

**Creative Rathangan Meitheal**

**Response to the  
Draft Territorial Just Transition Plan**

**Creative Rathangan Meitheal (CRM)** is a voluntary organisation, based in Rathangan County Kildare. Since its establishment in 2016 Creative Rathangan Meitheal (CRM) has devoted a significant part of its annual programme of activities to exploring the question- '*What happens when BnM ends its peat extraction activities?*' - *What does this mean for workers, communities, for employment opportunities and for the environment?* This has included consideration of (1) BnM's socio-economic impact on the area in '*The Vanished and the Vanishing?*', (2) the potential of BnMs railway beds to act as greenways in '*Walking Off A Paper Landscape*', (3) the potential of rewetted peatlands to act as carbon sinks in '*Healing The wound*', (4) and, following the closure of the Shannonbridge and Lanesboro Power Stations, the possibilities and potentials of BnM's cutaways in '*Imagining a Landscape*'.

In 2020 CRM ran three online seminars. Layers 1 explored bogs through *Macro-Photography, Archaeology and Ecology*; Layers 2 explored *History, Story, Memory, and Identity*; and, Layers 3 titled '*Remnants, Brownlands and Wetlands*' focused on *Just Transition*. During 2021 CRM focused on mapping BnMs industrial rail network in West Kildare via a series of stop/start films, CRM also hosted '*Bord na Mona's Railways In A Changing World.*' an illustrated talk by Sean Cain to mark *European Year of Rail Heritage 2021*

CRM collaborates with local schools and a range of organisations including (1) BnM and in particular its Ecology Team, who have facilitated site visits and on-site workshops with local families, pupils from local schools, Transition Year Students, adult groups and Students from Maynooth University; as well as actively participating in our seminars/conferences, (2) the Geography and History Departments in Maynooth University, (3) the Irish Peatlands Conservation Council and (4) the Community wetlands Forum.

CRM is currently collaborating with the Geography Department Maynooth on a cross county oral history project funded by the RIA. It is also a partner *Gnáthóga Nádurtha* (Natural Heritage), an Arts Council funded Climate Action and place-based initiative led by Carlow Co Council with Kildare and Meath Co Councils, which brings together environmental activists, artists and community mapping experts.

## **Making the EU Just Transition Fund Work for the Wider Midlands Region**

From a West Kildare perspective, the closure of the Shannonbridge and Lanesboro Power Stations was part of a process which began with the closure of the Portarlinton and Allenwood Power Stations in the 1990s. This was expected, as was a major reduction in BnM's peat extraction activities. However, when the end came, and was followed by BnM's decision to cease all peat extraction activities, it was jarringly abrupt.

Covid-19 played a major part in dampening discussion around impacts as face-to-face meetings became difficult if not impossible. However, the sense of hurt was palpable. Former BnM workers, particularly younger ones, found themselves facing uncertain futures. Older workers appeared largely resigned to the prospect of not re-entering the workplace. While BnM has reinvented itself as a climate solutions company, many of its former employees believe that they were victims of a rush to deal with Ireland's Climate Crisis and that they were being left behind.

The inclusion of West Kildare in the wider Midlands Region was a welcome development. This is the first time the region – dependant on BnM, the ESB and peat extraction - has been formally recognised as such. But the dynamics of existing administrative boundaries will tend to work against the coherence of the Greater Midlands Region. In addition, there are currently no effective mechanisms or structures for communities across the Greater Midlands Region to communicate, meet and explore options for collaboration. As a consequence, there is considerable risk, not just for West Kildare, but across this region that competition for funds will generate winners and losers.

As the region moves away from a reliance on peat it is essential that this move enables communities linked to BnM, the ESB, and peat extraction, to reinvent themselves. While the four broad development needs identified in the draft Territorial Just Transition Plan are a useful starting point for developing an action plan, the question remains - How will the implementation of the Territorial Just Transition Plan *'ensure transition is fair, equitable, and inclusive in terms of processes and*

*outcomes?*<sup>1</sup>. As has been observed elsewhere the key challenge with Just Transition is to ensure that communities are '*agents of change, not victims of change*'<sup>2</sup>

While the draft Territorial Just Transition Plan is peppered with the term '*Just Transition*' it is not defined. However, reference is made to Just Transition Policy Framework articulated in the Climate Action Plan. But the risk here is that the term becomes a vague rather meaningless term which various stakeholders can interpret and define according to their own priorities. CRM would recommend that Just Transition be defined as '*Climate Action + Social Inclusion = Just Transition*.'<sup>3</sup>

CRM views the four broad development needs in the draft Territorial Just Transition Plan as interlinked, and for the purpose of this response CRM will largely focus on Industrial Heritage with a particular emphasis on archives and oral history.

### **Heritage, BnM and ESB Archives and an Oral History**

The draft Territorial Just Transition Plan cites NESC (2021) and the importance of '*recognising the historical and cultural context of places and communities in a just transition process*'. However, an insensitive focus on tourism initiatives runs the risk of reducing the shared history of the Greater Midlands Region to a commodity. Kieran Mulvey, the current Just Transition Commissioner has suggested that the history of BnM and the ESB, in the Greater Midlands Region, be held in one central photographic/oral history archive or museum. There are two broad risks here (1) if the Commissioner's suggestion is acted upon communities will essentially be excluded from ownership of their pasts and their identities, and (2) in the absence of a coherent overall strategy County Councils and/or communities could find themselves competing for the resources to present part of the overall story in a series of standalone and disconnected heritage projects.

