



OFFALY'S GREEN VISION

To accelerate Offaly's green energy transition enabling transformative projects to deliver sustainable and integrated economic, social and community development.

Offaly County Council's response to Ireland's

Draft Territorial Just Transition Plan

February 2022



Comhairle Chontae Uíbh Fhailí
Offaly County Council

<u>Contents</u>	<u>page no</u>
1.0 Executive Summary	2
2.0 Offaly’s Green Vision Statement	3
3.0 The Timing of the JTF Spend & OCC Readiness	4
4.0 The Territory Most Affected	6
5.0 Response to Development Needs & Pillars 2 and 3	8
○ Project of Scale 1 - Direct Support to Local Government	10
6.0 Response to Actions in the draft Territorial Plan	13
○ Project of Scale 2 - Green Hydrogen Demonstration Hub	15
○ Project of Scale 3 - Midlands Cycling Destination	23
○ Project of Scale 4 - Lough Boora Sculpture Park	24
○ Project of Scale 5 - Grand Canal Dock Tullamore	29
7.0 Governance Mechanisms	33
8.0 Appendix – Territorial Projects of Scale	34

1. Executive Summary

Offaly County Council welcomes Ireland's draft Territorial Just Transition Plan (dTJTP) and expects that when agreed with the Commission, it will have a significant role in underpinning the delivery of the EU Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) for the Midlands Peat Region in Ireland. Its completion will also meet some of the objectives of the Climate Action Plan 2021 'Implementation Plan for the Midlands Region'.

In this submission, Offaly County Council presents its response to the four high level development needs and the fifteen actions set out in the draft plan. It also presents proposals for five Projects of Scale, its views on key issues such as the timing of the spend for the Just Transition Fund (JTF), the most affected territory, and proposed governance mechanisms.

It is Offaly County Council's position that the most affected territory is the NUTS 3 region of counties Offaly, Longford, Westmeath and Laois. This position is strongly supported by the comprehensive research carried out by EnvEcon published in December 2021.

This Council understand the urgency that will apply to programming and committing the Just Transition Fund. It is already engaged actively in projects that meet the development needs identified and will work in partnership with DECC and EMRA to deliver the best possible outcomes for the Territory.

Future public policy and public spending investment decisions should acknowledge the findings of the EnvEcon research reports, the designation of the Territory and the objectives of the Territorial Just Transition Plan. Only in this way will the Territory be enabled by the Just Transition Mechanism to attract further private sector investment and deliver sustainable economic, environmental and social recovery.

In spite of the challenges arising from decarbonisation, Offaly County Council sees a myriad of opportunities that can be unlocked by EU Just Transition Funding and aligned Government Policy. By addressing deficits in a meaningful way, Offaly and the NUTS 3 Region will not just 'catch up' with other counties but 'leap frog' them so that by 2027 the Midlands JT Plan Territory will be the low carbon territory of choice in which to live, work, visit and invest.

The four Midland counties comprise a compact region with strengths and capacity to develop as central hub, connector and collaborator with neighbouring regions. With the right investment, the Midlands can become a natural hinterland of the Dublin region, absorbing investment and community growth that helps to prevent 'increased congestion and costs' in the Dublin region.

We express our thanks to the EU Commission, the Department of Environment, Climate Action and Communications and the East and Midlands Regional Assembly for their efforts in researching, consulting and publishing their reports and this draft TJTP. We look forward to working closely with them to deliver the benefits envisaged for the individuals, families, companies and communities most affected by accelerated decarbonisation in our region.

2. Offaly Green Vision Statement

To accelerate Offaly's Green Energy transition, enabling transformative projects using renewables and green technologies to deliver sustainable and integrated economic, social and community development in Offaly.

Space to Grow

A potential c.1GW of operational, permitted or pipeline renewable energy generation and storage, only 30 - 80 km from the Greater Dublin Area presents an unprecedented opportunity for large energy users and employers to establish in the Midlands. This represents **c.15% of the current all-time maximum electricity system demand (ROI & NI)**. Offaly holds c. 1.1% of the all-island population and c.1.6% of the ROI population. In addition, by locating in Offaly, large energy users will join a **dynamic eco-system of green energy companies**, and also can fulfil Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) obligations in investing in an area most affected by the accelerated cessation of peat harvesting and peat fired power generation.

Space to Innovate

The co-location of diverse renewable energy systems integrating into the national grid provides unique prospects for cutting edge innovation and demonstration hubs. Collaborations between industry, academia and stakeholders are underway to explore opportunities such as a Green Hydrogen integration and demonstration hub, and large scale energy user integration with renewables.

Space to Locate

The Midlands region, with its burgeoning renewable energy sector, extensive natural resources, central location and human capital may already be said to constitute an energy industry cluster. Offaly aims to build upon this firm foundation, promote interaction between stakeholders and market the region as an outstanding location in which live, work, visit and invest.

The JTM can facilitate Offaly County Council to actively develop large strategic land banks (as per the Grangecastle model in SDCC) to suit existing and new businesses in the Just Transition. The proximity of the sites to 'pipeline' electricity supply, within 'clusters' and within an energy-positive landscape and policy background with superb natural amenities as an attractor for investment.

