

## **Joint Submission: Cllr. John Leahy & Kilcormac Development Association**

### **Introduction**

I have served the Birr / Ferbane Electoral Area of Offaly County Council since 2009 and I have served as Chairperson of Kilcormac Development Association for over 10 years.

Over my 12 years as a Public Representative and a Community Activist, I have seen many positive changes but unfortunately the decision to accelerate the “end to peat extraction” in West Offaly from 2030 to 2021 is having a paralysing effect on our Communities.

It was inevitable that decarbonisation would eventually win out but accelerating the end date was a cruel economic blow to Offaly and in particular West Offaly.

The majority of society will embrace change if change is introduced over a period of time. The time element is the essential ingredient to allow the process to develop. Case studies have shown that time and resources to educate, reskill and develop new employment opportunities are the key to success when a major Industry ceases in an area/community. Unfortunately the Communities most impacted in Offaly never got the most important ingredient – TIME for a process to be introduced, implemented, monitored and managed.

### **Territories Most Impacted**

Offaly is the most impacted County in the Region in terms of job losses. Job losses are a direct hit on a Family and their Families future opportunities. Job losses are also an indirect hit on a Community and the working mechanism of how a small rural economy works. High unemployment levels in a Community will potentially lead to less disposal income which affects every facet of the Community. To avoid duplication and repetition, I strongly endorse the factual job loss figures in both Offaly County Councils submission and Cllr. Dooley’s submission. The statistics clearly identifying the most impacted County in the Region is the County of Offaly.

## *Development Needs and Actions*

The all-important Questions

Is the County of Offaly adequately equipped to deliver change? Are there Community groups that could assist leading agencies to create real change and bring new employment opportunities to their Communities?

*The answer is simple YES.*

Look at OCC track record as a Local Authority. In 2021 OCC were nationally identified as high achievers and awarded additional funding to be administered by the Local Community Development Committee as a direct result of overprescribed community projects. The records show within various Government Departments that communities in Offaly are consistently engaging with the relevant agencies in drawing down funding for their communities and this connection with Local Government and Communities in Offaly continues to expand but needs to be resourced.

### *Example*

Communities groups like Kilcormac Development Association have lead the way in the creation of Social Enterprises resulting in job creation for over 30 years. The KDA were successful in securing 430,000 euros under the Irish Just Transition Fund. This will enable a strongly recognised community organisation develop a tourism hub linking the Town of Kilcormac to the Bord Na Mona Plant in Boora only 3k from the Town. The KDA will create a tourism walking, cycling and train tour to Boora. As the tourists travel along the route they will be exposed to the machinery that was used over the last 50 years, effectively telling the story of Bord Na Mona. This is only one of many social enterprises that have the ability to create local sustainable jobs at the epicentre of a decarbonised community.

Offaly County Council have strategically embraced the concept of making Offaly a great place to visit, using many of “Offaly Hidden Gem’s” to attract footfall to the County, namely Birr Castle, Clonmacnoice, Lough Boora Discovery Parklands, Croghan Hill and many more. The capital investment in Green Ways has proven to be a success in attracting tourists with the added benefit of communities using these fantastic recreational facilities. I strongly believe that if Offaly was fully resourced OCC can directly and indirectly create sustainable employment opportunities. Offaly has over 100 acres of peat lands (one fifth of its land mass). Offaly can be the leading recreational tourism hub and again create sustainable jobs.

The disadvantage of Offaly having one fifth of its land mass covered with peat lands is the devastating effect on the road network. Over 30% of the road network connecting communities to vital services in Towns and Villages in Offaly are constructed on Peat Foundation Roads of which 30% are located in West Offaly. Offaly cannot be adversely affected by the loss of an Industry and subsequently our roads underfunded with the reduction in commercial rates and development fees that were paramount in the past and separate to the Local Government Roads allocation.

Kind regards

**Cllr. John Leahy**