

[Cycling and the Offaly County Development plan 2021-2027](#)



Substandard bicycle lane heading north over the Kilbeggan bridge in Tullamore. Picture by Dean Brickland 7th September 2019

Executive summary:

The short version of this submission is there is a lot of economic growth we are leaving on the table in our county due to Offaly County Council not taking the bicycle seriously as a mode of transportation for everyday journeys. There are negative impacts caused by health problems which manifest themselves in negatively impacting our economy and our communities. There is the more nationwide issue of carbon emissions fines and the role local authorities can play in mitigating such economic damage. Cycling infrastructure is also more productive than other transport infrastructure such as roads according to the National Cycle Policy Framework 2009.¹

A quote from page 8 of that PDF's summary/introduction to chapter 4, **"Cost benefit analyses (CBA) attest to the fact that investments in cycling outweigh the costs to a far greater extent than investment in other modes. For example, Benefit / Cost ratios of 7.4 have been shown for cycling training programmes in the UK (SQW, May 2007)."** Considering that local authorities' budgets are getting more and more constrained, it makes budgetary sense to get as much impact out of it as possible for the economic growth and health of the citizens of our county. Bicycle infrastructure seems to be the sensible way to go for Offaly County Council.

This is my main gripe with OCC on bicycle infrastructure. Until it is taken seriously OCC will continue to have to deal with parking issues and other motor traffic related issues. Everyone drives because it is encouraged. All the facts appear to be being ignored. Here is my attempt to explain those facts.

Introduction:

Transport for London has produced a PDF explaining most of these points I make and more in fantastic detail. I am going to flesh out points that I believe are key and relevant to Offaly.² All links and sources can be found at the end of this document at the corresponding superscript number.

The reason for this submission is the lack of prioritising of walking and cycling by Offaly County Council, particularly cycling. Offaly County Council is frequently operating in contrast to DMURS. DMURS is the Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets.³

Page 40 of 165 on source 3, DMURS, shows us the best practice urban design principle of the transport hierarchy. First should be pedestrians, second is cyclists, third public transport and the last to be considered is the private car. For whatever reason Offaly County Council appears to have completely flipped this. OCC frequently prioritise the car over cycling. One example is O'Connor square. The amount of space given to cars with pedestrians given crumbs around the edges and cyclists getting a few Sheffield stands. This is going to get worse for cyclists going forward with the square but thankfully it is the reverse for pedestrians as they are given more space, but the car is still too prevalent in my opinion.

The basic gist of all of this is my confusion with the lack of progress and thought for cycling across the entire county as a serious mode of transportation. An example of a lack of thought would be bicycle lanes suddenly ending when approaching a junction. These are common to see, can be seen on the Srah road in Tullamore and on the R443 connecting the train station entrance to the roundabout past the schools and further on to the IDA roundabout. There is a yield box in them telling cyclists to give way to motor traffic metres before the junction. I fail to see the point of a bicycle lane if it abandons cyclists when they need support from the infrastructure the most. They are effectively being left to deal with the situation on their own, easily being surprised by the fact the lane disappeared underneath them. These bicycle lanes should guide the cyclists straight through the roundabout, not force them to yield to motor traffic coming from the right. This prioritises the car over the bicycle. This encourages me to drive. This is a copy paste issue seen in virtually every aspect of cycling infrastructure in Offaly and it is the motivation for this submission.

The new greenway project alongside the canal in Tullamore is a great idea. It will be a nice amenity to the area but is it something people will use to commute, or does it look more like something for the weekends? I don't see this project linking up with infrastructure in the town centre in any serious way. Some joined up thinking could go far on this. It could be used more often if it was more strongly connected to the town centre. The photo on the cover of this document stands in complete contrast to the greenway. That lane in the photo is supposed to be used for travel in the town centre of Tullamore, but it is very short and directs people into the backend of parked cars. There appears to be an element of contempt to those who travel via bicycle in Tullamore and in Offaly as a whole. It appears to be viewed as something to do on the weekends to get fit. If it continues to be treated with this attitude we risk missing out on so much.

From looking over the Tullamore street enhancement scheme there is not much bicycle infrastructure present, at least on the parts that have been confirmed. No bicycle lanes, not even a Sheffield stand included in any aspect currently under construction as of the 9th of September. In fact, Sheffield stands have been removed from O'Connor square with no plans visible to replace them. Railings throughout the town which were used as makeshift bicycle parking due to the shortage of such parking have been removed also. It is looking grim for cyclists as their local authority tells them they are not wanted. Of course these people will now start driving because it is less of a pain and traffic will increase and so will demand for parking.

There are plans to include a subpar bicycle lane on store street in which the pedestrians are pushed to the edge of the footpath and cyclists next to the primary school due to the door zone of the cars parked there. Of course, you cannot get rid of low demand car parking in Tullamore. DMURS says one thing and Offaly County Council does the opposite. OCC feel like they must maintain car dominance regardless of what best practice urban design tells us. This is bad for us all.