Space to Live

Offaly is transitioning to a low carbon, digital future. To build resilience and to ensure a Just Transition, many renewable energy projects include societal gain, targeting the use of excess heat to provide low/zero carbon heating, transport, and food production through the use of heated biomes. Throughout the county, exciting projects are taking shape to harness the opportunities of peatlands, waterways, agriculture and rural communities. Carbon sequestering, science and ecology, Greenways, Blueways, advanced manufacturing, remote working and eco-tourism are just some of the development prospects for Offaly.

3. The Timing of the JTF Spend and OCC Readiness

There is an expectation for expediency around the allocation and spending of the JT fund with €62.7m of €84.5m (75%) to be committed by 2023.

Offaly County Council requests to be a key intermediary in this process.

Offaly County Council has an excellent track record of reliable, effective and efficient project management and delivery funded through a range of Programmes and Departments. It has existing working relationships with key stakeholders and can move quickly to realise the ambition of the Territorial Plan. With the support of the Managing Authority, Offaly County Council is well positioned to lead out on Territorial Plan Actions and related Projects of Scale across the Territory that meet the requirements of the JTF regulations.

Offaly County Council can build on existing relationships with industry stakeholders, higher education, statutory partners, local government partners and peatland communities in the Territory to lead the following actions in the draft JTTP;

- Action 1 - to deliver a Green Energy Cluster – new LG Just Transition Team
- Action 2 - Business Supports and Advice (Green Energy) through Local Enterprise Office
- Action 4 - Specialist Staff/Business Incubator – LG Economic Development/LEO
- Action 7 – Investment Sites Scoping Exercise – LG Economic Development/LEO
- Action 8 – Repurposing Sites for Business/Community – LG Economic Development/LEO
- Action 9 – Community led support fund – Local Community Development Committee
- Action 11 – Developing Tourism Potential – LG Tourism Team
- Action 13 – Smart Specialisation – Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan Office
- Action 14 – Improved Local Mobility – Active Travel & Infrastructure Teams

To deliver on the above, Offaly County Council seeks funding to

- Digitalise services and processes within Offaly County Council to provide an enhanced service, reduce costs, maximise staff resources and be an exemplar to other LAs, businesses and communities in Offaly. *Examples include: business process improvements, improved customer service interface, CRM systems, project management tools, planning and housing paperless systems*
- Access technical expertise and resources to drive competitive fund applications and project implementation
- Attract inward investment and enterprise expansion through targeted measures and incentives. These measures would be limited, and criteria would apply.

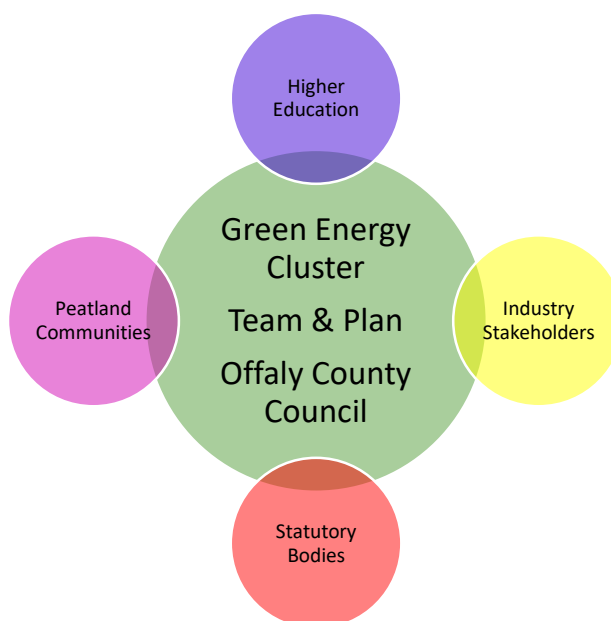
The table below is a summary of Table A8, from page 103 of the EnvEcon Report on the Challenges, Needs and Recommended Actions for the Most Affected Territory.

Just Transition Fund under the Investment for jobs and growth goal

(€millions current prices)

Source	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	Total
Investment for Jobs + Growth	4.975	5.074	5.176	5.279	5.385	5.492	5.602	36.985
EU Recovery Instrument	9.272	18.915	19.293					47.480
	€62.7m			€21.8m				€84.5m

This table shows how much of the JTF must be committed each year to 2027. A significant proportion of the fund must be committed by end 2023. The Irish Government may match the EU contribution of €84.5m to the Just Transition Fund up to an equivalent amount.



Draft Plan Flagship Action 1: The Green Energy Cluster

Offaly County Council can drive the Midlands Green Energy Cluster – hosting the Team, supporting the Steering Group & developing the Vision (See page 13-14)

4. The Territory Most Affected

It is Offaly County Council's position that the most affected territory is the NUTS 3 region of counties Offaly, Longford, Westmeath and Laois. These four counties should remain the relevant territory for the full implementation phase of the Fund and the TJTP.

