based on a number of principal requirements associated with the future development of the county for the period up to 2015.



Volume 2 of the County Development Plan contains settlement plans. The policies contained within these plans must be read in conjunction with the policies and objectives contained in this volume.

Table 4.4 Offaly's Settlement Hierarchy


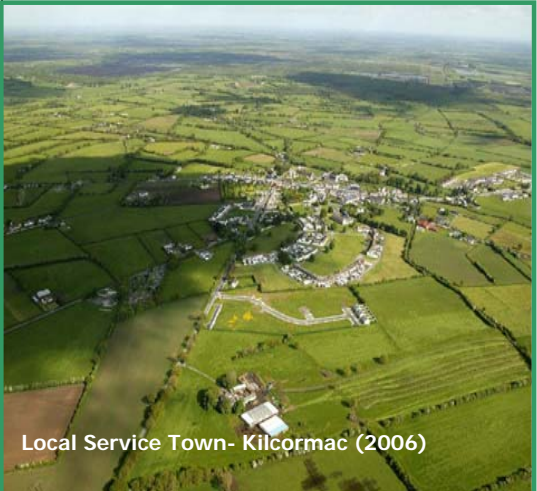
| <b>County Offaly Settlement Hierarchy</b>     |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Tier 1 Linked Gateway Town/County Town</b> |   |
|   | Tullamore   |
| <b>Tier 2 Large Towns</b>                     |   |
|   | Birr, Edenderry, Portarlinton (combined with Laois side)  |
| <b>Tier 3 Medium Towns</b>                    |   |
|   | Clara [supporting Gateway town]   |
| <b>Tier 4 Local Service Towns</b>             |   |
|   | Banagher, Ferbane, Kilcormac, Daingean  |
| <b>Tier 5 Villages [23 no.]</b>               |   |
|   | Belmont, Ballinagar, Ballycumber, Bracknagh, Cloghan, Clonbullogue, Cloneygowan, Coolderry, Crinkle*, Geashill, Killeigh, Kinnitty, Mucklagh, Moneygall, Mountbolus, Pollagh / Lemanaghan, Riverstown, Shannonbridge, Shannonharbour, Shinrone, Rahan, Rhode, Walsh Island. |
| <b>Tier 6 Sraids [25 no.]</b>                 |   |
|   | Ballinamere, Ballyboy, Ballyfore, Blueball, Boher, Boora (Leabeg), Brosna, Cadamstown, Clareen, Clonfinlough, Croghan, Doon, Dunkerrin, Durrow, Fivealley, Garryhinch, Horseleap, High Street, Killina, Killurin, Killyon, Lusmagh, Rath, Roscomroe, Tober.                 |
| <b>Open Countryside</b>                       |   |



\* The Village Plan for Crinkle is not contained within this County Development Plan. It is being included as a chapter within the Birr Town and Environs Plan 2010 – 2016, due to be adopted in 2010.

**Table 4.5 General Planning Principles relating to the Tiers within Offaly County Council's Settlement Hierarchy**

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <p><b>Tier 1 - Linked Gateway<sup>1</sup> Town</b></p>  <p>Linked Gateway -Tullamore (2006)</p> | <p><b>At a Regional Level</b>, the Midlands Linked 'Gateway' comprises Athlone, Tullamore and Mullingar which together aim to form a strong, linked urban centre and act as a '<b>driver</b>' for the Midlands Region. The 'Midlands linked Gateway' as identified in the National Spatial Strategy and MRPGs, is to become a nationally significant urban centre which requires a critical mass necessary to sustain strong levels of economic growth and prosperity. Its identified role seeks the need to compete as a region for development, for people, for jobs and for services at a National, European and International level.</p> <p><b>At a Local Level</b>, Tullamore forms part of the 'Midlands Linked Gateway' and will continue in being the <b>largest settlement within Offaly</b>, providing the majority of employment and sustaining a large portion of the population for the county. As per Census 2006, Tullamore's population was <b>c.12,927</b>. Having regard to recent development activity, it is estimated that its population is currently <b>c.14,000</b> (2008).</p> | <p>In accordance with the MRPGs population targets, it is envisaged that Tullamore could potentially grow to <b>30,000</b> by <b>2020</b>. The development of the necessary infrastructure associated with a 'Gateway', for example efficient public transport system, cultural facilities, increased levels of recreational facilities etc. requires a significant population base and such facilities are considered necessary in enhancing the overall <b>quality of life</b> for the region. It is important to note that the development of Tullamore as part of the Midlands Linked Gateway should not be curtailed by the county's overall projected target population figure of 85,000 by 2015. Rather, should Tullamore's population target in 2015 be met or exceeded by appropriate development, this may allow scope for additional population within the county. However, to allow development in other areas which would increase the county's population to 85,000 at the expense of the Midlands Linked Gateway would be contrary to the MRPGs and the overall strategy of the County Development Plan and this outcome should be avoided.</p> <p>[Note: Tullamore Town and Environs has its own Development Plan, however its role is determined and defined within the county's settlement hierarchy for the purposes of the County Development Plan].</p> |
| <p><b>Tier 2 - Large Towns</b></p>  <p>Large Town - Birr (2006)</p>                            | <p>The role of the <b>Large Towns</b> is to strengthen the settlement pattern across the county and to provide support to their immediate surrounding hinterland (including Local Service Towns, Villages, Sraids and the Open Countryside) as well as being self-sustaining. It is anticipated that the Large Towns will reinforce their role as key centres within the settlement hierarchy through the provision of employment opportunities, business, industry, education, tourism and infrastructure.</p>   | <p>For the purposes of the plan, 'Large Towns' comprise a minimum population threshold of <b>5,000 persons</b>.</p> <p>[Note: Birr Town and Environs has its own Development Plan and Edenderry has its own Local Area Plan, however their role is determined and defined within the county's settlement hierarchy for the purposes of the County Development Plan].</p>   |

