



# Submission to Consultation on Offaly County Council Development Plan 2021-2027

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26 FEBRUARY 2019

## Submission by Elgin Energy to the Consultation on Offaly County Council Development Plan 2021-2027

### Introduction

This submission is made by Elgin Energy in response to the consultation on Offaly's Development Plan 2021 – 2027.

Elgin Energy is an international solar developer with operations in Ireland, UK and Australia. To date, we have energised 21 projects / 230MW including the largest solar farms in Scotland (13MW) and Northern Ireland (46MW). In terms of our development in Offaly, Elgin Energy has secured planning permission for one solar farm and is currently developing four further solar farms in the County. Once energised, these projects have the potential to provide clean, renewable electricity to 20,000 local homes making a significant contribution to Offaly's renewable energy targets. By supporting the development of renewable projects, Offaly County Council can become a leading renewable advocate.

We commend Offaly County Council for calling on public submissions as part of the consultation on the new Development Plan. All development plans must be considered in line with national targets and guidelines. As set out in the Climate Action Plan, the Government has set a target of 70% renewable penetration coupled with replacing coal and peat-fired plants by 2030. Under the National Planning Framework, in its support for the roll-out of renewables and protection and enhancement of carbon pools, the Government stresses the necessity to ensure "that climate change continues to be taken into account as a matter of course in planning-related decision-making processes." In order to achieve 2030 targets a unified national approach supporting the installation of renewable projects expeditiously is imperative.

This submission focuses on three main areas; Climate Action & Energy, Natural Assets and Rural Areas. We have provided answers below to questions relevant to our expertise and experience.

### Climate Action & Energy

#### *How do you suggest we transition to a low carbon and climate resilient society?*

Solar PV is the fastest deployable renewable energy in the world therefore it is best placed to assist Offaly County Council with decarbonisation of its electricity network. Solar PV is low impact and can be located close to demand centres and make use of existing electrical infrastructure. At the end of the project's life, the project is decommissioned and the infrastructure removed and recycled. The land can then be restored to its original use.

By nurturing the development of renewable projects, Offaly County Council can generate additional investment opportunities by attracting businesses that want their operations to be powered by renewable energy, such as data centres.

Producing indigenous renewable energy reduces our dependence on imported energy and increases our security of supply. Irish renewable energy generation in 2017 avoided €278 million in fossil fuel imports, reducing import dependency from 88% in 2015 to 66% in 2017.

The solar industry is set to continue its rate of progress as the cost of solar panels continues to decline, and the technology becomes cost-competitive with conventional generation such as coal and oil. With support from Government and local Councils, Ireland can begin to capitalise on the opportunity provided by solar PV and introduce competitive clean energy to our national grid. The UK has already installed 12,000MW of solar PV. With appropriate policies in place Ireland can meet a similar target.

***What types of renewable energy should be pursued in county Offaly and in what areas e.g. solar farms, wind farms?***

Elgin Energy would like to see solar PV in all its forms being supported and pursued by Offaly County Council. The development of these projects (particularly ground mounted solar farms) is reliant on their proximity to the existing grid network.

Energy storage technologies should also be pursued to support the further development of renewable projects.

***How can this Plan ensure that the principles of Green Infrastructure are implemented in all new developments?***

A key area for Offaly County Council to develop green initiatives is transport. In the Climate Action Plan, the Government set a target of 950,000 electric vehicles (EVs) to be on the road by 2030. To achieve this target, a transition to EVs must be supported primarily with the widespread provision of charging facilities. The result can be a two-fold benefit. By providing EV charging facilities, the number of EVs on the road will increase reducing the number of traditional combustion engine vehicles, and while drivers are waiting for their car to charge, they may visit local shops or attractions bringing revenue to the local area.

Charging facilities can be combined with solar covered carports. This will reduce carbon emissions further by partly powering the charging facility with solar energy.

Conversion of public transport vehicles to EV or hybrid vehicles is another opportunity for Offaly County Council to contribute towards national emission reductions.

The introduction of secure and safe cycle lanes can also contribute to reducing emissions by removing cars from the road and can increase tourism opportunities like the Greenway cycle routes in Dublin, Mayo and Waterford.

