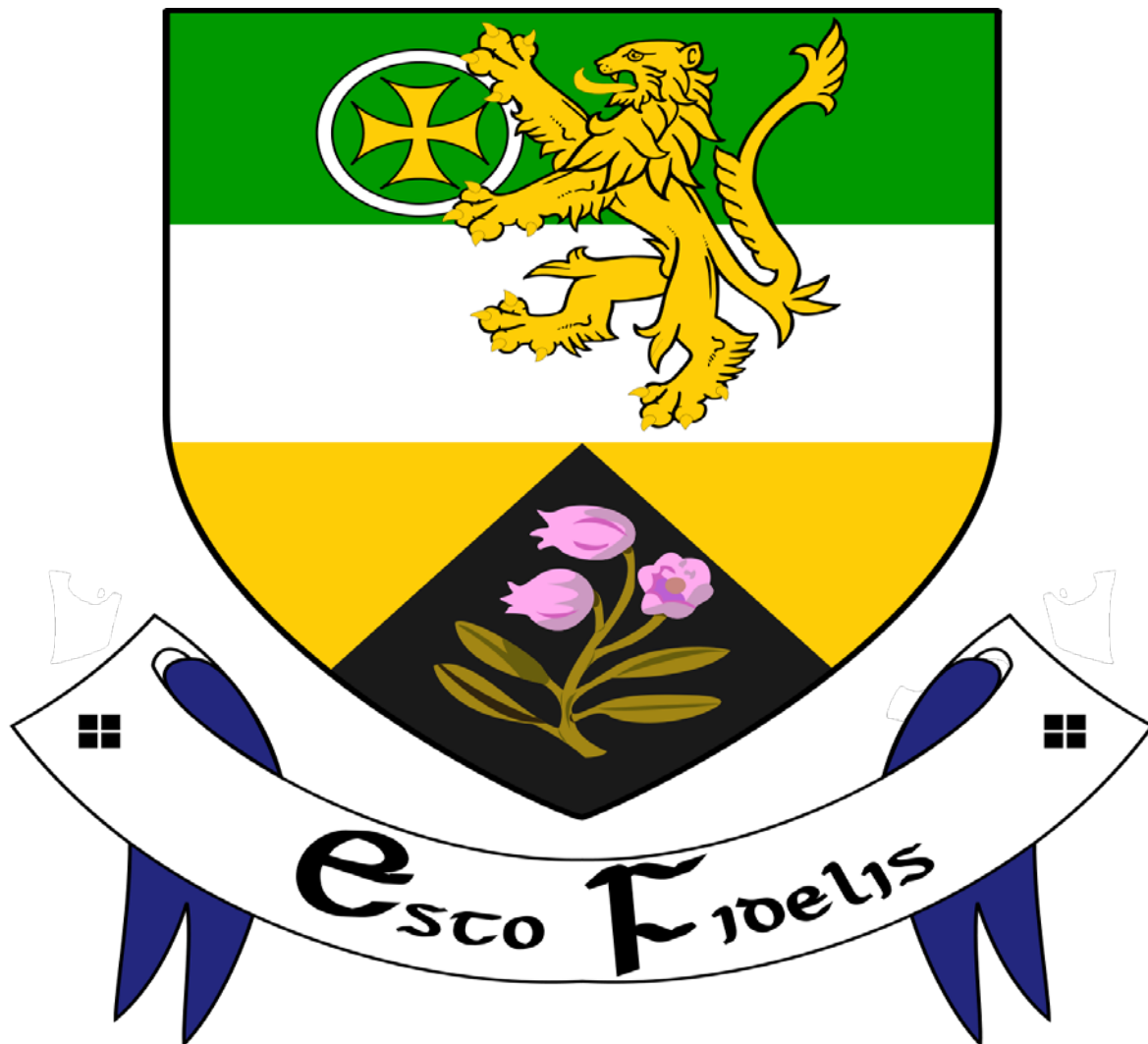


Dear Sir/Madam, As Chairperson of the Laois Offaly Social Democrats I submit to you a copy of our party members submissions regarding the Offaly County Development Plan Draft. As a party we acknowledge and fully welcome the comprehensive report which has been compiled by Offaly County Council, and we very much hope that some of our recommendations may assist in the final publication of the future Offaly County Development Plan. My sincere thanks on behalf of all our members. With best regards,
Cathal Nolan Chairperson Laois Offaly Social Democrats

Social Democrats

Laois Offaly Social Democrats - Draft Submissions



Laois Offaly Social Democrats - Offaly County Development Plan

Draft Plan Submissions - Laois Offaly Social Democrats

The pre-draft Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027 was amended by elected members and agreed to be the Draft Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027 on 13th July 2020.

The draft plan comprises the following:

[Chapter 1 - Introduction](#)

[Chapter 2 - Core Strategy, Settlement Strategy, Housing Strategy](#)

[Chapter 3 - Climate Action & Energy](#)

[Chapter 4 - Biodiversity and Landscape](#)

[Chapter 5 - Economic Development](#)

[Chapter 6 - Tourism and Recreational Development](#)

[Chapter 7 - Retail & Town Centre Strategy and Regeneration](#)

[Chapter 8 - Sustainable Mobility & Accessibility](#)

[Chapter 9 - Social Inclusion, Community and Cultural Development](#)

[Chapter 10 - Built Heritage](#)

[Chapter 11 - Water Services and Environment](#)

[Chapter 12 - Land Use Zoning Objectives](#)

Chapter 13 - Development Management Standards

Laois Offaly Social Democrats - Offaly County Development Plan

Chapter 1 - Introduction

The following submissions in accordance with the public consultation phase of the forthcoming Offaly County Development Plan (OCDP), have been carefully discussed and finalised following internal consultations of the Laois Offaly Social Democrats party over the past number of months. The individual submissions included focus upon a wide ranging number of chapters and subchapters in a manner similar to that of the original OCDP first draft.