<sup>1</sup> To function as envisaged by the National Spatial Strategy, the 'linked Gateway' must be linked intrinsically and supported by the **moderate growth and appropriate development of its surrounding towns and Villages** and the intervening rural area.

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| <p><b>Tier 3 - Medium Towns</b></p>  <p>Medium Town – Clara (2006)</p>                   | <p>A <b>Medium Town</b> is similar in context to Large Towns, but to a smaller scale. Clara, identified as a Medium Town within the County's settlement hierarchy, is considered as being a key settlement within the Gateway triangle and is also identified for population expansion, employment opportunities, business, industry, tourism and infrastructural development by the 'Strategic Development Framework for the Midlands Gateway' and therefore, will continue to be a focus for development as a supporting town to the Athlone Tullamore Mullingar Linked Gateway.</p>  | <p>For the purposes of the plan, Medium Towns range in size from greater than <b>3,000 persons to 5,000 persons</b>.</p> <p>[Note: Clara has its own Local Area Plan, however its role is determined and defined within the county's settlement hierarchy for the purposes of the County Development Plan].</p> |
| <p><b>Tier 4 - Local Service Towns</b></p>  <p>Local Service Town- Kilcormac (2006)</p> | <p><b>Local Service Towns</b> throughout the county are of fundamental importance in offering local services and facilities to their rural hinterlands. Local enterprise is encouraged within this settlement tier and the location of industry where appropriate may also be considered. The success of Local Service Towns can be achieved by adequate zoning of lands, servicing and a facilitatory approach towards appropriately scaled and designed urban development.</p> <p><b>Ferbane</b>, whilst identified as a Local Service Town and within Tier 4 of the settlement hierarchy; it has an enhanced important strategic role within the county. Particular attention to its development, as appropriate to its identified role by the Midland Regional Planning Guidelines as a 'key service town' is acknowledged.</p> | <p>Local Service Towns comprise a population of approximately <b>1,000+</b> persons. There is a necessity to ensure that development is in keeping with the character and carrying capacity of these attractive towns.</p>  |

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| <p><b>Tier 5 - Villages</b></p>  <p>Village - Cloneygowan (2006)</p> | <p><b>Villages</b> are smaller settlements, many of which are very attractive and rural in character. While some have not experienced sustainable growth in the recent past, others situated particularly within the eastern portion of the county have experienced increased growth levels over the past decade. Due to their existing and envisaged size, their general structure as small country settlements, their range of housing requirements and their semi-urban character, their plans include <b>statutory 'zoning'</b> of particular land for particular purposes. Provisions are also made for redundancy within these settlement plans i.e. more land zoned than necessary to allow for non-release of lands for development over the plan period.</p>   | <p>Villages support a population generally in the order of approximately <b>one hundred to a few hundred people</b> and sustain a moderate level of existing physical, services and community infrastructure. Permitted growth within a village will be small scale and very well designed having regard to the existing character of the settlement concerned.</p> <p>The aim is to facilitate rural living in a 'semi urban area' which is well serviced by physical and community infrastructure. Particular regard therefore must be afforded to the carrying capacity—physical services / 'social' facilities and the existing scale and character of each village on an individual basis. Therefore it is not considered appropriate to allow the 'completion' of <b>any</b> of the village plans within the current plan period i.e. 2009-2015.</p>  |
| <p><b>Tier 6 - Sraids</b></p>  <p>4.6 Sraids - Lusmagh (2006)</p>   | <p><b>Sraids</b> are very small, sometimes embryonic rural settlements with a very small amount of development to date. Generally, a Sraid will have a loose gathering of existing development (primarily housing) and some public services i.e. a church, school, shop etc. The concept of Sraids evolved during the preparation of the County Development Plan 2003-2009 as a measure to be implemented in order to act as an alternative to piecemeal development activity; to <b>provide alternatives</b> to the sporadic provision of "one-off" houses in the countryside; and also to address rural de-population and decline in certain areas, in particular within the identified traditional rural settlement network.</p> <p>Given the Sraids' existing and envisaged scale and size, <b>development envelopes are delineated and no formal zoning has been applied.</b> Residential and other development which is appropriate in scale and character of the Sraid concerned, and subject to servicing, amenity and environmental limitations will be encouraged within the development envelope. Sraids are considered as being a sustainable form of development in the longer term, and will create a greater sense of place and community in these areas. They will help stabilise and consolidate population levels, in an orderly and sustainable fashion, within those rural areas which have experienced a decline. They will also act as a planning tool to ensure that small settlements which come under pressure for development do not become over-developed.</p> | <p>Population growth at a small scale and service provision growth over the medium to long term is envisaged. Permitted growth will be very small scale and on an incremental basis and must be reflective of the very rural nature of these settlements. Single units or very small-scale residential development (generally on individual sites for servicing) and small-scale commercial or employment-generating development will be encouraged. Growth will be very carefully monitored and managed. However <b>it is not intended to 'complete' the development envisaged within the delineated development envelope within a short timeframe.</b> Rather, a medium to long-term timeframe for their completion is considered more appropriate at this stage. It is therefore not considered appropriate to allow the 'completion' of <b>any</b> 'sraid' envelope within the current plan period i.e. 2009- 2015.</p> |