## **Rural Areas**

***What ideas have you for the after use of Bord na Móna peatlands on cessation of harvesting & production?***

Elgin Energy recommends that the peatlands remain in place as they play a vital role, as carbon sinks, in combatting climate change. There may be an opportunity to retain peatlands whilst also developing wind farms on site; however, ground conditions are unlikely to be suitable for solar farms.

In relation to Bord na Móna employees facing redundancy with the closure of peat plants and associated operations, the Irish solar industry can provide employment opportunities.

Local employment can be provided both during the installation time and for ongoing Operations & Maintenance.

Offaly County Council could perhaps integrate solar PV training courses through Offaly Work & Learning Centres.

### *How do you suggest we strengthen our rural economies and communities?*

Solar farms offer agricultural businesses the opportunity to diversify income by providing stable revenue streams through rental fees. Once a solar farm is installed it is possible to graze sheep between the rows of panels. In that instance, the land will serve a dual use of clean energy production and sheep farming providing farmers with dual income.



With respect to Elgin Energy's development model, a community contribution is made with each project. To date, in Ireland, this has been paid direct to the local County Council. This contribution can be used to improve the local area and provide tangible results for the local community, as a direct benefit from the solar farm. In the UK, our community contribution has taken other forms such as educational initiatives and facilitating upgrades to local infrastructure and historic monuments. This model can also be applied to the Irish market and we can work with local community groups to identify suitable initiatives.

Small scale solar installations, both rooftop and ground mount, enable farms to begin to decarbonise operations. Small scale installations can be done quickly and can plug into existing electrical infrastructure. Please see our case study of an 11kW ground mount installation on a Kilkenny dairy farm via the link below. This case study demonstrates how quick and easy the installation process is and the role solar PV can play in reducing both emissions and electricity costs on farms.

<https://www.elgin-energy.com/2019/04/02/case-study-11kw-solar-installation-on-kilkenny-dairy-farm/>

### **Natural Assets**

*How do you suggest we protect and enhance Offaly's natural assets of clean water, biodiversity (plant & animal life), landscape, amenity, natural heritage and agricultural land?*

Installation of solar farms can protect and enhance the natural environment by removing land from intensive agricultural use and increasing biodiversity. Elgin Energy includes

several ecological enhancements as part of our site design such as retention of existing hedgerows/woodland, planting of new hedgerows where required, introduction of wildflower mix and in some cases the introduction of beehives/insect hotels. Implementation of these measures leads to increased biodiversity and ensures habitat protection in and around the site. In addition, species-rich grassland naturally develops under the PV panels and surroundings as the land remains fallow.

The introduction of solar farms can lead to the closure of peat-fired plants such as Lough Ree. The re-firing of Lough Ree Power Plant on 23 September 2019 is a major setback for climate change targets and extremely detrimental to the environment. According to [SEAI's Energy Related CO2 Emissions in Ireland 2005 – 2016](#), electricity generation accounted for 75% of peat CO2 emissions in 2016. Increased renewable energy penetration is urgently required to protect and maintain our natural environment. Solar PV can provide immediate solutions.

Adoption of EVs will also benefit the local and national environment as it reduces emissions and pollution resulting in cleaner, safer air.

## Conclusion

As outlined above, Elgin Energy believes that solar PV can form an essential part of the Council Development Plan 2021-2027 and solar farms can provide several benefits to local communities and the wider Offaly County. They can assist Offaly County Council to boost local economies, potentially attract new business, provide beneficial community funding, produce clean renewable energy and make a significant contribution towards national climate change targets.

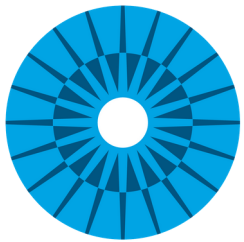
Elgin Energy is happy to provide our insight and experience to assist Offaly County Council in further developing the County Development Plan 2021 – 2027 particularly for Climate Action & Energy objectives. We look forward to continued engagement with Offaly County Council on this matter.

If you would like further information on any details in this document or solar PV in general, please contact [anne.arnold@elgin-energy.com](mailto:anne.arnold@elgin-energy.com). To learn more about Elgin Energy and the work we do, please visit our website [www.elgin-energy.com](http://www.elgin-energy.com).

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