As a party we would first and foremost like to commend Offaly County Council on your production of a highly comprehensive and professional report, which has served as an invaluable template for the provocation of further thought and discussion amongst the Laois Offaly members of the Social Democrats Party. In particular we are impressed with the councils commitment towards sustainability, addressing the impacts of climate change, the move towards a more renewable economic model of production, and the various mechanisms designed to increase investment and rejuvenate our frail town and village centres.

The following submissions focus largely upon our parties belief that within the existing draft a number of chapters could be a little more ambitious, with specific targets and metrics being incorporated so as to serve as a guideline in terms of progress over the coming timeline of the OCDP. In particular, the party wishes to express our desire to see a greater emphasis on providing quantifiable targets regarding the cutting of carbon emissions, specific tourism initiatives, the mechanisms which will be explored in promoting greater shared economic development within the county and the overall improvement of our transport services.

What follows is an overview of the submissions, in varying levels of detail, some of which are highly specific, while others are more general areas of focus which we believe the council may direct its attention before the conclusion of the public consultation process. Also accompanying the submission is an attached executive summary, which briefly details the various submissions in a more user friendly manner, serving as an introduction to the further detail provided in the main body of our online submission. Again we wish to thank you for your excellent plan, and we very much look forward to hopefully seeing some of our submissions being included in the office OCDP before it's final publication.

Chapter 2 - Core Strategy, Settlement Strategy, Housing Strategy

The Laois Offaly Social Democrats seek Offaly County Council to continue its work with vacanthomes.ie to identify vacant, abandoned and derelict properties within County Offaly and to publish a list of the same. We further seek a commitment to bringing a minimum of 50% of

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such properties back as into use by the end of this plan as social and affordable housing either by the County Council, Approved housing bodies or by facilitating their sale between the property owner and developers and running a campaign to invite property owners to sell such properties to the Council and using compulsory purchase orders where necessary.

We also ask that this is given priority over the approval of Part 8 planning permission for new schemes of houses.

The Laois Offaly Social Democrats seek Offaly County Council to make a commitment for the duration of this plan to abolish the 100% refund on Rates for commercial properties in an attempt to bring empty commercial properties back into use. We also ask that a list of such properties be published and a strategy to bring them back into use be implemented with a commitment to bringing 50% back into use by the end of this plan. We further ask that where a planning application for the building of a new property is made that the Council, possibly through the LEO office, investigate whether a suitable empty premises already exists with the county and to engage with the planning applicant regarding same.

Below are examples of empty commercial premises in Clara and Tullamore.

Clara - Erry



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Tullamore - Puttaghan

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The Laois Offaly Social Democrats would also like to see accommodation for the elderly similar to that of McAuley Place in Naas. The premises below might be a suitable location.

Clara - Kilnabin (Housing for the elderly)



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The Laois Offaly Social Democrats support re-wilding and the planting of wildflower gardens both on roundabouts as has been done in Laois and other suitable areas within our towns and villages (Please see example location below). We would also like to see the inclusion of “Floating Islands” similar to what has been done in the Blessington Street Basin in Dublin.

Tullamore - Spollenstown (In front of the Rugby Club)



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The Laois Offaly Social Democrats ran a competition to ask the citizens of Co.Offaly for their Offaly Good Idea. Below are a list of some of those ideas which we would like to see included in the County Development Plan.

Offaly Good Idea

1. Greenway & Blueway for Offaly
2. Urban gardens on vacant council land
3. Free car park for people working in Tullamore
4. Rewilding more large areas, and lots more small places.
5. Become a Tree Hero County (plant and protect existing native trees. Stricter licencing for felling - And landowners compelled to replace with native trees; to plant four where they felled one.

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To encourage shopping within the town we would like to see the multi story Car Park below brought back into use. There is very limited on street parking on the main street at present.

Parking - Main Street, Tullamore Town



Climate Action and Energy

1. Climate Governance and Structural Amendments

1.1 Commitment on achieving Carbon Neutral County

In light of the declaration of a Climate Emergency by the previous government, and subject to indisputable evidence contained within the IPCC reports on behalf of the UNFCCC we the Laois Offaly Social Democrats call upon Offaly County Council to declare a Climate Emergency within the framework of the finalised county development plan. By formally declaring a Climate Emergency Offaly County Council will be joining in the footsteps of numerous nations, regions and cities across the globe in a unified voice in highlighting what is the greatest challenge facing humanity.

Having declared a Climate Emergency a strategic commitment on achieving carbon neutrality, with key carbon emission deadlines, Offaly County Council, under the remit of the county development plan can actively prioritise the transition of Co. Offaly from a carbon intensive region into a carbon neutral, and ultimately a net carbon sink. As a county we are fortunate to have been provided with natural resources, in the form of widespread peatlands, above average forest cover and aquatic environs, which have the capabilities to ensure Offaly can emerge as the first Irish county to pursue a clear pathway towards carbon neutrality.

The pathway towards achieving carbon neutrality is indeed complex, and incorporates far reaching aspects of society. However, despite remaining beyond the scope of the present county development plan, the transition towards a carbon neutral Offaly must include the restoration of existing cutaway bogs to become net carbon sinks, renewable energy expansion, creation of additional renewable energy and forestry industries, community led renewable energy projects, increased investment within electric vehicle infrastructure, district heating initiatives and the establishment of a specialised higher education institute specialising in renewable energy and hydrogen power technologies.

At a global level the pursuit of environmental sustainability and carbon emission reductions has emerged as a key variable in the attractiveness of regions, with many global industry leaders actively seeking to establish businesses within such regions as opposed to what may be viewed as climate lagards. Likewise the financial industry, both domestically and internationally, have also begun a process of transitioning away from the accumulation or funding of brown asset projects, and instead pursue sustainable financing options for environmentally sustainable projects and investments.

