

Submission on DRAFT EU Territorial Plan on behalf of Midlands Region (CORE) of MRTT comprising of Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath

Introduction:

This submission is made by the Midlands NUTS III region comprising of Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath members of the MRTT, in response to Draft Territorial Just Transition Plan (TJTP) as published on gov.ie on 20 December 2021 for the European Just Transition Fund.

At the outset it is acknowledged that the proposed beneficiary area is that of the wider Midlands, as defined for the National Just Transition Fund, comprising of the core Midlands NUTS III counties of Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath, together with Roscommon, East Galway, North Tipperary and West Kildare. It is also noted that the beneficiary territory may change over the implementation phase 2021-2027.

The EnvEcon reports as published on gov.ie on 17 December 2021, provides the evidence for the 4 development need areas as set out within the Draft. The submission provides observations in relation to the 4 Development Needs areas identified within the draft document.

The thrust of the Development Needs are welcomed and align closely to draft Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024. It is hoped that the following comments and observations in relation to the development needs and the proposed actions will serve to strengthen the areas and proposed actions of intervention within the proposed beneficiary area, to the benefit of the impacted communities within same.

Identified Development Needs

It would be helpful to incorporate extracts from relevant sections of 7.3 the EnvEcon *‘Report on the Challenges, Needs & Recommended Actions for the Most Affected Territory’* to provide context for the proposed actions outlined for each development need area within the Draft TJTP.

Development Need 1: Modernise the Business Environment and Create Employment Opportunities

The word ‘Modernise’ has archaic connotations, consideration should be given to the replacement of the word ‘Modernise’ with ‘Reform’ or ‘Enhance’.

Action 1: Midlands Green Energy Cluster: Dedicated Staff and Development Plan

A green energy cluster located in the Midlands, supporting the development of renewable and sustainable energy technologies. Would entail creating a development plan which would include dedicated staffing to develop the proposal, carry out a cluster mapping exercise and co-ordinate a vision to carry forward into implementation stage.

The establishment of this unit should be within the most impacted territory as defined within the EnvEcon report. The provision of additional resources to the MRTT (as per recommendations of the Progress Reports of the Just Transition Commissioner) could be a potential mechanism to oversee the development of the Midlands Green Energy Cluster. In addition, the development office could be charged with the identification and pursuit of renewable energy funding opportunities for the region.

Action 2: Midlands Green Energy Cluster: Business Supports and Advice Support the skills capacity for the development of the green energy cluster and the Midlands Retrofit Programme through providing business supports and advice for construction workers and businesses on how to establish and grow one-stop-shops for retrofit projects.

This action should be broadened from the retrofit agenda to the provision of mentoring and supports for companies seeking to establish a benchmark and to reduce the carbon footprint of their business, and support interventions necessary to realise same.

Action 4: Entrepreneurship and Social Enterprise Training & Support for Low Carbon Services

Fund staff and training to create business incubators focusing on supporting enterprises to set up in the green economy. Could include technical advisors to evaluate and mentor emerging low carbon projects and advise businesses on how to transition to more sustainable practices and engage with the green energy cluster. Provide mentorship within communities.

It is noted that no funds for buildings or infrastructure would be available from this development need, however the ability to access funds to cover refurbishment/retrofit costs and costs associated with hiring a Business Development Manager to work with clients of the incubators/hubs would be welcome.

Action 12: Expand Midlands Retrofit Programme to Private Housing and Retrofitting Public Buildings In line with energy efficiency priorities, retrofit private housing to be part of an expanded Midlands Retrofit scheme which is focussed on social housing. Also to consider improving the energy efficiency of all public buildings in the region to a level that is commercially viable.

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Engagement with the NZEB training facility at Mount Lucas, regional industry and Local Authorities would be essential regarding same and fulfilment of actions detailed within the Climate Action Plan 2021.

Action 13: Supporting Smart Specialisation Strategies

A number of smart specialisation strategies have been identified as areas which could be further supported to enhance the productivity of the region, for example: a Food and Drink cluster, Robotics, Telecommunications and Sustainable Advanced Manufacturing.

The financial assistance to support the development and implementation of identified sectoral areas of smart specialisation and cluster development within the draft Midlands REP to 2024 is welcomed, namely Midlands ICT Cluster, Advanced Manufacturing and the implementation of the **MidlandsIreland.ie** Regional Food & Drink Strategy.

Consideration to the development of a Competitive LEO type fund for the benefitting territory would be very welcome to progress the identified areas of smart specialisation and cluster development.

Development Need 2: Enhance the Skills Profile

Action 3: Midlands Green Energy Cluster: Training Centres of Excellence

This action would develop and enhance training facilities to enable the region to operate as a retrofit training centre of excellence, also supporting the development of the Midlands Green Energy Cluster, the Midlands Retrofit Programme and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan's Green Skills Action Programme.

This action should be broadened to reflect the wider skills training necessary for all retrofit components and specifically develop the DASBE model within the wider Midlands region. The development and roll out of the DASBE will necessitate close engagement with TUS also as a project partner.

Action 5: Green Ambassador Enhanced Employment Scheme Develop an enhanced (supported) employment scheme for impacted employees in "Green Ambassador" roles.

These roles could be linked with the green energy cluster, circular economy and sustainable waste management objectives. Further training could be offered to provide skills in areas such as baseline energy audits and retrofit of public buildings.