**Tier 7 - Open Countryside**



The tier **open countryside** encompasses all lands located outside of the identified settlements. This Council recognises the need to sustain rural communities through the provision of housing coupled with the countryside's agricultural function and other rural landuses for example forestry, tourism and rural enterprise and development. The Council continues to facilitate local growth which sustains rural communities within Offaly whilst managing development pressures and protecting the countryside's scenic amenities and environment.

An appropriate balance between rural housing in areas which are experiencing de-population and other rural areas which are under strong pressure for development of housing, in particular those rural areas situated close to towns and the Greater Dublin Area is necessary. There is a general presumption against urban generated housing<sup>2</sup> in rural areas which are located within the county's pressure areas (Refer to Section 4.4).

Population growth at a moderate scale is envisaged, having regard to identified need in accordance with Council policy and development standards.

<sup>2</sup> a) **Rural generated housing** needs arise for people who are an intrinsic part of the rural community by way of background or the fact that they work full-time or part-time in rural areas. As a general principle, subject to good planning practice in matters of location, siting, design and the protection of environmentally sensitive areas and areas of high landscape value, rural generated housing needs should be accommodated in the areas where they arise.

b) **Urban generated housing** in the open countryside is development driven by urban areas.

#### 4.4 Housing in the Open Countryside

This County Development Plan recognises the largely rural nature of County Offaly, the tradition of rural living and the requirements of people connected with the rural area and/or with an identified need to reside in the open countryside.

The previous County Development Plan (2003-2009) incorporated a policy to manage the provision of housing in the open countryside, providing a more restrictive approach to development within the Edenderry and Tullamore electoral areas and a more flexible policy being applied to the Birr and Ferbane electoral areas. This approach reflected the differential in development pressures over preceding years.

National policy, increasing environmental awareness and the identification of development pressures at sub-county level has resulted in the progression of the Planning Authority's policy on rural housing need. The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government's Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines (2005) recommend that Planning Authorities distinguish between areas within their functional area which are under 'strong urban influence', 'stronger rural areas' or 'structurally weaker areas' etc. The guidelines contain a map for rural area types within Ireland, which, as the guidelines specifically acknowledge, set out these area types in a "broad brush manner" and are an indicative guide only.

The Guidelines advise each Local Authority to undertake an analysis and adopt a more localised policy, as applicable to its administrative area. It is specified that Development Plan policies must take into account the different housing requirements of urban and rural communities and the varying characteristics of rural areas within each county. Policies must also be grounded in National Policy, other guidance and linked to the County's Housing Strategy.

Offaly County Council's policy formulation on rural housing at sub-county level has had careful regard to the guidelines and is largely based on the following:

- Planning application trends.
- The proximity of the Edenderry electoral area (east of the county) to the Greater Dublin Area, the consequent substantial growth of its urban centres

and the resulting pressure for rural housing in the countryside.

- The pressure for urban generated rural housing within the Tullamore electoral area (largely the 'centre' of the county).
- Continued concern for the strength of the rural areas within the south and west of the county, represented by the Birr and Ferbane electoral Areas. There are 17 DEDs included in the 'Clár' programme within these two areas.
- Analysis in Chapter two, Context and Challenges, has shown that levels of population decline appear to have been largely halted in the Birr electoral area. However these largely positive results are based on the most recent Census (2006) which was concurrent with a period of unprecedented house building and economic growth nationally. Previous census results i.e. 1996-2002 recorded considerable levels of rural population decline in this electoral area. Therefore, it is intended to continue with a less restrictive policy over this plan period, while having particular regard to future census results for future policy formulation.
- Analysis in Chapter 2 has shown that Census 2006 has indicated a trend of small levels of population decline within 11 DEDs in the Ferbane electoral area. These results, coupled with the ongoing restructuring of rural economic activity in this area i.e. less dependence on peatlands as a source of significant employment etc., has informed the Council's decision to continue a less restrictive rural housing policy in this area over the plan period.