The facts point to this backwards approach from the council to be harming our economy, public health and our environment or at the very least squandering so much potential benefits on these key issues. A fundamental shift in this regard, if performed, will benefit our county. I set forward in this submission to argue that case.

I have broken my explanation into three parts. The first is the economics of the issue, the second part is the public health arguments and the last section is on climate change. There is overlap between these points of course but done this way for simplicity sake.

Economic reasons:

The economic benefits of promoting walking and cycling (active transport) are quite clear. The source 1 TFL PDF does a great job of outlining this. Revenue for town centre businesses can be increased by 30% when walking and cycling improvements are made. Cyclists spend more than car drivers as they visit more frequently. With businesses struggling with increasing insurance prices etc. we need to help them out. This would be a great way of boosting their potential revenue and boosting potential job growth in our communities.

The reasons for why cyclists spend more varies depending on the location. Cars are expensive to purchase and maintain.³ Choosing a bicycle as the main way of getting around (assuming someone can make that choice of course) can leave that individual with a lot more disposable income. Increasing insurance costs and poor road quality can really drive the cost of owning a car up. Income is not growing in proportion to those costs.

The Tullamore street enhancement scheme is an example of walking improvements being made, but cycling improvements are near non-existent. No bicycle lanes or even Sheffield stands for bicycle parking included in any of the aspects of the project that have been signed off on as of 7th of September. The footpaths being widened is great, taking space from cars and giving that space over to more economically fruitful uses. That same idea needs to be applied regarding cycling also. The national policy goal of achieving 20% of journeys being by bicycle can only be achieved with local authorities playing ball. If we do not help push for that goal, we miss out on the economic benefits.

Traffic congestion is a driver of economic stagnation. The Department of Transport's Economic and Financial Evaluation Unit has found that time lost to traffic congestion in Dublin costs the economy €350 million per year and it is set to rise to the billions by 2030's.⁵ Obviously Dublin is on a different scale to Offaly, but the effect is the same, just to a smaller degree. Tullamore becomes a nightmare in the run up to Christmas, with massive tailbacks on the bypass and through the centre of the town.

If people had adequate infrastructure that was safe to cycle it would encourage them to make that choice, we could see a big jump in sales due to the more efficient movement of shoppers.⁶ People would have more time to shop, it would be a more pleasant experience so people would choose to shop for longer. Nobody wants to sit in traffic. When you get stuck in traffic you are traffic. Get people onto bicycles and out of their cars for unnecessary/short journeys. Our local businesses would all benefit.

Public health reasons:

The main public health concerns that should motivate us to support more cycling infrastructure are [air quality](#) and [exercise](#). [Social benefits](#) are also health ones. Massively overlooked.

[Air quality](#): Petrol and more importantly, diesel vehicles, pollute the air that we breath.

According to the Harvard school of Public Health there is no safe exposure level to these pollutants.⁷ Quote: "Researchers could find no sign of a "safe level" of exposure to either Ozone, aka Smog, or Particulate Matter 2.5, aka Soot at a microscopic level. For every 1 microgram per cubic meter ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) reduction in Particulate Matter pollution, 12,000 lives were saved annually. For every 1 ppb of ozone reduction, 1,900 deaths were prevented." Simply the less exposure the better for us all.

In Offaly we don't have air quality that is classed as bad by the Irish EPA, but it can still be high in certain circumstances. One of these is when sitting in a car according to relevant scientists interviewed by the Guardian.⁸ People, such as kids, sitting in the back seat of a car are exposed to higher levels of air pollutants than someone outside of the car, due to the nature of these pollutants building up inside of the vehicle. Considering most people travel by car in Offaly this should be a concern to our local authority.

I believe all this together tells us that even in Offaly, we should take this threat to public health quite seriously. One of the ways of combating this air quality issue is to encourage other modes of transport such as walking and cycling. If we make it safe and convenient for people to commute by bike, we would have cleaner air. There is a moral obligation argument here on OCC but also an economic one. People get sick earlier and must leave the work force. This usually causes a drop in that individuals' disposable income and that has knock on effects to

our local economy through less tax revenue collected by the state and less spending in local shops. If you care about our local businesses, then you should care about poor air quality and how transport impacts such.

Exercise: According to the CSO, 53% of car journeys outside of the Dublin region are for 2 kilometres or less.⁹ This over reliance on the car for short journeys should render these as “unnecessary car journeys.” We should actively be trying to discourage those journeys by car and encouraging walking and cycling for those journeys instead. This could free up parking spaces for those who need them, such as people travelling from further afield. I decided to cycle two kilometres to see how long that would take and it took me about ten minutes. Probably longer for others. If this was in both directions, that is twenty minutes or more of exercise I would not get if I took my car. This can be a big boost to the general health of the area.

Why should we care about that? People who cycle to work are less likely to take sick leave. According to the TFL source mentioned in the introduction, the data is 1.3 days less on average for cyclists compared to those who do not cycle. For those “active” it is 27% fewer sick days. This tells us two things, one about the individual and the other about the economy. That individual is healthier overall. This means a higher quality of life. The economy is also more productive due to the reduction in absenteeism and people being more alert at work.