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<sup>1</sup> Climate Action Bill 2021

<sup>2</sup> [EEAC 28thAnnual Conf 2020.pdf \(nesc.ie\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.caro.ie/knowledge-hub/general-information/just-transition>

There is a need to take a systematic approach to capturing and telling the story of BnM from the pre-war years, through the Emergency, and its 70-year long partnership with the ESB. While this does not rule out local heritage initiatives or a central archive/museum, it does require an approach that finds ways of acknowledging the fact that the lives and identities of communities across the Greater Midlands have been bound up with that of BnM and the ESB. As former workers in BnM/ESB and Midland Communities negotiate their way through the transition from peat extraction, it is essential that their experiences and stories are part of how the region reframes itself.

CRM proposes that the Heritage Council or a body of similar standing and capacity be asked to take a coordinating role to ensure:

- that BnM and ESB archives relating to the Greater Midlands Region, whether held centrally or dispersed across depots/old work centres, are stored safely and an audit undertaken to establish the range and depth of materials therein.
- this audit should pay particular attention to the maps made of, and used in, the various BnM bogs
- that a long-term arrangement for the safe storage of these materials be identified
- that the possibility of digitalising these records be explored. It may then be possible to use anonymised details from wage cards to map the migration of people into the Greater Midlands to work for the ESB or BnM. This would have the benefit of preserving records, providing hard data for demonstrating the socio-economic impact of BNM and the ESB on the Greater Midlands region, and, in the longer term, creating a genealogical treasure house.
- that a systematic approach is taken to gathering the alternative/unofficial archives held in local histories and newspapers.
- that a coordinated approach, via a structured Oral History Project, be taken across the Greater Midlands aimed at capturing the lived experience of those who worked for and benefited from the presence of BNM/ESB in their communities.

Much of this work could be undertaken by former ESB and BnM workers given the appropriate training and support. Such an approach seeks to present the complex

and layered BnM/ESB story in a way that respects and values workers and their communities while allowing for the emergence of several museums/interpretative centres. Each museum/interpretative centre could focus on a particular theme or era such as *'The Emergency Years'* and *'The Turf Camps'*, the *'Evolution of ESB Power Stations'*, *'Migration to the Greater Midlands'*, and so. Such an approach would reduce the risk of unnecessary competition and facilitate greater cooperation across the Greater Midlands Region. It also recognises the need to prevent a concern with County or local priorities taking precedence over the need to protect, preserve and celebrate a shared common history and identity.

BnM is the custodian of a unique industrial heritage, and over the years it has constructed a range of buildings from the portable 'Ganger's Hut' to the 'Turf Camps', to Workers' Housing, to various workshops and factories. In addition, it operated an industrial railway system which was longer, at its peak, than that operated by Irish Rail. Its bogs are crisscrossed by a network railway lines, machine runs and gravel roads.

BnM is currently engaged in an extensive rehabilitation scheme under the EDRRS and the Peatlands Climate Action Scheme (PCAS). However, there is no clear long-term management strategy for the management/protection of these rehabilitated bogs.

BnM has had a number of machinery sales since it ceased peat extraction activities on its lands. As it rehabilitates bogs under the Enhanced Decommissioning, Rehabilitation and Restoration Scheme (EDRRS) it is removing railway tracks, and it appears that much of this is going for scrap. There is scope for BnM to work with the Irish Heritage Railway sector in the identification of items of historic significance, and for the Irish Heritage Railway sector to either identify or provide a safe home for such items thus allowing for their preservation in operational condition.

Anecdotal evidence thus far is that BnM is not prioritising the preservation of items of historical interest or adopting an approach which while retaining ownership of such industrial heritage facilitates voluntary organisations in becoming custodians of this

heritage. There may be a role for the Heritage Council here and certainly this is something which may need to be brought the attention of the relevant Minister.

It is worth noting that BNMs narrow gauge railway system, associated machine runs and gravel roads have the potential to serve not only as green roads. In the case of West Kildare. CRM have mapped BnMs railway noting that it is possible to develop a series of greenways from stretching from the Royal Canal at Enfield via Kishanroe, then travelling along the BnM railway line to the Grand Canal at Allenwood, and on to Killinthomas/Ballydermot near Rathangan (on the Barrow Blueway) and on to Mount Lucas.

### **The Just Transition Funding Process to date**

CRM took part in a Community Wetlands Forum/Irish Rural Link meeting with Kieran Mulvey on December 10<sup>th</sup> 2021, convened at his request, to discuss the experience of community groups in accessing funding etc. CRM pointed to the need for technical assistance and seed funding to develop ideas/projects. But more importantly the need for businesses or agencies with the capacity – technical and financial - to establish, or be part of, and lead consortia in applications for EU funding. CRM also referenced the role which could be played by Social Enterprise Lenders such as Clann Credo and referenced the use of Global Grants to in earlier EU funded programmes.

There is clearly a role for the Leader/Local Development Companies in providing Community Groups with support and technical assistance in the preparation of project applications. There is also merit in encouraging multi-stakeholder and cross-county projects.

There is also a need to ensure that the Communities are not excluded from the implementation, management and monitoring structures for the Just Transition Plan and that there a clear communication strategy is adopted.