The policy (as articulated more specifically by policies P04-16 to P04-21) is therefore to continue a more restrictive approach to rural housing in the Edenderry and Tullamore electoral areas with a less restrictive approach in the Ferbane and Birr electoral areas. This policy has regard to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government's (DEHLGs) 'Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines' (2005), distinguishing between areas under strong urban influence, stronger rural areas and structurally weaker areas and it is considered that this typology is applicable to the various parts of Offaly as described above (by electoral area). Further, the policy is specifically aimed at restricting what the guidelines refer to as 'urban generated housing' whilst prescribing that 'rural generated housing' will be facilitated by way of policy throughout the county.

It is important to note that considerations under the single rural house in the countryside policy represent only one element in the assessment of an application for dwelling(s) in the open countryside. The principles of the development relating to siting, design, environmental, heritage, amenity and traffic considerations, is of paramount importance in the consideration of such development.

Offaly County Council's policy on rural housing is therefore in accordance with the broad objectives on 'sustainable rural settlement policy framework' as outlined in the National Spatial Strategy, whilst also having particular regard to the DOEHLGs 'Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines'. It addresses the need to achieve an appropriate balance between the protection of the open countryside, to retain and strengthen rural population levels and to meet the housing needs of individuals with a connection and/or requirement to live in the rural area. Policies P04-16 to P04-21 state the Planning Authority's specific policies on the provision of rural housing within the county.

#### **4.5 Review and Monitoring Programme of County Offaly's Settlement Strategy**

In order to secure the successful implementation of the county's settlement strategy, the Council will undertake an ongoing review and monitoring programme. Particular reference will be afforded to issues raised in policy P04-01.

This process will involve in particular:

- Analysis of Census data
- Analysis of planning applications decided
- Development trends relating to the Gateway and the remainder of the county

Findings of the Council's monitoring programme will be inputted into the Planning and Economic Development Strategic Planning Policy Committee and the full Council, as necessary and subsequent corrective action will be taken where necessary. In accordance with Section 15 of the Planning Acts 2000 - 2006, a 2-year report on the progress achieved in securing the objectives contained in the plan will be undertaken. It will contain a sub-section purporting to key findings and possible outcomes of this analysis.

In addition, the Council in its Development Management function will have regard to current relevant Ministerial Guidelines where reference is made to appropriate growth levels in urban areas.

## 4.6 Policy<sup>3</sup>

### Overall Settlement Strategy Policy

**P04-01** It is Council policy that future development in Offaly be directed as per its settlement hierarchy, having regard to each individual area's:

- a) Identified role within the region (National Spatial Strategy / Midland Regional Planning Guidelines)
- b) Existing Size
- c) Existing Function
- d) Capacity for Sustainable growth (i.e. growth without detriment to its surroundings, its built or natural assets and/or its character).

Further, it is Council policy to monitor growth patterns **and** the pace of growth within individual settlements and apply appropriate management measures in ensuring compliance with the above.

It is Council policy to strategically prioritise the development of Tullamore as part of the Midlands Linked Gateway. The Council will monitor the growth of the gateway in nominal terms towards the 2020 target of 30,000 persons and also relative to the growth of the remainder of the county and in particular the share of county population attributed to the Gateway and the other tiers after the 2010 census of population.

It is Council policy to implement the 'sequential approach' (i.e. develop from the centre first, then outwards) in assessing proposed housing developments throughout the settlement hierarchy. This relates in particular to Tiers 2 to 5 where management of growth levels is of paramount importance in securing a development pattern and levels in line with the Midland Regional Planning Guidelines. Within this context, the sequential approach is vital to avoid isolated development of outer zoned areas.