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Amid such a global change it becomes of paramount importance that Offaly is seen as a county which is a national leader in seeking solutions to our climate emergency, and whom fully support a process of attaining ambitious carbon emission reductions with a view to achieving full carbon neutrality by 2040, a decade ahead of the present administration's national carbon neutrality pledge of 2050. Such ambition would place Offaly at the very head of the pack in regards to championing the transition towards a more sustainable economic model, one which can ensure economic prosperity returns to the region via the energy revolution at which Offaly must embrace. It is through the consideration of the above information that Laois Offaly Social Democrats actively call upon Offaly County Council to include a Climate Emergency declaration, and to establish a clear pathway towards carbon neutrality.

1.2 Annual Carbon Reporting Via CDP Network

In order to commence upon a path towards climate neutrality there is at first a precedent that we must truly understand Offaly's annual carbon emissions structure and identify the key pillars through which we can pursue rapid carbon emission reductions. To truly tackle a problem, whether as individuals, regions, or states, we must first ascertain a true understanding of the scale and the nature of the challenge which we face. While there are existing statistics at a national level, on a local level there is little or no existing evidence, therefore making it virtually impossible for local governments to significantly address the issue of carbon emissions.

To overcome this difficulty, and to take the second step on the road towards climate change neutrality, the Laois Offaly social democrats call upon the Offaly county council to include within its county development plan a commitment to engage with and become a member of CDP, the world's leading non-profit organisation who engage with companies, cities, regions and states in identifying their present carbon emissions through the disclosure of information, before actively engaging with the city, company, region or state in establishing pathways through which they can significantly reduce their carbon emissions, thereby reaching carbon neutrality.

Aside from ensuring that Offaly solidifies its position as a national leader in the pursuit of achieving carbon emission reductions and the associated benefits regarding investment and ESG metrics associated with such a process, actively becoming a member of CDP will afford local representatives and Offaly county council with the ability to determine its carbon footprint, to avail of a significant body of information and guidance in the field of achieving carbon emission reductions, as well as engaging with various other cities, regions and states across the globe who can cross correlate, share information and assist in their overall quest to address the challenges of climate change.

At present Offaly would be joining a network of 110 states and regions, who represent over 650 million people, 13 trillion euros in global GDP and who collectively produce over 3.8GtCO₂e per annum. Existing regions and small cities of a comparable size include the Northwest Territories in Canada, North Karelia in Finland, Jamtland in Sweden, and Basel-Stadt in Switzerland, to name but a few. The pursuit of achieving carbon neutrality through membership of CDP is shown to

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significantly increase FDI and generate internal economic growth within the geographical area of the city, region or state. Ensuring Offaly's emergence as the first county within the island of Ireland can and would lead to further investment within the county, as well as attracting domestic talent and significantly enhancing the counties ESG metrics.

1.3 Creation of Offaly Climate and Sustainability Committee OCSC

Pursuing such ambitious policies require an extended network of experts, local representatives, senior council staff and the engagement of the wider community, all adhering international best practice in a non-cyclical environment of continual marginal progression. Internationally this has been best observed through the creation of international co-operative structures such as the UNFCCC, the IPCC, UNEP and NATO, to name but a few. Nationally Ireland has been at the forefront in the establishment of inclusive governance on issues relating to climate change. This has been observed through the establishment of Ireland's Climate Change Council and the students assembly initiative. In order to achieve carbon neutrality within Offaly then its a paramount importance that such inclusive and holistic approaches are pursued.

The third step in addressing climate change and energy issues within the confines of the county development plan therefore include a commitment to establish the Offaly Climate and Sustainability Committee, the OCSC. The creation of the OCSC would provide the council, local government, industry leaders, independent experts, and local citizens with the opportunity to continually shape, renew and enhance the counties climate and energy policies throughout the present time frame of the ensuing county development plan. Building upon the foundations of declaring a climate emergency and actively engaging with the CDP in disclosing the carbon emissions of Offaly, the establishment of the OCSC is the next necessary step in enhancing Offaly's reputation as a climate leader, as well as providing a mechanism for driving change at a local level.

While the exact makeup of such a body would remain within the control of the county council and its elected representatives, Laois Offaly Social Democrats would actively encourage representatives from the following local and national organisations to be included within the committee. Bord na Mona, Coillte, Department of Agriculture, Department of Climate Action, ICARUS climate department NUI Maynooth, UCD Energy Institute, Environmental Protection Agency, Waterways Ireland, elected members of Offaly county council, Offaly county council engineer and environmentalist. Such a wide ranging panel of experts, supported by Offaly's local governance

2 Renewable Energy

2.1 Wind Energy

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The skyline of Offaly has changed considerably over the past decade, with the dawning of the renewable age wind turbines have been erected across the county, but especially so in the east Offaly local electoral area of Edenderry. In total Offaly has a current stock of some 36 wind turbines, which together account for a rather small share of the overall national wind energy budget of 2.63 percent. While stiff local opposition emerged to the concept of wind turbines across the county the overall reaction to their establishment once erect has been rather welcoming. Laois Offaly Social Democrats actively welcome the councils assessment of wind energy within the county and look forward to the future establishment of further wind turbine farms across the county, provided that appropriate public consultation and distancing from existing residential homes are maintained.

Future wind energy farms are planned across the county, however the overwhelming majority are again located within the Edenderry local electoral area. This quantity of wind turbines within such a geographically small area is a slight concern for residents of the area, however we believe these concerns can be alleviated through the advent of community energy initiatives which we propose at a later section. Offaly's overall wind energy capacity will increase from 98.5 M/W at present to 336.3 M/W under the proposed development of wind energy farms in Cloncreen, Yellow River, Derrinlough and Moanvane. The continued development of wind energy within the county will play a critical role in the creation of new employment, economic prosperity and the continued reduction of Offaly's carbon emissions.

