

OFFALY COUNTY DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2020-2026 (CONSULTATION SUBMISSION)

Proposed Objective ' Offaly County Council will during the lifetime of the Plan, take steps to render all of its public offices carbon neutral'

Project Ireland 2040 notes the National Climate Policy Position which establishes the national objective of achieving transition to a competitive, low carbon, climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable economy by 2050.

The EMRA Spatial and Economic Strategy 2019-2031 at RPO 4.68 states that '*...an acceleration of the transformation of our economic activities and the way we live towards a more sustainable setting is one of our main aspirations*'.

The local authority via its Development Plan will be the lead agency in achieving these goals at local level. At the macro scale, this will require more compact towns and villages, new movement options and local energy sources. At the individual level, better insulation and waste and water management will be required. All of these changes will come at a cost and the local authority will be perceived as introducing a new and possibly expensive, approach which may not be acceptable to all.

In order therefore to assume the moral authority to ask others to alter their economy and lifestyles through achieving energy self sufficiency and altered travel modes, the local authority should take a prominent advanced position. Rather than being seen as having no role other than regulating the general public, it should be the prominent leader in effecting the essential change towards a carbon neutral society.

The most high profile project would be the retrofitting of the Council's own offices in Tullamore, Birr and Edenderry as exemplars of best practice.

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Proposed Objective ‘ Subject to a detailed assessment, the core areas of Kinnity, Shannonbridge, Killeigh, and Banagher will be designated as Architectural Conservation Areas’.

National heritage guidance¹ suggests that where in the opinion of the planning authority ‘ *a place, area, group of structures or townscape, taking account of building lines and heights is of special architectural, historical, architectural, cultural, scientific or social interest*’ it may designate it as an Architectural Conservation Area.

The purpose of this designation is to protect and improve the unique character of the designated area. For selected areas, it will require a greater degree of development control scrutiny but also result in a more active participation by the local authority in improving their amenities with a consequent increase in local pride and property values.

Though most Irish planning authorities make widespread use of this device, Offaly County Council has so far designated only Geashill as its sole project. This has proved successful in adoption and practice and has been promoted by the Council as a good example of its commitment to the protection and preservation of the County’s built heritage. This review of the County plan gives the opportunity for the extension of the Geashill example to other worthy areas.

There are many towns, villages and sites around the County which would fall within the definition offered by the Department, but possibly the selection of those which by virtue of their local tourist economy or location on major national routes and which have therefore a higher tourism profile, might be the most practical approach. These would certainly include Shannonbridge, the final destination on the Grand Canal Greenway and Banagher both of which are visited by river cruisers. Kinnity is a major destination for touring in the Slieve Blooms and located on the newly opened Cycling Loop. Killeigh is a well known as a pretty village by those travelling from north to south on the island.

All have a distinctive and intact architectural character and contain individual buildings which are listed for protection. All are very appropriate for the receipt of ACA designation.

¹ Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht 2011

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Proposed Objective 'That the Bord na Mona villages of St. Cormac's Park, Kilcormac and St. Brochan's Park, Bracknagh, be designated as Architectural Conservation Areas'

Bord na Mona's programme for the development of the Midland bogs was responsible for the most significant economic, social and environmental changes to affect County Offaly in the 20th century. Today, as the Bord retreats from the utilisation of the bogs for fuel and seeks a new role, it is appropriate to consider how its important legacy can be remembered and celebrated.

Possibly the best known and treasured initiatives of the Bord are the six villages which it built for its workers in Kildare, Longford, Roscommon, Westmeath and Offaly. Constructed in the early 1950s, these are now considered to be amongst the best examples of public housing in Ireland in the 20th century and their importance was recognized by their inclusion in the authoritative 'Art and Architecture of Ireland/Vol 4'¹ which observed that they '*provide a planned spatial antidote to the organic nature of the existing villages in which they invariably found themselves, while their curious axial layouts-often with very carefully considered and articulated public open spaces-make them feel like fragments of some larger vision left incomplete, or forgotten*'.

All of the schemes were designed by Frank Gibney (1905-1978) now recognised as one of the most important architects and town planners of the period, who shared the nationalistic visions of Tod Andrews, the head of Bord na Mona and Taoiseach Eamon de Valera. The recent biography of Gibney² asserts that '*...in terms of housing at least, the Bord na Mona villages are the sole physical manifestation of the visions enunciated by Pease and de Valera and to which Andrews and Gibney subscribed, of modest and traditional settlements in the countryside for those employed in local industry*'.

Westmeath County Council has recognised the importance of the only village in its jurisdiction- Derrygreenagh Park in Rochfortbridge- by designating it as an Architectural Conservation Area. Gibney's two villages in Offaly- St. Cormac's Park, Kilcormac and St. Brochans Park, Bracknagh are arguably of equal or higher quality and fully deserve a similar designation.

¹ 'Art and Architecture of Ireland/ Vol 4 Loeber, Hurley, Montague, Campbell, Rowley The Royal Irish Academy 2014

² 'Ambition and Achievement-The Civic Visions of Frank Gibney Fergal MacCabe Castles in the Air Publications 2018

OFFALY COUNTY DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2020-2026 (CONSULTATION SUBMISSION)

Proposed Objective ‘ That Offaly County Council collaborate with Westmeath and Laois County Councils to investigate the feasibility of providing a tourism cycling route linking the Old Rail Trail to the Slieve Bloom BMX Loop via Tullamore’.

There are at present three tourism cycling projects either completed or in progress in the central Midlands:

- (a) The Old Rail Trail linking Moate and Athlone which was opened some years ago
- (b) The Grand Canal Greenway linking Ringsend in Dublin with Shannonbridge via Edenderry, Tullamore and the Lough Boora Discovery Park, whose eastern section is largely complete
- (c) The Slieve Bloom BMX looped trail whose first section from Kinnity was recently opened.

The EMRA Spatial and Economic Strategy identifies Tullamore as a ‘Service Hub’ as part of its ‘Midlands Cycle Destination-Offaly’ project. for cycling tourism , presumably because of its accommodation and restaurant base. RPO.6.19 of the Strategy seeks to eventually link all the cycling routes in the Region from the Barrow to the Shannon..

Though it is located on the Grand Canal Greenway, Tullamore presently has no links to any other cycling routes and in order to justify its ‘Hub’ designation it seems appropriate that links to the other two relatively nearby Midland trails should be examined.

A link to the Old Rail Trail might utilise the line of the abandoned Streamstown-Clara railway line, while the Clara-Tullamore link might be routed via Durrow Abbey, whose promotion for tourism purposes is an objective. A link from Tullamore and the Grand Canal Greenway to the Slieve Bloom BMX Loop might connect at either Kinnity via Kilcormac or Clonaslee via Charleville Castle.

The first step would be an economic assessment of the costs and benefits of such a link. Should it prove viable, a detailed study of route options might be undertaken. If achieved, almost all of the prominent tourist attractions of the County would be available to tourism cycling, with Tullamore located conveniently as a central hub for day trips.