**P04-02** It is Council policy to ensure that housing developments both individually and cumulatively are reflective in size / scale of the relevant settlement / area's position within the County's Settlement Hierarchy. In this regard, and without prejudice to other development plan policies or development management best practices, there will be positive presumption for housing developments of the following sizes **or smaller** within each tier, as appropriate:

**Gateway:** 150 houses.

**Large Town:** 80 - 100 houses.

**Medium Town:** 50 - 80 houses.

**Local Service Town:** 20 - 40 houses.

**Villages:** 10 - 20 houses.

**Sraids:** 2 - 4 houses.

This policy is not intended to preclude developers / landowners who have large blocks of zoned and serviced land for development from developing same. In such cases, land blocks should be put forward for development by means of planning applications in a sequential manner. While it is general Council policy to require that developments be linked to each other and to the existing fabric of the settlement by means of roads, footpaths, linked open spaces etc., it is also general Council policy to require that developments **differ in design and layout** while maintaining the overall character of the area in order to achieve interest and variety in the built form and to provide choice to the prospective new or

<sup>3</sup> This Chapter contains the Council's overall policies concerning the county's settlements. Individual settlement plans for each of these towns contained in Volume 2 of this Plan (with the exception of Birr Town, Tullamore Town, Clara and Edenderry – separate plans) comprise further, more specific policies as applicable to the settlement concerned, in accordance with overall policy. In relation to the villages and sraid settlements, this chapter contains a very significant amount of overall policies which concern all village and sraid settlements within the county. These will assist in clarifying the Council's policy concerning these settlements.

second hand house purchaser. It is policy that directly provided Local Authority housing or housing delivered in co-operation with the Council will adhere to the above principles also.

Further, it is Council policy to require a **mix** of dwelling types in housing developments across the settlement hierarchy, in particular to encourage as **part of** housing developments the provision of:

- Small numbers of single storey houses to give choice to persons with enhanced accessibility needs i.e. the elderly and persons with a disability.
- Detached dwellings on large sites subject to adherence with general principles regarding the efficient use of building land (i.e. such dwellings may form part of a mixed density development).
- Individually serviced sites, particularly in Local Service Towns and villages, subject to submission with the planning application, of a detailed template(s) for the general design, scale, position, materials, boundary treatment etc. of the dwellings so as to avoid uncoordinated development of settlements.

All new development shall have such a mix of house types such as not to closely overlook the curtilage of existing dwellings.

Planning applications comprising multiple units (i.e. 5 or more in a village, 30 or more in a Local Service Town, 40 or more in a Medium Town, 50 or more in a Large Town) will be required to submit a social infrastructure assessment, which demonstrates the facilities available to adequately service their proposed development. This should include details regarding the following facilities as applicable to the subject settlement's identified tier within the county's settlement hierarchy i.e. education, childcare, health and other services such as shops, post offices, recreational facilities etc.

**P04-03** It is Council policy to **ensure balanced growth and development** across the county in accordance with the settlement hierarchy e.g. ensuring that settlements within the west and south of the county can help counterbalance the development pressure in the east of the county.

#### Midlands Linked Gateway

**P04-04** It is Council policy to ensure that Tullamore can support the level of growth (socially and economically) to underpin its role as part of the 'Midland's Linked Gateway' and as a 'driver' of development in sustaining strong levels of economic growth and prosperity in the county and region as a whole.

#### Large Towns

**P04-05** It is Council policy to ensure that population growth of Large Towns is **appropriate in scale** within their identified role in the settlement hierarchy and to apply appropriate management measures in ensuring that such growth and/or pace of growth is appropriate and in compliance with the above.

**P04-06** It is Council policy to appropriately **manage** through the development management process, the population growth of the Large Towns (i.e. Edenderry and Portarlington) situated in the **east** of the county.

#### Medium Town

**P04-07** It is Council policy to ensure that population growth of Clara is **appropriate in pace, scale and diversity of uses and services** within its identified role in the settlement hierarchy. The Council will apply appropriate management measures in ensuring that such growth and/or pace of growth is appropriate and in compliance with the above. In particular, that such growth and/or pace of growth is without compromise to the growth of the 'Linked Gateway'.

#### Local Service Towns

**P04-08** It is Council policy to **conserve, enhance and strengthen** the Local Service Town structure within the county ensuring that the appropriate scale of growth is supported. It is general policy in favour of increased population growth,

however the Council will apply appropriate management measures in ensuring that such growth and/or pace of growth is appropriate and in compliance with the envisaged role of Local Service Towns.

**P04-09** It is Council policy to have regard to the particular role of Ferbane, identified in the Midland Regional Planning Guidelines as a 'Key Service Town' within the county.

### Villages

**P04-10** It is Council policy to **conserve, enhance** and **strengthen** villages within the county, in accordance with their existing size and character.

**P04-11(A)** It is Council policy to promote the consolidation of the village structure throughout the county.

**P04-11(B)** It is Council policy that expansion of villages will be in a planned manner and in line with existing infrastructural capacity. Development may also be permitted where it will facilitate the provision of the necessary infrastructure provided that it is in accordance with policy, in particular concerning scale, design and in accordance with the established character of the village.

**P04-11(C)** It is Council policy to restrict single and/or multiple large scale developments which would lead to rapid completion of the village within the development boundary, and in excess of the village's capacity to absorb development in terms of physical (i.e. water, wastewater, surface water, lighting, footpaths, access etc.) and social infrastructure (i.e. schools, community facilities etc.).

