

Tullamore & District Chamber of Commerce

Submission to Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027

Public Consultation Issues Paper – September 2019

Executive Summary

Project Ireland 2040 and the Eastern and Midland Regional Spatial Strategy espouse compact, smart urban growth, to enable the enhanced and effective provision of a range of accessible services, pursuant to the objective of achieving transition to a competitive, low carbon, climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable economy.

It is the opinion of Tullamore & District Chamber of Commerce that the twin goals of transition to a low carbon economy and centralisation of services are necessary, yet apparently in conflict with the sustainability of rural economies and more importantly, communities. Perhaps this assertion is cast in no starker relief nationally, than in north and west Offaly.

It is in this context that Tullamore & District Chamber of Commerce is unashamedly in favour of the prioritisation of Tullamore as a “Key Growth Settlement” and economic engine for the entire County and region.

Towns & Villages Regeneration and Housing

Tullamore & District Chamber of Commerce welcomes the establishment of Urban and Rural Regeneration Funds by the Government of Ireland, under the auspices of Project Ireland 2040. Attractive town and village environments are central to quality of life and sustainable local economies. Unique consumer experiences and accessibility have never been more important than in the context of the burgeoning trend towards online shopping and the ageing economy. Town and village centres should be as attractive, accessible, permeable and user-friendly as possible. Offaly County Council should aim to have accessibility strategies in place for every town and village in the county, if any are to stand a chance of competing into the future. Having said this, we make no apology in saying that the prioritisation of Tullamore’s development as county town, Offaly’s only “Key Growth Settlement”, and driver of the regional economy should be pursued with clarity and vigour.

To this end, and particularly in relation to Tullamore, an accessibility strategy should be developed and acted upon to link long-identified “opportunity sites” for infill/brownfield development within the town environs, with its most trafficked areas. It is perhaps partly down to the non-existence of an accessibility/permeability plan, and action towards local government-provided linkages that these sites have remained isolated and heretofore undeveloped, despite their designation. There is no excuse for linkages such as Tanyard-Roselawn-High Street or O’Connor Square-Church Street-Market Square to have been carried forward from Development Plan to Development Plan without ever having been implemented. Plans for said linkages should be retained, and expanded, to form an overarching permeability strategy, which actually

facilitates sequential development of key sites, pursuant to the goals of the National and Regional plans.

While it may extend beyond the remit of a County Development Plan or indeed Offaly County Council itself to establish such a scheme, it should be noted that very little happened by way of large scale urban regeneration within Tullamore before, or since, the urban renewal scheme of the 1990s which provided for double rent allowance and 10-year rates waivers. While aspects of the system were ill-conceived, opened a good system up to abuse and ultimately led to several cases of unsustainable development, such a scheme should be re-imagined to establish an environment where a proactive and collaborative approach is taken between local authorities and private developers to reverse urban sprawl, and provincial town centres are perceived to be a viable investment opportunity once again.

Proactiveness on the part of Offaly County Council is a theme that will reoccur several times throughout this paper. Project Ireland 2040 opens the door for public private partnerships to be grant assisted. Re-designating "opportunity sites" as "strategic development zones" may be helpful in this regard. We wish Offaly County Council and Waterways Ireland good luck with their joint application to redevelop the Canal Harbour area in Tullamore, but we remind Offaly County Council that they are not precluded from accessing funding for public private partnerships on designated town centre sites. Such a collaborative approach to planning and investment could be extremely impactful. While the harbour area development plan is being devised, it would be desirable for Offaly County Council to remove the boundary wall and buildings on the harbour site as soon as Waterways Ireland move to their new location, in order to open the area up to the community and show people what an asset the harbour is, and could be.

Potential strategic development zones should include Charleville, Durrow, the Harbour, the former Coen's site, the former Carroll Meats factory on Church Road, Kilcruttin, the Train Station and surrounding areas.

Proactiveness on the part of Offaly County Council need not necessarily always be so capital intensive either. Establishing, part-funding and enforcing a town centre colour scheme and acceptable shopfront materials guide could easily create a noticeable improvement in the coherence of the urban environment, and in turn, the experience of the consumer or visitor. A small grant scheme could be established for shop front renewal in line with design guides.