Transport for London did an analysis of studies and found that when employees are encouraged by their employers to do more exercise, they see a reduction in absenteeism.¹⁰ The most cost-effective way of doing this is by changing travel behaviour. In other words, encouraging people to walk or cycle to work aids in the reduction of absenteeism and this is of clear benefit to the employer.

I have already shown the science behind poor air quality in cars. On top of that people who drive live a more sedentary lifestyle. Average commute times in Offaly are about 29 minutes according to the CSO.¹² Most of those journeys are by car according to the same source.

In 2016, according to the CSO's 2016 census data, there were at least 61 people who were cycling to work in or out of Tullamore Urban.¹¹ These are people choosing the bicycle despite poor infrastructure. I believe OCC can aid this increase in cycling commuters and aid

businesses simultaneously by simply building good quality bicycle lanes and installing sheffield stands in the towns of Offaly and make this possible for some people to do. I don't see any negatives stemming from this. If we maintain a car centric county, we miss out on these benefits. This is a conscious decision to ignore improving the economy and the health of people in the county once these facts are acknowledged.

Social benefits: Connecting communities is important to me. People are excluded from social activities due to infrastructure quite frequently. If I live on a road which does not have a footpath, I am far less likely to visit my neighbours. I am far more likely to rely solely on my car. If the only sensible way for me to travel to the centre of my town is by car, why would I not simply add tens of minutes to my journey and travel to the nearby town shopping centre and save myself some money? According to Geodirectory, Edenderry has one of the highest commercial vacancy rates in the country.¹³ I blame this on the car. There is no reason to shop locally if you have a car. Drive to Tullamore or somewhere further afield where prices are usually lower.

I believe this car centric planning has decimated rural Ireland and small towns across the country, and a lot of transport planners would agree with me on that. I believe OCC is doing a disservice to those in Edenderry and Birr and elsewhere by leaving them with virtually no option other than the car. I encountered a bicycle lane in Birr beside the playground off Wilmer street and there were cars parked in it. No enforcement by the Gardai and no infrastructure from the council to protect it from such flagrant abuse.

Simple plastic wands would suffice. Children may be able to cycle to the playground rather than be driven to it if the infrastructure was there to allow that kind of activity. This would reduce demand for parking spaces and potentially free up space for other more economically fruitful activities. The town becomes a more pleasant place to be and staying times increase, increasing the amount of social activities in the area which is fast becoming a major issue, loneliness.

Back in April the government announced a three-million-euro fund for community projects to combat the issue of loneliness.¹⁴ People are more likely to spend in the shops if they are spending time in the area and can conduct social activities in these shops. Cars can get in the way of doing this as they are anti-social. For example they are loud, dangerous to the point

where we need orderly stop and go systems to allow pedestrians to cross streets, and they take up so much space that could be used for social activities and commerce.

If we create a more pleasant town centre this gives people a place to travel to rather than somewhere to merely travel through. People are far more likely to return if a place is pleasant. If we are interested in this we need to move against the car and towards best practice urban design.

Environmental reasons:

Compared to the rest of Europe, Ireland is doing very poorly on protecting the environment. We were ranked the worst in Europe for action on climate change.¹⁵ According to the Environmental Protection Agency, we are going to miss our greenhouse gas emissions targets for 2020 and targets even further afield.¹⁶ This will bring massive fines our way with carbon credits our only mitigator. That money could be invested in creating jobs here and improving our infrastructure and communities.

Local Authorities can play a key role in this country avoiding these unnecessary payments. One of the ways we can help our nation avoid the expenditure is through applications to the EU for funding for projects. The Tullamore street enhancement scheme was partly funded by the EU. I am not aware of a single cycling specific project for which funding was applied.

Quote from the EU Commission website "It provides funding, in particular through the European Structural and Investment funds which support the development of cycle infrastructure in eligible regions, the EU Health Programme and the Erasmus+ Sport Programme which supports actions to promote the awareness of the importance of physical activity and healthy lifestyle, and through the Horizon2020 Research Framework Programme via the CIVITAS initiative. The STEER (transport) pillar of the Intelligent Energy-Europe programme provided EUR 33.6 million to 21 European pilot projects related to cycling."¹⁷

I believe the county could greatly benefit the cause of lowering carbon emissions by investing more in cycling projects. According to the European Cyclists Federation, "In the previous Multiannual Financial Framework, which covered the period from 2007 to 2013,

approximately 600 million Euros was allocated to cycling.¹⁸ I would love to see OCC applying for commuting/short journey cycling focused projects. Make the towns of Offaly more cycling friendly, there are budgets there that can be applied for, potentially multiple ones from various sourced and we can help cut down on our carbon emissions, amongst the other benefits listed of which there are a myriad.

Thank you for taking the time to read.

Sources:

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<http://census.cso.ie/p6map21/>

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