

Review of County Development Plan Climate Action and Energy County Offaly has the opportunity to develop its economy and contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions through sustainable energy production. Transition to a low carbon and climate resilient society will require the phasing out of industrial and small-scale peat harvesting for energy and horticultural use and the use of peat to heat homes. This needs to happen alongside the creation of sustainable jobs to replace those lost in peat production. The midlands region has been included by Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Richard Bruton, in the Platform for Coal and Other Carbon Intensive Regions in Transition. This initiative, along with the decision by Offaly County Council to access funding from central government to help local communities, including those affected by the winding down of peat production, is welcome. While Bord Na Mona is to cease peat production for energy use by 2030 it is to continue production of peat for horticultural use beyond that date. In tackling climate change peat left untouched in bogs will have greater financial value than extracting it for energy or other uses. The value of our bogs in mitigating against climate change is now quantifiable in financial terms. Incentives and retrofitting schemes need to be widely available so that homeowners can switch to renewable energy sources. Information needs to be disseminated and models of best practise set up to show how the transition can be made. People should have the opportunity to learn from public buildings within the county which are already using the latest technology and best practise in energy efficiency. New schools fitted with energy saving technologies can be good examples. Solar panels on industrial and farm buildings can provide power to the national grid. Small scale privately owned solar units can replace fossil fuels, supplement farm incomes and help sustain rural areas. Many European countries have schemes to support PV panels on houses. Larger solar farms are also needed. The possibility that a large-scale bio-digester may be built to serve a wide area of the county should be considered. A bio-digester can use farm waste, brush from forests, grass and other materials available locally. Solar and wind energy has the capacity to be profitable for investors and landowners. The guidelines for wind and solar need urgent updating. While this needs to be done by government rather than individual local authorities Offaly County Council should be asking for the urgent publication of long promised guidelines. In relation to renewable energy there is inadequate community and local business involvement. In countries where community involvement is greatest the move to sustainable energy use has been much faster and more acceptable. Wind farms should not be clustered in any one area. The east Offaly area has more than enough approved turbines with Mount Lucas Wind Farm

operational and Cloncreen, Yellow River and Moanvane approved. Economic Development County Offaly has a higher concentration of early Christian sites than any county in Ireland. These are well documented in Caimin O' Brien's book *Stories from an Ancient landscape; Croghan Hill to Clonmacnoise*. Apart from Clonmacnoise these sites are under-developed for tourism and some have poor access. The situation with regard to the internationally important Durrow Abbey site continues to be a major cause for concern and a lost opportunity for Durrow, Tullamore and the midlands region. With serious competition from other counties it cannot be relied on that Clonmacnoise will continue to grow or even maintain visitor numbers. Numbers fell from 2016 to 2018. A tourist trail that takes visitors to other early Christian sites and other heritage attractions across the county needs development and promotion. Lack of progress on the Durrow site should not delay the development of all the other early Christian sites, each of which has its own particular attractions. The acquisition by Offaly County Council of the land at the summit of Croghan Hill has been a very positive development and has potential for tourism as a site of geological, historical and an early Christian site of importance. Further initiatives at other sites are needed. The county is too reliant on a small number of well established attractions such as Clonmacnoise and Birr Castle while most of the county benefits little from tourism. The fact that Offaly is easily accessed from Dublin, the country's main population centre should ensure a return from investment in tourism. Offaly needs to capitalise on its tourist potential by promoting attractions that offer visitors a different experience from other counties. This includes our built and natural heritage. There is potential for eco-tourism. Natural Assets. During the term of the last County Development Plan our Natura protected sites and unprotected sites sites of high nature value such as NHA's have continued to deteriorate. The recently published NPWS Status of EU Protected Habitats and Species in Ireland shows the decline. The continued exploitation of peatlands effects water quality through silting of streams and rivers and reduces the capacity of our bogs to contribute to flood mitigation. The Living Bog; Raised Bog Restoration Project has stated that "10% of Irelands emissions come from degraded peatlands". As Offaly has a greater proportion of its surface covered with peat this figure is likely to be higher here. NPWS has recorded the Overall Status of Active Raised Bogs, Degraded Raised Bogs (i.e. capable of being restored to Active Raised Bog status) and Blanket Bog (Slieve Blooms) as Bad. The main pressures are assessed as peat extraction, drainage, afforestation and burning. Transforming our damaged bogs and cutaways from carbon producers to carbon sinks can make a very significant contribution to national emissions targets, a matter that needs to be