Instatement of digital signage on approach roads to the town would create an opportunity to collect advertising revenue, clean up cluttered signage on approach roads and welcome visitors to the town for events such as athletics, or the Tullamore Show. The town also needs a high quality monument or artistic installation to serve as the unique Instagram shot or selfie moment. Tullamore Chamber fundamentally believes Offaly County Council should appoint a Chief Information Officer to manage all communications, online and traditional media publicity. The simple establishment of a clever designated hashtag for Tullamore for visitors to use could be very useful in promoting the town.

Repurposing of listed buildings needs to be made more attractive and user friendly as a commercial undertaking. It is entirely coherent with national policy for empty or derelict commercial buildings to be repurposed as housing, and for over-shop accommodation to be

made liveable. If commercial units are empty and proving difficult to fill, why should there be development charges incurred in repurposing them as housing, in accordance with national policy? Equally so if such developments are protecting the historic built environment for the next generation to come? Planning restrictions pertaining to such schemes should be relaxed to facilitate what can often be tricky and relatively expensive undertakings.

Economic Development

Offaly County Council will suffer a catastrophic loss in rates revenue with the scaling back to peat harvesting and burning of fossil fuels for energy during the lifetime of this County Development Plan. Some of this revenue will be replaced with renewable energy developments but the next major source of development charges and rates generation needs to be strategically targeted. To this end, the strategic development of Tullamore's capital base and population needs to be planned and executed with urgency. West Offaly, according to Census figures is one of Ireland's most deprived areas even without the loss of hundreds of local jobs caused by the evolution of Bord na Móna and ESB. Tullamore will need to play a major role in the re-training and re-employment of these people. Tullamore's urban population needs to grow by at least 40% within the lifetime of Project Ireland 2040 if it is to compete with other Key Growth Settlements, but even greater gains in population should be targeted to help attract inward investment and to facilitate the growth of existing employers in the town. Tullamore has a significant cohort of highly qualified people commuting to Dublin for work on a daily basis. These people, and especially the people of West and North Offaly, should have the opportunity to access decent employment in their own county, not least for the associated benefit to the environment.

Tullamore Chamber has previously called on Offaly County Council to develop a 100 acre business park facility, and will continue to do so. The IDA business and technology park at Srah is almost full. Serviced sites and advance facilities need to be made available. Offaly County Council should also target major investments such as centralised distribution centres or data centres. Whilst not necessarily massive employers in their own right, the town can benefit from associated employment gains, associated investment in infrastructure, development charges and rates. It cannot come to pass that existing rate payers in the County are simply asked to dig deeper into their pockets to fund the Council's budget in the absence of reduced rates revenue from BNM and ESB.

To facilitate the continued growth and development of Tullamore Hospital as a University Hospital and designated Trauma Centre for the midlands, Offaly County Council needs to push for the upgrade of the N52 to Kilbeggan and between Nenagh and Birr. Offaly County Council needs to push especially hard for the upgrade of the N80 to Portlaoise and beyond to Carlow. Rail access of course needs to be protected and upgraded. Tullamore Chamber notes the recently added provision of an extra evening service from Dublin Heuston serving Mullingar. Tullamore's commuters are crying out for such a service. Offaly County Council should examine the feasibility of upgrading Ballydownan Lane from Geashill to the N80 to facilitate the re-opening of Geashill train station.

Climate Action & Energy

The themes of urban dwelling, accessibility, permeability and local employment dealt with above are equally applicable under this heading. Upgrades of the N52 and N80 and indeed rail services will assist local employers to attract high quality employees from a broader catchment within the region. These candidates may otherwise commute to Dublin, putting pressure on the capital's infrastructure.

Offaly has a strong history in energy generation and we support the continued development of renewable energy generation sites, in the interest of the environment but also in the interest of the Council's ability to supplement its rates base. Local objections to such developments often stem from the perception that developments are not going towards satisfying local energy needs and the community benefit is too small. Community shared ownership schemes are not uncommon elsewhere in the EU. Such shared ownership and community benefit schemes may help to overcome some planning hurdles that have previously been deemed insurmountable.

In line with national policy, Offaly with such a high percentage of land in public ownership, is a prime candidate for reforestation and re-wilding. Environments with significant and mixed sources of locally generated renewable energy, forestry and biodiversity are prime candidates for data centre development.

Rewilding need not be restricted to the rural environment. Urban greening is a very popular theme in modern architecture. More off-street/ back land car parking developments should be encouraged in Tullamore to allow for increased priority towards pedestrians, cyclists, carbon sinks and biodiversity areas.