

**Submission by Councillor Eamon Dooley, Birr/ Ferbane Electoral Area  
Offaly County Council, February 2022 in relation to public consultation on the  
draft Territorial Just Transition Plan for Ireland**

I have been a member of Offaly County Council for almost 30 years. My background as a former Bord na Mona employee, a long-time community activist living in West Offaly gives me an insight into the core issues at the heart of this review.

### **Territories Most Impacted**

I am from a small rural area where the decline of the rural economy has been evident for a long time, where it is difficult to see climate change as an opportunity and where the demographic profile illustrates a community in apparent terminal decline. Demographically, Ferbane's plight is obvious and the impact of transitioning away from peat is self-evident.

**Even before the decision to cease peat production in 2020, the signs were ominous: as can be seen from the 2016 CSO figures below**

21% of the nation's population is under 14 years – it's only **18% in Ferbane.**

The 25–44-year cohort is crucial to any community and nationally accounts for 29.5% of Ireland's population. Locally they constitute only **22.8% of the population of Ferbane..**

The over 65 years' cohort comprises 13.6% of Offaly's population, (national average 13.4%).

However, the challenge is further illustrated by **Ferbane's over 65 years' rate – 22.3%** resulting in an **Old Age Dependency Rate of 37.2%** -EMRA average 18% (Offaly 21.3%)

**The Labour Force Participation Rate** in the EMRA is 63.3%. The State average is 61.4% and Offaly's Labour Force Participation Rate is 59.8%, while **Ferbane's is a paltry 48.1%** - bearing testament to redundancy packages over the past **3 decades**, that leave too many out of work too soon.

In 1989 Offaly absorbed 50% of the 1200 redundancies over the previous 12 months. **Source** [Irish Times 31/3/1989.](#)

Breakdown of the 1200 job losses. 700 General operatives, 227 Craft, 80 Supervisors and 150 Administration.

**Source** [Dáil Debate on Turf Development Bill 23rd Feb. 1989](#)

Table 1. Job losses in the Ferbane catchment area 1984 to 2002

Year	Location	Location	Location	Location	Location	Total
	Boora	B/Water	D/Lough	Total BnM	ESB Ferbane	BnM &ESB
1984	770	772	120	1662	160	1822
2002	189	335	60	584	0	584
Job Loss	581	437	60	1078	160	1238
% Loss	75%	57%	50%	65%	100%	68%

**Source** [Mr. Kevin Gavin Head of Human Resources Bord na Mona December 2002](#)

### Job losses at Bord na Mona in Offaly 1980 to 2021

1200 redundancies from 1988 to 1989. **Source** [Dail debate on Turf Development Bill 23/2/1989.](#)

From 1982 to 1989 Offaly accounted for over 1000 of the 1500 job losses in Bord na Mona. **Source** [Irish Times 31/3/1989.](#)

### Bord na Mona employment 1980 -2018

1980 -----7100 employees **Source** [Dáil Debate on Turf Development Bill 23rd Feb. 1989](#)

1982-----6200 **Source** [Irish Times 31/3/1989](#)

1989-----4700 **Source** [Irish Times 31/3/1989](#)

2018-----2012 **Source** [Jim Power, Economics Limited, Bord na Mona and The Midlands May2018.](#)

Offaly has accounted for the largest number of job losses in Bord na Mona since 1988.

It is worth noting that of the bogs currently listed for rehabilitation, Offaly account for 53% of all bogs listed in the Peat Climate Action Scheme. Although over 50% of the approx. 300 workers employed in this scheme are based in Offaly, this programme is expected to be completed by 2024.

## **Development Needs and Actions**

Ferbane has a proud industrial heritage, long associated with Bord na Mona and the ESB.

Lack of employment locally has the potential to transform Ferbane into a retirement village instead of the Service Town status bestowed upon it in both County and Regional Development Plans.

That fate is neither desirable nor inevitable.

The capacity to overcome challenges was proven when the decline in the peat generated electricity industry first became apparent back in 1998 – the closure of our local peat generation station was the first indication that the industry on which we had become dependent would no longer sustain our community.

As a community of common interests: Local Authority, community and voluntary sector, statutory education and training providers and private enterprise joined forces to maximise the benefits of an investment fund of €3million that the ESB left as its legacy to our area. It was a fund that was targeted specifically at the community most affected by the job losses and rationalisation in both ESB and Bord Na Mona in the late 80's early 90's, resulted in a reduction of over 1,200 jobs in the Ferbane Catchment area.

In order to respond to this scenario and to secure a viable future for the town of Ferbane and its hinterland, a Ferbane Town Development Committee was established to draw up a Five-Year Town Development Plan. This 5-year plan which was prepared in consultation with, and fully supported by, the local community and statutory bodies in the region and outlined a vision statement to articulate the type of place residents wished Ferbane to become and this continues to strongly influence the type of programmes and projects that are being implemented in the town.

A critical element in the Plan for facilitating employment generation opportunities in Ferbane was the provision of suitable enterprise space for business start-ups in the area to foster a culture for local enterprise. As a result, **we now possess a community-owned Business Park that hosts 115 local jobs.** It was a bottoms-up approach to community and rural development that worked.

The community's social needs – a community crèche and a community playground – were identified by the community which, with considerable assistance from the agencies, took ownership of the need and the challenge and assumed responsibility for its successful solution.

We now face those challenges all over again. The two counties in the Midlands region which will take the largest hit in terms of job losses and a decimated economy are **Offaly and Longford.**

However, the opportunity to gain from the investment in Just Transition has seen the Midlands expanded to 8 counties (a quarter of the counties on the entire island of Ireland). The ESB fund that proved the launching pad for the revitalisation of the 1990's affected communities, has been subsumed into the Irish Just Transition Fund.

And, while statistics don't always provide the full picture, the peatland community of Ferbane is in a perilous position, where too many people of working age are unable to contribute to a local economy.

This is not because of any inability or lack of desire to work but because it has been decided that peat was easier pickings than transport, or industrial pollution or large-scale agriculture.

As a public representative serving a community dealing with the abrupt shut down of the Irish peat industry, I see, on a daily basis, the consequences of an unplanned Just Transition. I am an eyewitness to the dangers of an Unjust Transition.

As unemployment increases, disposable income in the area is now the second lowest in the state. As living standards fall, students cannot afford to advance to third level education. When you stop the flow of income, villages die, and so small shops and businesses are forced to close their doors.

## **Key opportunities for Communities**

The opportunity for communities to develop renewable energy projects on state owned lands (cutaway bogs)

Develop a greenway to link Lough Boora Discovery Park to Clonmacnoise (via Grand Canal and Villages) on the disused /redundant Bord na Mona rail network. This work should be incorporated into the Bog Rehabilitation Programme.

Reconstruction of roads on peat foundation (of which there are 30% in Offaly) using Bord na Mona employees, equipment and cutaway bogs for excavation, and disposal of excavated material.