The development of the Green Ambassador Programme on a pilot basis within the wider Midlands region is welcomed, and this too will contribute to and build upon climate action agenda of Tidy Towns within impacted communities, and consideration should also be given

to the incorporation of tourism guide skills for emerging tourism services within impacted communities closest to the Royal and Grand Canal Greenways.

Action 6: Career Guidance Personnel for Secondary Level Students Fund regional career guidance personnel to co-ordinate and provide information to existing career guidance services so that secondary level students are more efficiently matched to further and higher education and job opportunities in the region.

This intervention should be expanded to include provision for Leaving Cert applied courses across schools within the impacted communities, to develop and guide students from junior cert and to develop pathways from level 3 upwards.

Provision should also be made for the extension of STEM engagement services from TUS: Midlands Midwest throughout the region and impacted communities, whilst also enabling the regionalisation of very successful Offaly Vex-Robotics Programme.

Development Need 3: Promoting Environmental Sustainability and Industrial Heritage

Action 11: Developing the Midland's Tourism Potential Support tourism initiatives in the Midlands links to build on the national JTF tourism projects and Fáilte Ireland's Hidden Heartlands. Tourism is growing in the Midlands on the back of both the new Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand and on the renewed interest in the region from the domestic market during 2020 and 2021.

This development need should also support actions related to the Shannon Masterplan and Ireland's Ancient East, specifically in relation to projects identified within the draft Midlands REP to 2024.

Action 10: Extension of Peatlands Restoration Expand the current peatlands rehabilitation scheme - the current Enhanced Decommissioning, Rehabilitation and Restoration Scheme (EDRRS) - from 33,000 hectares to cover additional hectares designated for rehabilitation or develop an additional/ distinct programme for National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) sites.

Currently there are approx. 300 Bord na Mona staff involved in the PCAS programme. The majority of the 300 staff are seasonal workers with the current programming period being up to 2024. These jobs whilst welcome, are not sustainable in the longer term, offering only medium – term job security at best, and careful consideration will be needed in terms of the magnitude of funds allocated to this specific action, as over €118M has been allocated to the

current programme. Should similar funds be allocated under the EU JTF then little will remain for the implementation of other actions and indeed other identified development need areas.

Action 15: Support for the EU LIFE Project/Agricultural Training Peatlands and People project includes Just Transition Accelerator, Peatlands Knowledge Centre of Excellence and People's Discovery Attraction. Skills development in agricultural practices through upskilling former peat workers to assist in creating local job opportunities. Support, animation and training services to upskill farmers for opportunities in sustainable agricultural activities.

Additional detail in relation to this specific action is needed.

The Just Transition Accelerator element of the Peatlands and People project is open to applications from beyond the proposed beneficiary region of the draft EU JTF.

Development Need 4: Enhancing potential of region as a place to live and work

The first two actions of this development need relate to increasing the attractiveness of the region for investment. It is therefore suggested that the title of this development need be amended to include the words 'invest', whilst the second two actions relate to the development and enhancement of improved local mobility and transport, and the word 'visit' could reflect this in the title.

This action should also provide for funding to support the promotion of the Midlands Region as a destination of choice in which to live, work, study and invest, including the provision of staff over the lifetime of the programming period.

Action 7: Scoping for Development Sites - FDI, Business and Community Facilities Carry out a scoping exercise to identify suitable sites for workspace investment including workplaces suitable for IDA and LEO businesses, remote working hubs and community facilities. This could include unused buildings which could be repurposed for regeneration of towns.

This would align to the work of the appointed Business Development Manager for the Midlands Network of Co-working Facilities under the National JTF.

Consideration should also be given to assisting local authorities in the development and provision of serviced sites and buildings to potential investors, locations of which would be informed by the scoping report.

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Action 8: Repurposing of Existing Sites - FDI, Business and Community Facilities Further to Action 7 above, a dedicated fund would be made available to repurpose the existing sites including refitting technology and facilities. This may include unoccupied office space, factories, manufacturing centres, or other spaces.

This dedicated fund should also include the provision of serviced lands and/or repurposing of sites, to align with National Strategic Objectives of the National Planning Framework for more efficient use of urban and designated land.

Action 9: Community Support Fund for Microenterprise, Active Mobility & Circular Economy A community support fund to enable Local Action Groups to support employment and economic development through micro-enterprises, active mobility and the circular economy. Targeted at supporting small enterprises. Could play a beneficial role in terms of creating direct employment opportunities for displaced workers.

The appointment of Just Transition Officers within the local authorities in each county of the proposed beneficiary region would greatly enhance the effectiveness of this action, to liaise with communities, and Climate & Environmental awareness officers.

Action 14: Improved Local Mobility Put in place improved regional transport links and improve bus links between towns, remote working hubs/offices and educational institutions to ensure better public transport infrastructure for potential employees and address rural isolation. May include electric vehicle charging points.

This action is welcomed.

Conclusion

It is noted that EnvEcon in the preparation of the suite of 'evidence' reports developed a 'weighted system' to determine the most affected territory impacted by transition. It would be welcomed if a similar approach was adopted to the disbursement of funds from the EU JTF, thus ensuring that the most affected territories and the communities therein, in particular Lanesborough and Shannonbridge, experience a 'just transition'.