There are however a couple of areas where Offaly County Council can actively engage with private energy companies seeking to establish wind farms within the county. One such area would ensure the protection of views of Croghan Hill which may become obstructed on account of the development of the Yellow River wind energy farm near the Westmeath Offaly border. A second concern is the ecological impact to protected migratory swans who frequently return to Offaly's wetlands during the late Autumn and early winter from Arctic regions. While climate change is of paramount importance, ecological destruction is an equally significant global issue which should also be enshrined within the present county development plan.

In Summary the Laois Offaly Social Democrats recommend that all proposed wind turbines are fitted with wildlife sensory technology which significantly slows the rotation of the turbine blades when birdlife is detected approaching the vicinity of the windfarm. Such technologies exist within Germany's fleet of wind turbines, and serve as a means to protect migratory birds who have difficulty identifying the rotating blades at fast rates, but who have no difficulties in identifying the rotation of the blades at slower speeds. Such technologies have the potential to ensure the safety of protected bird species within the county, which actively improves the social and ecological value of Offaly's regenerating wetlands.

2.1 Solar Energy

Laois Offaly Social Democrats welcome the inclusion of solar energy within the daft Offaly County Development Plan and wish to see a continued emphasis on the use of solar energy across the

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county. As an area which receives above average hours of sunlight in an Irish context, Offaly is well suited for the development of solar farms, especially so given the geographical advantages Offaly has, namely its relatively low lying topography and the aforementioned sunshine hours. Disused peatlands under the ownership of Bord na Mona have been considered for the installation of solar farms across the county, which is encouraging due to the available lands and the potential returns from such developments.

At present the majority of solar installations across Ireland are on a micro scale, associated mostly with the installation of micro-generating solar panels installed on newly developed or existing properties or commercial properties. The installation costs are becoming increasingly affordable due to the continued development of the technology, the increased uptake in micro-generating solar panels, and due to generous grants from SEAI and other governmental agencies. Taking these two factors into consideration Laois Offaly Social Democrats call on the following recommendations to be considered as concrete proposals to be considered for the County Development Plan.

Laois Offaly Social Democrats call upon Offaly County Council to ensure that a precondition for the development of all social and affordable housing schemes under the remit of the council, as well as private housing developments, is the installation of micro-generating solar panels to be used either for the provision of electricity or for the purposes of providing heating energy. Such a precondition ensures the creation of a greater stock of energy efficient and self-sustaining homes across the county, helping to further reduce carbon emissions within the county, producing more resilient housing stocks, and ensuring that the transition to a low carbon economy is indeed a just transition which is accessible to all citizens.

Laois Offaly Social Democrats also call upon Offaly County Council to engage with SEAI and other governmental agencies to ensure the upgrading or development of existing council and public owned properties to ensure that by the termination of the newly proposed county development plan all existing and proposed county council buildings, as well as public buildings such as libraries, schools and other service buildings are powered by renewable energy sources. Powering the social and educational needs of the county are an important step in creating a carbon neutral Offaly. All additional energy produced by the installation of micro-generating solar or renewable energy sources can then be resold to the national grid, with the funds being reinvested within a further expansion of the county's renewable energy stock.

2.2 Geothermal Energy - Municipal Heating

Laois Offaly Social Democrats again welcome the inclusion of geothermal energy within the scope of Offaly County Councils development plan, and further compliment the council of the wide ranging variety of renewable energy projects considered. Geothermal energy has already been

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included as a key component of energy mix's in numerous international cities and towns. The most famous example is of course Reykjavik, Iceland where the entire capital city has provided its heating needs through geothermal heating, as well as 26.5 percent of the nation's overall electricity needs, and 86 percent of the country's social and business heating needs. Iceland's existing geothermal geology is particularly well suited to the use of geothermal energy and heating, with the country having a long established history of availing of its natural resources as far back as the 1930's.

Recent geological surveys have been conducted across the island of Ireland to determine the suitability of geothermal energy heating and energy production. The results have been particularly encouraging, with large swathes of the country being deemed highly suitable or suitable for the development of geothermal heating and energy. Indeed from a local perspective Offaly is particularly well suited to the development of scalable municipal heating systems via the exploitation of the county's natural availability of subsurface geothermal energy. The geological survey of Ireland has produced maps on the topic of geothermal energy suitability with sufficiently high levels of geothermal potential occurring in the vast majority of both Laois and Offaly.

Focusing on Offaly for the purposes of this report we can determine that the county is particularly well suited to the development of municipal scale heating and energy projects, given that the majority of the county is either classified as suitable or highly suitable. Indeed upon closer inspection we can identify that the towns of Edenderry, Portarlinton, Tullamore, Kilcormac and Birr are all considered highly suitable locations for geothermal energy. The only areas of the county in fact which are deemed not suitable are those areas over an elevation of 300 metres on the Slieve Bloom Mountains, as well as some of the higher elevated lands near the Tipperary border.

Laois Offaly Social Democrats recommend that Offaly County Council commence a feasibility study on the potential of developing district heating projects across the towns of Tullamore, Birr and Edenderry, with potential providers, businesses and residents across the county entering into a consultation phase regarding the potential pros and cons of such an ambitious energy project. The development of such a project at a municipal level would be truly unique in the Irish context, and again would ultimately benefit the wider community through affordable home heating and energy needs, as well as increasing ESG metrics and continually moving the county ever closer towards the primary goal of the county development plan which is to ensure the development of sustainable economic growth within the county while increasing environmental and climatic stability.

2.3 Energy Storage Facilities

Offaly, as emphasised within the contents of the draft county development plan, has an extensive network of energy connectivity infrastructure, in the form of high voltage power cables which connect the greater Dublin region to key energy infrastructure sites across the country. Irish energy usage as a national percentage is expected to increase by 19.75 percent by the year

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2028, with 73.3 percent of the total increase in Ireland's energy consumption being the result of an increasing number of energy intensive data centres which have been built in the greater Dublin area and which will continue to be built over the coming decade. The topic of data centres will be discussed in greater detail at a later section.