**P04-11(D)** It is Council policy that in appropriate locations within villages, particularly within the 'other settlement land' zoning, proposals for houses on large sites will normally be accommodated. This is to create a viable alternative to "one-off" houses in the open countryside, and may be achieved by the provision of single houses, groups of fully serviced sites as stand alone developments or as constituent parts of other developments.

**P04-11(E)** It is Council policy to ensure that development in villages will both reinforce existing village commercial centres and facilitate the expansion of or provision of new mixed-use and employment-generating development. Lands zoned as 'other settlement lands' and in particular within the 'core' areas as indicated on the zoning plans will be considered favourably for such developments, subject to site suitability and normal planning requirements. This will bring variety and vitality to the settlements, providing a wider choice of services and will help to create a 'centre' with a greater sense of place.

**P04-11(F)** It is Council policy to ensure that villages are developed in a phased manner and within the boundary indicated on their respective plans.

**P04-11(G)** It is Council policy that there will be a presumption in favour of small developments of differing scale and character rather than larger, more homogenous urban scaled housing 'estates'. (For example 3 separately designed 10-house developments would generally be preferable to a single homogenous suburban style 30-house development). This approach would be more likely to create a sense of individualism and differing aspirations to each development. However, these smaller developments must not be solely "stand alone" developments. They must demonstrate how **they fit in with and contribute to the overall development of the village** (roadlines, services etc.) as indicated on the relevant plan. Where an individual landowner or a number of interests propose to combine and provide the necessary framework and infrastructure as an integral part of their proposals, and it is demonstrated that this is in line with the greater good of the area, the Council would be prepared to examine such a proposal and consider it on its merit. Such a proposal may necessitate a 'master plan' for the landholding(s), clearly indicating potential development areas, obvious distinct character areas and vehicular, pedestrian, open space and services linkages to / through the remainder of the landholding or adjacent landholdings / developments.

**P04-11(H)** It is Council policy to ensure that developments have regard to and help to maintain and reinforce the form and character of the village concerned in terms of design, layout, finishing details, boundary make-up, landscaping etc. The resulting development shall be high in quality, appropriate in scale and designed in a style suitable for its location and context. In particular, roads which open up significant tracts of land relative to the existing size of the settlement should be designed by suitably qualified professionals with strong Landscape Architecture and design input. Boundary treatments, footpaths and lighting should reflect the village's rural character.

**P04-11(I)** It is Council policy to require that applications for developments of 8 houses or more in Villages will be accompanied by a design statement, prepared by a suitably qualified professional. Such statements should indicate the reasons for choosing the design(s), the design cues from which ideas were taken and how it is considered that the design(s) chosen are compatible with their immediate environs. Regard should be had to the context and cues provided by the existing development and to the Council's policy to maintain attractive, appropriately scaled and well designed rural settlements.

**P04-11(J)** It is Council policy to ensure that developments, where possible, retain valuable man-made and natural heritage features within their boundaries or environs, and are designed in a manner which is sympathetic to the natural or heritage aspect concerned, (for example: attractive stands of trees, mature hedgerows, stone walls, protected structures, archaeological sites, street furniture, recorded monuments etc.).

**P04-11(K)** It is Council policy to promote the formation / consolidation of a central meeting place or similar open space within the Villages where practicable. It is also policy to facilitate by land identification, reservation or other means, the development of / extension of community facilities within the Villages.

**P04-11(L)** It is Council policy to monitor development activity within each village boundary to ensure that growth is completed in an orderly and sustainable manner.

### Sraids

**P04-12** It is Council policy to **conserve and enhance the open countryside**, providing a **balance** in accommodating rural generated housing needs and protection of the open countryside.

**P04-13(A)** It is Council policy to promote the development of Sraids to assist in satisfying rural generated housing needs within a structured but low density settlement, as a viable **alternative** to the development of "one-off" houses in the open countryside, remote from services etc. It is also policy to promote Sraids as limited opportunities for housing for urban dwellers who would not satisfy "local need" criteria but who aspire to live in a rural environment.

**P04-13(B)** It is Council policy not to permit developments which would lead to rapid completion of the Sraid development envelope, i.e. in a period considerably short of the medium to long term time period envisaged, and in excess of the settlement's capacity to absorb development in terms of physical (i.e. water, sewerage (if applicable), lighting, footpaths, access etc.) **and social** infrastructure (i.e. schools, community facilities etc.).

**P04-13(C)** It is Council policy to facilitate the provision of appropriately scaled commercial development within the Sraids. This may include limited new mixed-use development, including employment generating development, childcare and other appropriate commercial development. This will bring variety and vitality to the settlement, providing a wider choice of services and assist in creating a 'centre' with a greater sense of place.

**P04-13(D)** It is Council policy to encourage the development of the Sraids in an incremental and plan-led manner, with the emphasis on small scale developments over a medium to long term period.