highlighted so that government understands the need to financially support the restoration of bogs and wetlands in Offaly. The Irish Times, August 10th 2019 highlighted how climate and changes in agricultural practise are adversely affecting the callows along the Shannon. The NPWS status report assessed 6150 Lowland Hay Meadows as Bad. The deterioration of the Shannon Callows should be acknowledged in the current review. Offaly County Council should be involved in seeking a solution that would support farmers in protecting what was described by The Irish Times as a “midlands jewel”. The proximity to our main tourist attraction at Clonmacnoise and the potential for eco-tourism make it imperative that the decline is halted. Close to Clonmacnoise in a scenic area, there are a range of important habitats such as Mongan Bog, orchid rich eskers, Clorhane Wood, and the callows. Existing country lanes and elevated views could offer visitors an experience which is unique and give them a reason to stay longer in the area. Towns and villages along the Shannon offer other attractions for visitors. The counties hedgerows are in poor condition due to overcutting and drift from sprays which over time weakens and damages them. New hedgerows planted under GLAS cost 11 million Euro but in many cases this progress is negated by the poor management of established hedgerows. As native woodland is scarce with its status assessed as Bad by NPWS this gives added importance to proper care of our hedgerows. Hedgerows are important landscape and boundary features which provide habitat for biodiversity, prevent run-off from agricultural land, allow water to penetrate the soil and store carbon. A code of best practise in hedgerow management should be drawn up by stakeholders, including Offaly County Council. As in the rest of Ireland there are serious declines in bird species. As a breeding bird the curlew is facing extinction while breeding lapwing are being lost from many areas of the county. The Red Grouse is gone from our bogs. Once common White-fronted Geese are now confined to the Little Brosna area where numbers are falling. On the positive side work on halting the decline of the grey partridge at Boora and the Breeding Wader project in the Shannon Callows have been very successful and have led to greater numbers of breeding lapwing, skylark and other species. On a recent visit to Boora, Minister for Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Josepha Madigan, said that lessons learned from conservation work on grey partridge would be used to improve the status of other species. The Swift Survey, an initiative of the Heritage Officer of Offaly County Council, has been very beneficial in bringing experts and amateurs together to record and protect a declining swift population. Conservation of species and their habitats will contribute to economic development in the future through attracting locals and tourists to the improved quality of life and health benefits that unspoilt rural areas with

interesting wildlife can offer. Water quality in our waterways and springs needs to improve. The EPA Water Quality in 2017: An Indicators Report stated that “56% of our rivers are at high or good biological quality with the remaining 44% being at moderate or worse quality”. It found that “The decline in high quality sites is continuing” and said “This trend must be reversed.” In relation to groundwater it stated that “Faecal bacteria were detected at 43% of groundwater monitoring sites in 2017”. A meeting of Westmeath County Council recently highlighted pollution of the Brosna River. Nitrate concentrations are a cause of concern for many water schemes including Geashill where “concentrations appear to have risen gradually over the last number of years”. (Establishment of Groundwater Zones of Contribution, Ballinagar Group Water Scheme March 2017). Quarrying continues to be an important industry. Where peat production has uncovered gravel deposits these should be exploited in order to save what remains of our eskers. Following gravel extraction flooded quarries and bare gravel are quickly recolonised by aquatic and plant life giving them great potential in restoring biodiversity. An example is the Derryarkin/Derrygreenagh area where ponds already have fish life and adjacent areas have breeding lapwing, ringed plover, common sandpiper, skylark and other birds along with wintering Whooper Swans and other wildfowl. Native wildflowers support insect life. Planning conditions relating to future use of quarried lands should allow flexibility as naturally regenerating high nature value habitat will become more important. In Agall an extensive area of former quarry, part of the Screggan Fan, is now rich in plant life including orchids. As the overall status of 6210 Calcareous Grassland (Orchid Rich) has been assessed as “Bad with a deteriorating trend due to ongoing habitat loss” the potential importance of this area for biodiversity should be considered. Without reseeded for farming, such sites should qualify for support under GLAS type schemes, which along with some grazing to prevent encroachment by scrub would provide owners with an income when quarrying ceases. Our locally important wetlands and biodiversity hot spots will become increasingly important in tackling climate change, supporting biodiversity and providing ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, water purification, flood mitigation and air quality. Currently many are neglected. NHA’s such as Pallas Lake should have a management plan in place so that sustainable agriculture, amenity use including fishing, water quality and protection of species are planned for. This is particularly relevant as Pallas Lake has been shown by the GSI to be the source of the Rahan area water supply which is pumped from Agall. Another example is the extensive Annaghmore Lough Fen which has a lagg or untouched natural bog edge (in County Offaly) which is regarded as rare. In Germany and France studies have shown a decrease

in insect numbers of up to 80% in the last 25 years. Our wetlands support insect life that are a vital part of the food chain which sustains other species. The role of our undesignated and locally important sites in sustaining the biodiversity of the county needs to be recognised and reassessed. Information on these sites should be updated. Any further losses will have economic consequences as ecosystem services are reduced and the ability of such sites to contribute to climate change mitigation is also reduced. Whether of international, national, regional or local importance, where the County Development Plan highlights high nature value sites and their importance, such focus is more likely to attract investment from government and the EU. The revised Common Agricultural Policy will give opportunities for improvement in the status of Natura and undesignated sites. Minister Richard Bruton has stated that “In the next CAP 40% of the money will be tied to climate and environment improvements”. Environmental schemes that involve groups of farmers working to an agreed plan where results are rewarded have been successful in the Burren and other areas. This supports rural communities through sustainable agriculture and tourism.