As a county with a rich history of energy production, energy innovation and with an abundance of infrastructure and skilled workers in the field of energy production and management Laois Offaly Social Democrats welcome the development of battery storage facilities in Shannonbridge and Lumcloon and the proposed development of an additional battery storage facility in Coolcor Rhode, which is built on the previous site of the Rhode ESB power station which was demolished between 2000-2003.

Given the proximity to existing power transfer lines, ease of access to existing facilities, and the proposed development of the county's largest wind turbine farm at the Yellow River site, Laois Offaly Social Democrats call upon the county council to encourage the location of an additional battery energy storage facility to be considered on the grounds of Bord na Mona's existing Derrygreenagh facility on the Offaly Westmeath border north of Rhode. Such a facility will increase Offaly's capacity to store locally produced renewable energy, help to maintain a balance in Ireland's overall energy usage and to assist in creating local employment during the production, operation and maintenance phases.

2.4 Data Centres - Energy Consumption

Ireland has become the undisputed capital of European data centres with over 50 of the world's leading internet companies choosing Ireland as a key strategic base for their data processing centres. This particular title is one with which the previous and present administration look set to maintain, with 10 further data centres already planned and an additional 20 such data centres proposed. While the creation of such data centres creates some economic opportunities, and as official government policy suggests the physical infrastructure of a data centre increases a company's likelihood of choosing Ireland as a potential home for a European hub of their operations.

Such data centres come at a significant cost however, with each data centre requiring the same equivalent energy of powering 10'000 homes with a constant supply of energy. Government projections indicate that by the year 2028 a staggering 30 percent of Ireland's entire energy needs will be devoted to the constant powering of data centres. Indeed of the increase in energy consumption projections between now and 2028 some 73.3 percent of the increases in energy consumption are projected to be as a result of data centres. As reported in The Irish Times and The Guardian newspapers this places Ireland on a collision course between choosing to pursue a path of attracting global tech giants or between reducing the nation's carbon footprint and avoiding significant fines from EU institutions, as well as undermining the carbon emission and energy consumption savings made through great sacrifice in other sectors.

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Under the proposed county development plan Offaly County Council actively welcomes and promotes the idea of using Offaly as a potential base for the future development of data centres. Such proposals however would bring a rather limited increase of no more than a couple of dozen employees per development, with a significant strain upon existing energy needs occurring as a result of the proposed data centres. Such developments in their current format are in direct opposition to the premise upon which this county development plan is proposed. The creation of potentially numerous energy hubs would result in a drastic increase in the overall energy consumption and carbon footprint emanating from the county. The direct economic opportunities under the current format are outweighed by the negative aspects of increased energy consumption and greater carbon emissions. However there is a way in which such data centres can be created in a more sustainable manner.

Laois Offaly Social Democrats call upon the council to enshrine within the county development plan that in order for the granting of planning permission of energy intensive data centres within the county that the data centres must be powered entirely by purchased renewable energy or be in a position to generate its own renewable energies within the immediate vicinity of the data centre. Such legislation already exists at numerous data centres across the globe and in our estimation should also become a prerequisite within the Irish State. This policy has already been enacted at numerous data centres in the US, Chile and the Netherlands. If Offaly is to meet its goal as a carbon neutral county then such developments must be conducted in a wholly responsible and environmentally friendly manner. The development of the Yellow River wind farm for example could provide the required energy for such a data center with possible site locations available within the locality that provide direct access to existing energy infrastructure and transportation in the form of the nearby Dublin-Galway motorway system.

3 Land Use Policy - Flood Strategy

3.1 Afforestation

Afforestation is considered a key strategic policy in the sequestration of carbon from the atmosphere and is presently the most cost effective and readily available tool we have in combating excess carbon emissions within the atmosphere. Globally afforestation is seen as a key policy in offsetting carbon emissions, with some 7 billion trees required annually if we were to offset our present global carbon emissions. Ireland too has sought to use forestry initiatives as a means of combating climate change. Ireland has a relatively poor 12 percent of its landmass covered by forestry, with the government targeting a rather meagre increase to 18 percent tree cover by mid century. On a European scale Ireland's percentage of forest coverage is one of the lowest at just 11 percent. Even assuming Ireland were to meet its target and achieve 18 percent forest coverage by 2050 this would still leave Ireland significantly below the median figure, and again struggling as one of the least forested countries in Europe, certainly in comparison to Finland which has over 72 percent of its landmass covered by forestry.

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There is however great concern that Ireland is already falling well short of its projected afforestation statistics due to a combination of government inaction, licensing issues and a failure to adequately reimburse those who pursue afforestation of private agricultural lands. Recent statistics provided by various tree nurseries who were required to destroy millions of their stock as a result of underutilized stock estimate that instead of the 8'000 hectares of forestry projected to have been planted per year the true figure of planted forests in recent years has been little over 2'000 hectares, just 25 percent of the anticipated afforestation levels. Such statistics are indeed rather disturbing, especially when one looks at the rate of deforestation, or the increased rate of consumption of mature forests and the meagre impacts of newly planted forests. Indeed a closer look at government forestry statistics would suggest that Ireland's afforestation rates have if anything fallen as opposed to have increased.

Offaly as a county has a forested area of some 15 percent, still above the national average however given the rural nature of the county and its past and future potential the area could well be considered underforested. Until the British plantations of Laois and Offaly in the 1500's Offaly was a predominantly forested area, however by the 1650's just over 2.5 percent of Ireland's landmass was covered by forests, reaching a record low of 1.2 percent in 1928. Although Offaly's level of forested area has increased by over 13 percent, largely due to the widespread afforestation of the Slieve Bloom Mountains of the 1950's and 1960's, the overall total area of forestry planted per year is nowhere near the required level, and as department of agriculture statistics allude to these figures have fallen since the turn of the millennium. In 1999 a total of 654 hectares of land were planted in forestry, which is a peak for the time series provided between 1997 and 2016. Offaly has seen its forestry totals decrease to just 136 hectares of forestry being planted in 2016.