**P04-13(E)** It is Council policy to provide an estimate of the possible / potential population capacity that each Sraid envelope may achieve in the medium to longer term.

**P04-13(F)** It is Council policy to monitor development activity within each Sraid envelope to ensure that growth is completed in an orderly and sustainable manner and in keeping with the medium to long term timeframe envisaged. In particular, it is policy to ensure that the levels of housing development envisaged by the individual Sraid plans (which will be primarily single house development but with **limited** scope for small-scale multi-house developments) takes place in a balanced pattern throughout the Sraid over the plan period.

**P04-13(G)** It is Council policy that there will be a general presumption against proposals of more than 4 units in any one application as such multi-house estate type developments would lead to “completion” of the Sraids at a faster rate than suggested, leading to premature overdevelopment. Larger scale development (i.e. >4 units) **may** be considered in exceptional circumstances but only if it can be demonstrated that: (a) it would add significantly to the area’s sustainable development; (b) it is reflective of the Sraid’s character and envisaged growth rate; (c) it will be strictly phased by the developer. These Sraid plans contain a **presumption in favour** of the small scale and incremental development of Sraids and a **presumption against** urban scale and style housing schemes within these designated settlements.

**P04-13(H)** It is Council policy that:

- a) Most opportunities for residential development in Sraids will take the form of frontage / linear development and that sites will be a minimum of half an acre in size.
- b) It shall further be the policy of the Council where in the limited cases that in-depth development is appropriate in a Sraid, that houses shall be detached only and that densities shall not exceed a maximum of 3 to the acre. This maximum density shall be determined having regard to the area’s character, density and to the residential amenity of proposed and existing development.
- c) In circumstances where a street already exists or is appropriate and in the interests of protecting and enhancing the character of the Sraid, it may be appropriate to allow a street form.

**P04-13(I)** It is Council policy to ensure that developments have regard to and help to maintain the form and character of the Sraid concerned. The resulting development shall be high in quality, appropriate in scale and designed in a style suitable for its location and context. In particular,

- a) Proposed new access roads through previously undeveloped lands should be designed to create a ‘rural’ rather than an ‘urban’ impression. Roads which open up significant tracts of land relative to the existing size of the settlement should be designed by a suitably qualified professional with strong Landscape Architecture and design input.
- b) Boundary treatments, footpaths and lighting should reflect the Sraid’s rural character.
- c) Where a Sraid (or part of) is characterised by interesting building layouts, plans and designs, these should be retained and complimented, rather than replacement with more ‘standardised’ development styles to ensure a varied character is maintained and to avoid typically suburban standardised developments.

**P04-13(J)** It is Council policy to require that applications for developments of 2 houses or more within Sraids will be accompanied by a Design Statement, prepared by a suitably qualified professional. Such statements should indicate the reasons for choosing the design(s), the design cues from which ideas were taken and how it is considered that the design(s) chosen is/are compatible with their immediate environs. Regard should be had to the context and cues provided by the existing development, and to the Council’s policy to create attractive, appropriately scaled and well designed rural settlements.

**P04-13(K)** It is Council policy to ensure that developments within Sraids, where possible, retain valuable man-made and natural heritage features within their boundaries or environs, and are designed in a manner which is sympathetic to the natural or heritage aspect concerned (for example; attractive stands of trees, mature hedgerows, stone walls, protected structures, recorded monuments etc.).

**P04-13(L)** It is Council policy to promote the formation / consolidation of a central meeting place or similar open space within each Sraid settlement, where practicable. It is also policy to facilitate by land identification, reservation or other

means, the development / extension of community facilities within the Sraids and to protect and enhance existing community and recreational facilities within Sraid envelopes.

**P04-14** It is Council policy in the case of Village and Sraid settlements located within pressure areas in particular, as defined under Policy P04-16 to closely monitor growth and pressure for growth and to implement appropriate management measures in controlling development in accordance with existing policies at both national, regional and local level.

## Individual Housing in the Open Countryside

### P04-15 Housing Policy - Open Countryside

It is Council policy that notwithstanding compliance with policies set out hereunder, quality, design, siting and other environmental considerations will be of paramount importance in the assessment of each individual application for a dwelling in the open countryside. In considering applications for single houses in the open countryside, regard shall also be had to all provisions contained in this plan under the separate chapter headings.

### P04-16 Single Rural House Policy for Areas of Special Control within the Open Countryside

It is Council policy that within the areas of the open countryside identified as being:

- Under development pressure / urban influence outlined on Map 4.4
- Other areas of special control<sup>4</sup> outlined on Map 4.4
- Outside the areas pertaining to policies P4-17 (Aquifer Protection Zones),

A **positive presumption** will be given towards a new single house for the **permanent occupation** of an applicant who falls within either of the 3 categories below **and meets** the necessary criteria.