Given the present state of afforestation within the county, and the existing potential to not only support existing jobs within the forestry sector but also to help create an increasingly active and environmentally sensitive forestry industry Laois Offaly Social Democrats call upon Offaly county council to follow through on their pledged support of the forestry sector and support the industry through whatever means necessary. We also call upon the council to consider the usage of urban miniature forests, which is a concept that has flourished in recent years as a result of the research of Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki. The process involves taking brownfield sites and planting them with densely covered native forest species which speeds up the regeneration process of the forests. Such initiatives could be undertaken throughout the various towns and villages of Offaly where existing brownfield sites exist. The forests have significant benefits including the capture of carbon emissions, increased biodiversity, and significant health effects in reducing air pollution and the psychological benefits of seeing greenery within an urban environment.

3.2 Peatland Restoration - Carbon Sinks

Achieving carbon neutrality in Offaly depends entirely upon the rewetting of our peat bogs and ensuring that our peatlands return as carbon sinks rather than carbon sources. Ireland is one of the most densely covered countries when it comes to peat, and within Ireland Offaly is the most

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heavily covered county in terms of the percentage of landmass being covered. The extent of the peatlands of Offaly and the volume of carbon that's stored within our bogs equals the same amount of carbon that would be stored in a tropical forest the size of the country of Luxembourg, while nationally the amount of carbon being stored in Irish peat bogs is equal to the size of a tropical rainforest that covers the entire landmass of Austria. In essence within Offaly we effectively are the custodians of a densely populated tropical rainforest, except the effects, much like our awareness, remains hidden.

The hidden potential in Offaly's bogs to become net carbon sinks is very often overlooked, and when comparing peatland surfaces to other carbon sinks such as tropical rainforests the results are indeed very surprising. Hans Joosten, a partner at the Mire Centre at Greifswald Germany, a world leading centre on the study of peatlands, has stated how the inclusion of peatland environments in international debates and national carbon emission reports is alarmingly low. Joosten gives the example of how a 15cm layer of peat over one hectare sequesters more carbon than a one hectare mature tropical rainforest. Indeed globally, despite only covering 3 percent of the world's land surface, peatland environments sequester and store more carbon than the entire stock of standing trees. Having made ourselves aware of such enlightening information one could easily reach the conclusion that in a national context Offaly is perhaps home to the Amazon of Ireland.

Laois Offaly Social Democrats welcome the county development plans draft proposal which includes references to the protection of the natural state of Offaly's peatlands the rewilding of previously industrialised peatlands. However, we do share some concerns that the overall focus in relation to peatlands may be directed towards replacing one industrialised landscape with an albeit more environmentally sustainable industrial landscape. Carbon sequestration and the rewilding of peatlands are at their most effective when the landscapes remain in an entirely natural state, without the erection of large scale industrial or solar wind farms, and without the plantation of non-native conifer plantations which serve to further dry out peatlands rather than rewetting them, leading to renewed carbon emissions rather than sequestration. We therefore request that the county council focus upon establishing a strategic overview in association with Bord na Mona on the creation of designated industrial sites and designed natural sites, with a minimum of 65 percent of peatlands being rewilded as opposed to reindustrialised.

While industrial scale peat harvesting is almost at an end in the peatlands of Offaly domestic turf cutting remains a well practiced, widespread, social and economic activity that occurs annually, and has done so for hundreds if not thousands of years. While the number of those relying entirely upon peat as their primary source of winter heating fuel has dropped significantly over the past decade or so there remains a large volume of Offaly's peatland that is harvested annually for the production of domestic heating. Those who harvest and burn turf as a primary way of heating their homes do so for the economic benefit and the sense of tradition and familiarity that occurs annually. Banning such activities would ultimately lead to a substantial backlash from a significant portion of rural Ireland, with such a ban perhaps leading to a present increase in the area of peatlands destroyed annually. Instead a more sustainable and just transitional approach must be

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created as a means to engage with private turf cutters rather than imposing what they would view as unjust and heavy handed policies from those who are out of touch with rural life in Ireland.

Laois Offaly Social Democrats instead would propose that a Peatlands Commission be established through the support of local government, the Department of Climate Action, the Department of Agriculture, Bord na Mona, EPA, and the various turf cutters of Ireland. A public consultation should be established which listens to the concerns of those who continue to burn turf as a primary fuel source, while also providing education of the negative impacts associated with such activities. Ultimately initial solutions would appear to arise through the awarding of grants or gradually reducing annual payments to those who burn turf as a primary fuel source, and for whom without turf would likely enter into a state of fuel poverty, which ultimately costs the state more through illness and overburdening of health services due to increased frequencies of flues and health issues as a result of cold and increasingly damp homes. A just transition, which has always been supported by the Social Democrats and by Offaly County Council is the only way in which we can ensure the protection of our peatland environments while also ensuring public support for the process of eliminating peat harvesting remains as widespread as possible.

3.3 Flood Defence

Offaly is a county which suffers from perennial flooding as a result of an overburden of winter precipitation for which various river systems are unable to manage. Climate change has already resulted in a temperature increase of 1 degree Celsius over the past century, and which has led to an increase of severe weather events across Ireland, and an increasingly volatile atmosphere. The latest scientific projections indicate that temperatures will rise to between 2.5-4.1 degrees Celsius higher than pre industrial levels by the end of the present century leading to widespread devastating atmospheric phenomenon becoming a new normal across the world. Offaly won't escape this increased volatility with one of the major risks being an increase in severe flooding events, particularly along the River Shannon, River Brosna, River Barrow and through areas of Tullamore. Such occurrences are likely to increase both in terms of their frequency and their severity as a direct result of climate change.

The impacts of climate change will have significant implications for Offaly County Council's Flooding Strategy. At present the projections of Offaly's county council are based upon historical impacts of the likelihood of future floods occurring, which traditionally has served the council well with regards to delivering effective planning regulations, however this current form of flooding regulations will become increasingly outdated as we progress through the present century. Anthropogenic climate change will lead to the occurrence of floods which are beyond the remit of our historical record and therefore are simply not catered for within the current flooding model. Already during the first two decades of the present century significant flooding has occurred widely across the county, with record flooding occurring during 2009 and again in 2014 and 2020. The frequency and intensity of winter flooding of the River Shannon will continue to increase and intensify as a result of a warmer world, with significant flooding also likely to occur throughout the River Brosna, River Barrow and smaller river systems throughout the county.

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Laois Offaly Social Democrats therefore call upon Offaly County Council to undertake a full climatological analysis using professional climate change consultancy groups and/or university professionals upon the likelihood of Offaly's future flooding risk based upon variant temperature projections of between 1.5, 2.0 and 4.0 degrees Celsius. Having an overview of the future impacts of Offaly's flooding risk in a warming world will allow for better planning regulations which will remain robust and enforceable throughout the coming century. Under the present system buildings which are afforded planning permission in the present based upon historical records and the likelihood of flooding based off those historical benchmarks will be overcome by future flooding as a result of climate change due to the inaccuracy of flooding models which have failed to take climate change into account. The investment in such a study is likely to lead to a more robust approach towards flooding within the county, and will ensure that homeowners, businesses and landowners are protected against the impacts of future climate change related flooding.

Laois Offaly Social Democrats also call upon Offaly County Council, under the remit of our already proposed Climate Change Committee, to establish a domestic flood defence warning system which can take timely and proactive action capable of limiting the extent of flood damage. Aside from the direct dredging of various river systems which are prone to perennial flooding, the establishment of a flood defence warning system would lead to an advanced preparedness of locals living within the affected area, allows time for county councils to mobilise response teams and flood barriers, and in extreme cases can allow for the mobilisation of National flood assistance crews and army personnel for the provision of sandbags and other crisis management provisions. Similar systems are already in place across the UK and other European countries, which serve as effective mechanisms for the monitoring and managing of severe flooding events. Such a proposal could be extended to cooperate with other county councils along the River Shannon to establish a common framework and collaborative effort in the creation of an effective and timely early warning system.

4.0 Transport

4.1 Electric Vehicles & Infrastructure

Offaly is very much a rural county with scattered developments or small towns and villages being the primary form of settlements across the wider area. Being such a rural community invariably results in a higher than average percentage of journeys within the region being undertaken via privately owned cars. This use of privately owned vehicles in itself is not a significant issue, however when we consider that over 83% of all journeys within the county are done so using privately owned cars, with the vast majority of privately owned cars in the county being traditional fossil fueled powered vehicles. Therefore Offaly, in accordance with our aforementioned outlined desire to see a significant reduction in carbon emissions, must either see a significant investment in developing public transportation, or community led transportation services, or the development of electric vehicle infrastructure.

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Therefore, Laois Offaly Social Democrats call upon Offaly County council to develop a county transportation strategy, with a primary goal of the strategy being to reduce the level of carbon emissions from transportation within the county. As previously touched upon there are numerous mechanisms whereby carbon emissions can be reduced while also improving the quality of transportation services. Such potential solutions to our present transportation issues include the development community led transport solutions such as organised car pooling, community bus and taxi services, or increased investments at a national level in local transportation services. A secondary strategy which focuses upon reducing the need for long distance commutes via the provision of remote working office hubs or the ability to work from home due to the increased quality of broadband services can also achieve the desired result of reduced carbon emissions.

Biodiversity & Landscape

Economic Development

Tourism:

The 'Experience Economy'

Offaly has the massive potential in 'Ecotourism'. Lough Boora is an excellent example of how a former industrial site can be transformed into a tourist attraction. People are now looking for an 'Experience' whilst on holidays and it is vital that those charged with responsibility for growing this sector identify the unique traits and the broader potential of the county's towns and villages.

The overall idea is that businesses must create memorable events for their customers, and that memory itself becomes the product: the "experience". More advanced experience businesses can begin charging for the value of the "transformation" that an experience offers. This, they argue, is a natural progression in the value added by the business over and above its inputs.

Since the idea was first mooted, experience industries have begun to grow across the world, and Ireland is no exception.

Experiential activities from outdoor pursuits (hiking, mountain biking etc) to festivals and events have grown as part of the broader 'experiences' sector.

The environmental, health and well-being impacts of this will be obvious. Less obvious is the potential identity-building opportunity offered by the greenway. Banagher can follow from the successful implementation in other similar-sized villages (i.e. Newport in Co. Mayo) that have branded themselves as 'bike-friendly'. The offer of plenty of bike parking, signage and dedicated safe cycle paths throughout the village would be a wise investment. Doing this will not only help

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capture the lucrative tourism revenue but also encourage a broader subscription locally to bike transport.

People in a locality want to improve their area. It is incumbent on those in local government to include local people in any decision-making process. With the increase centralisation of power during the last number of years with many feeling that all decisions are made at a government level. Local democracy has been the poor relation and needs to be re energised/reactivated. Good governance is vital for the functioning of our villages and towns. Governance always requires openness and transparency. Openness ensures broader subscription and interest in local projects, while transparency ensures trust in the structures. All of this is important in generating a broader collective view that people who live in an area have a say in decisions that will have an impact on them, their family, and their neighbours.

Retail Town Centre Regeneration Strategy

When it comes to the prospects of raising internal funds the councils position is rather limited by the overarching structure of centralised monetary policy in the Republic of Ireland. However, the local commercial rates is one such tool which has been continually used by the council as a means of generating income to be spent on shared infrastructure within the county. Currently a major issue in many of the larger towns and villages of the county is the increasing trend for our urban centres to become derelict or rundown as a direct result of increased commercialisation on the periphery of towns and villages in the form of large scale commercial premises.