#### Category 1: Local Rural Persons

The following **3 criteria** arise in assessing applicants under this category:

The applicant must come within the definition of a 'Local Rural Person'

and

the proposed site must be situated within their 'Local Rural Area'

and

the applicant must have a 'Local Rural Housing Need'

a.) A 'Local Rural Person' (applicant) is a person who was born within the local rural area, **or** who is living or has lived in the local rural area for a minimum of **5 years** at any stage prior to making the planning application. It includes returning emigrants seeking a permanent home in their local rural area.

b.) The 'Local Rural Area' for the purpose of this policy is defined as the area generally within a **8km** radius of where the applicant was born, living or has lived. *The rural area excludes those settlements listed within Tiers 1-2 of the County Settlement Hierarchy inclusive, which are urban settlements i.e. Gateway, Large Towns.*

c.) An applicant who satisfies a 'Local Rural Housing Need' is defined as a person who does not or has not ever owned a house in the surrounding rural area and has the need for a permanent dwelling for their own use.

#### Category 2: Persons Working Fulltime or Part-time in Rural Areas

Such persons shall be defined as persons who by the nature of their work, have a functional need to reside permanently in the rural area generally immediately adjacent to their place of work. Such circumstances will normally encompass

<sup>4</sup> 'Other' Areas of Special Control – These include National / International Conservation Designations (i.e. Special Protected Areas / Special Areas of Conservation, Natural Heritage Areas), Areas of High Amenity and Aquifer Protection Zones.

persons involved in full-time farming, horticulture or forestry as well as similar part-time occupations where it can be demonstrated that it is the predominant occupation. Other cases will be dealt with on their own individual merits having regard to the intended spirit of the policy. In each case the applicant must not already own or have owned a house in the surrounding rural area.

### **Category 3: Exceptional Health Circumstances**

Having regard to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government's *'Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines'* (2005), special consideration shall be given in limited cases of exceptional health circumstances - supported by relevant documentation from a registered medical practitioner and a disability organisation proving that a person requires to live in a particular environment or close to family support, or requires a close family member to live in close proximity to that person.

#### **P04-17 Single Rural House Policy within Aquifer Protection Zones**

Having regard to the need to protect the county's valuable groundwater supplies from contamination, it is Council policy to only consider for established residents within these zones, a permanent single dwelling where it can be demonstrated that:

1. There is no reasonable alternative within the remainder of any of the family landholding outside the protection zone.
2. The applicant does not already own or have owned a house in the surrounding rural area, except in exceptional circumstances.

#### **P04-18 Single House Policy for areas outside Areas of Special Control within the Open Countryside**

It is Council policy that within the areas of the open countryside identified as being:

- NOT under Development Pressure / Urban Influence outlined on Map no. 4.4
- NOT other Areas of Special Control outlined on Map no. 4.4
- Outside the Areas concerned by policies P04-17 (Aquifer Protection Zones)

There will be a presumption in favour of applications for single houses by persons from within or outside these rural areas who seek a permanent dwelling and will therefore contribute to the social and economic well being of the area. It is the policy of the planning authority to prohibit speculative development in these areas. Any application for a single permanent dwelling must be made in the name of the person for whom it is intended and a condition will be attached to any permission granted requiring them to occupy it in the first instance.

#### **P04-19 Replacement of Habitable Houses in the Open Countryside**

In the case of the proposed demolition of a substandard dwelling and its replacement with a new single dwelling, it is Council policy to favourably consider proposals subject to normal environmental, siting, design, and layout considerations. In such circumstances, the provisions of policy P04-16 (i.e. 'Local Need' requirement) will not apply. Notwithstanding the above, it is Council policy to protect the county's vernacular building stock from demolition where restoration is a feasible option.

**P04-20 Reuse of Existing Structures as Dwellings in the Open Countryside**

It is Council policy to favourably consider all applications (i.e. 'Local Need' requirement will not apply) for the refurbishment and/or reuse of older building stock subject to the following criteria.

- The external walls and roof are substantially intact.
- The design of the proposal does not erode the siting and design qualities of the building which makes it attractive in the first instance.
- The size of any extension takes account of the siting and size of the existing dwelling.
- The design, scale and materials used in the refurbishment and/or extension are in keeping and sympathetic with the existing structure.
- Mature landscape features are retained and enhanced, as appropriate.
- That normal planning considerations i.e. road safety, amenities, public health, design etc. shall take precedence over the 'principle' of encouraging such development.

**P04-21 Refurbishment of Derelict Dwellings in the Open Countryside**

It is Council policy to encourage the sensitive refurbishment of existing dwelling houses which have fallen derelict subject to the following criteria:

- That normal planning considerations i.e. road safety, amenities, public health, design etc. shall take precedence to the 'principle' of encouraging such development, and in particular that for such developments alongside or directly accessed from National Roads, that the provisions of Policy P13-04 shall apply. (Refer to Chapter 13, Transport and Accessibility).