The Laois Offaly Social Democrats actively call upon the county council to explore the option of developing a progressive scale on commercial rates within the county, whereby businesses in the traditional heart of the community would pay reduced rates, whereas those located or seeking to locate on the outskirts or periphery of our towns and villages will be charged an increasingly large sum. This provides a clear monetary incentivisation for small and medium enterprises to relocate to more central positions within our towns and villages, thereby helping to regenerate economic activity within the town centres.

Such policies are desperately needed as some of Offalys towns and villages have recorded the highest total of vacant commercial properties within a central urban area anywhere in the country. Indeed Edenderry has recorded the highest level of vacant commercial property of any town in the country, with over 80% of commercial spaces lying idle as of 2018. Such figures are indeed deeply concerning, and certainly stand in the way of the council's plans to redevelop brown site regeneration as opposed to the seeking of generative projects on ever expanding greenfield sites.

Sustainable Mobility

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Wellness Way

As a county Offaly is in many ways blessed by its rural landscapes which affords immense opportunities for recreational activities such as walking, hiking, cycling, kayaking and boating. Further still the Grand Canal splits right along the centre of the county from east to west, passing through various towns and villages such as Edenderry, Rhode, Daingean, Cappinur, Tullamore, Rahan, Pollagh, Ferbane, Belmont and Shannonbridge. While plans exist for the development of the Grand Canal Greenway and Blueway, it could be argued that the full potential of the Grand Canal as a local amenity remains unfulfilled. One particular mechanism which could be utilised for the further development of the Grand Canal would be the creation of wellness ways through the towns of Edenderry, Daingean, Tullamore, Pollagh and Shannonbridge.

Wellness ways are public walking tracks which incorporate the traditional benefits of walking/hiking routes, however, they also include elements of mental training exercises which are clinically proven to reduce stress, provide increased mental clarity, reduce physical tension, promote greater engagement and assist in numerous medical conditions which are increasingly common in an accelerating world. Wellness ways may also be expanded to include physical exercises such as incorporating relatively affordable freestanding structures such as pull up bars, wooden benches for specific movements and balancing exercises. Again the health benefits are numerous, with significant bodies of peer reviewed journals indicating the benefits for communities which develop such resources.

Laois Offaly Social Democrats therefore actively encourage Offaly county council to consider accessing the feasibility and implementation of such wellness ways along stretches of the Grand Canal, especially so in the aforementioned town lands of Edenderry, Daingean, Tullamore, Pollagh and Shannonbridge. Promotion greater usage of such facilities not only boosts the overall wellbeing and mental benefits of the community in which the ways are created, but they can also serve as an additional local attraction which can be publicly accessed by all visitors and or citizens living in other areas of the county. At a time when we are all becoming increasingly aware of the need to protect our mental health the creation of numerous wellness ways across the county would send a very positive signal regarding the councils interests in the promotion of our overall wellbeing.

Social Inclusion, Community & Cultural Development

As a county Offaly has one of the highest percentages of non-Irish nationals per head of population of any county in Ireland. As such Laois Offaly Social Democrats feel as though a series of inclusive activities celebrating the diversity of Offalys present population would help the harbour greater feelings of community and social togetherness. As a county which has a long standing tradition of being directly affected by outward migration, especially so during the 1980's, Offaly people are acutely aware of the challenges that face those who have decided to relate their lives to the Irish Midlands in search of new opportunities and financial security.

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Some of the proposed activities which the council could include are as follows. On the county councils website a Polish version of the site may be made available as a certain smaller percentage of the population have poorer literary skills in English. On specific national holidays the national flags of Poland, Lithuania and Latvia could fly side by side with the Irish tricolour outside the council buildings and on other public buildings as a sign of common support for our international neighbours. National festivals celebrating the uniqueness of our international community in Offaly could also be held, demonstrating some of the national cuisines, recreational and cultural activities of the represented countries within the county.

Built Heritage

Laois Offaly Social democrats recommend a programme to collate a written inventory of built heritage sites in the county. The aim of this programme would be to assess any conservation needs and catalogue important heritage structures in the region. Maintaining and protecting building structures of historical interest can feed into a general programme of the county's heritage development and tourism potential. An inventory of such structures also can assist local historians in compiling historiographies, which in turn, generate a wider interest in the local area history and heritage.

Built heritage is an important aspect of the social fabric and networks of local communities. However, due to the often delicate nature of such structures, vigilance is required to maintain and protect such sites from environmental damage and intrusive development, which have the potential to harm the integrity of historical sites. Hand-in-hand with an inventory, should be a programme of conservation, which includes a yearly assessment of sites on the inventory. This programme should be carried out diligently and sensitively. Following on from that recommendation, there should also be an emphasis on tourism promotion of such sites, incorporating trails and information points.

Water Services & Environment

Land Use Zoning Objectives

The "*Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027: Draft Stage Chapter 12 Land Use Zoning Objectives*" states that the purpose of this classification of zoning "is to protect, provide and allow expansion of a wide range of different community facilities, civic facilities and social services ranging from education and health facilities to places of worships, community centres

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and childcare facilities. Ancillary facilities such as dedicated open space or sports facilities will normally be facilitated within this zoning objective.

The Social Democrats Laois Offaly supports a change of zoning for the lands known as 'The Esso Pitch' located directly behind the Applegreen Service Station on Wilmer Road Birr from its present classification as an Open Space to a classification of Community/Educational.

It is vital that a Primary Care Centre is delivered to the population of Birr Town and the surrounding areas without any more delay and this piece of land is in a suitable location for this facility. A change in zoning will allow the owners of this site to expedite the delivery of a Primary Care Centre which when completed will facilitate the return of the towns 'Out of Hours' Doctors service.