This position is clearly backed up by the EnvEcon reports published on gov.ie in December 2021. The draft TJTP makes reference to peat and electricity-related closures in Offaly, past and future. However, it is important to be clear about the scale and ongoing nature of such closures i.e. peat fired stations at Ferbane, Rhode and Portarlinton (on the county boundary) in the 1990s; Mount Lucas briquette factory; Shannonbridge Power Station in 2020; Derrinlough briquette factory in the coming years; Edenderry power potentially transitioning out of peat; and the cessation of all peat harvesting by Bord na Móna in 2020.

This rapid transition was 7 to 10 years earlier than envisaged in the 2019 Climate Action Plan, which envisaged a gradual transition over time to the end of the decade. This has had a serious economic and social impact on the county of Offaly.

Notwithstanding this impact, Co. Offaly already has a large number of ongoing projects and project concepts which will, if further supported:

- (i) greatly enhance Ireland's prospects of transition to net carbon zero
- (ii) be exemplars in this energy transition
- (iii) allow County Offaly to 'catch up' on economic and social indicators and
- (iv) potentially assist on leading other counties in the region on the necessary energy transition.

It is also worth noting that communities, companies and statutory agencies across the county engaged very strongly with both Strand 1 and Strand 2 of the Irish Just Transition programme with multiple projects now successfully underway.

Offaly County Council has engaged with its Oireachtas members and MEPs on a number of occasions to make the case that the NUTS 3 counties be identified as the most affected Territory for the Just Transition process and that Offaly be identified as the most affected within the NUTS3 region.

Offaly County Council concurs with the conclusion of comprehensive analysis carried out by EnvEcon (see extract below) which finds that Offaly is the most negatively affected by accelerated decarbonisation, followed by Longford, Westmeath and Laois (Table 7, page 43 of the Report on the Transition Process Toward Climate Neutrality).

To ensure fairness, the rankings from the weighted multicriteria assessment carried out by EnvEcon should be applied to the disbursement of the Just Transition Fund among the NUTS3 counties.

Table 7 Summary rankings from weighted multicriteria assessment

	Direct/Indirect Impacts	Stakeholder s/3rd Party	S - E - E Mapping	Composite Indices	
Weighting	5	1	3	1	Total
Offaly	9	9	9	9	90
Longford	7	5	9	5	72
Westmeath	5	9	9	9	70
Laois	5	5	9	9	66
Roscommon	5	5	7	9	60
Clare	5	5	5	5	50
Galway	5	3	5	3	42
Kildare	5	5	3	3	42
Tipperary	3	5	5	5	40

While the draft Plan has regard to the findings of the above analysis, it provisionally recommends the wider Midlands be included in the draft/accepted by the Commission as the most affected territory. This includes all or part of the following - Galway, Roscommon, Tipperary and Kildare - as well as the 4 Midland NUTS 3 counties.

The inclusion of multiple less negatively affected counties in the Territory will diminish the impact of the fund. Job creation and other supports through the Just Transition Mechanism must deliver for the most affected territory i.e. the NUTS 3 counties.

The specific territory to be covered by the TJTP should be the coherent geographical NUTS3 area reflecting the functional economic territory and the communities, labour market and economic activities affected.

5. Response to Development Needs and Pillars 2 & 3

Section 7 of the EnvEcon report provided useful descriptions of actions 1-10 including the intervention logic, intended impact, lead and supporting bodies envisaged etc. In assessing the importance of all actions it would have been useful to have the same level of detail for actions 10-15 also.

Using the shading system below Offaly County Council has indicated the importance of the respective development needs and actions contained in the draft Plan to it as an organisation. The development needs and actions that are most closely aligned to Local Authority functions and/or where this Council may be, or is already, leading interventions are indicated as most important. Needs and actions which may also be of great importance to the Just Transition but where another organisation has responsibility or is the potential lead, we indicate as having less importance to OCC. For example, Enhancing the Skills profile may be led by SOLAS, DEASP or Dept. of Education so we indicate that it is less important as Development Need from the perspective of **our organisation**.

Order of Importance:	Most Important		Mid		Least Important
----------------------	----------------	--	-----	--	-----------------

Development Needs 1-4	Action No. Draft Plan	Action No. Draft Plan	Action No. Draft Plan	Action No. Draft Plan	Action No. Draft Plan
Modernise Business Create Employment	1 Midlands Green Energy Cluster: Dedicated staff and Development Plan	2 Midlands Green Energy Cluster; Business Supports and Advice	4 Entrepreneurship and Social Enterprise Training & support for low carbon services	12 Expand Midlands Retrofit Programme to Private Housing and retrofit public buildings	13 Supporting Smart Specialisation Strategies
Enhance the Skills Profile	3 Midlands Green Energy Cluster: Training centres of Excellence	5 Green Ambassador Enhanced Employment Scheme	6 Career Guidance Personnel for Secondary Level Students		
Promote Environmental Sustainability and Industrial Heritage	11 Developing the Midland's Tourism Potential	10 Extension of Peatlands Restoration	15 Support for the EU LIFE Project/ Agricultural training		
Enhance the Potential of the Region as a Place to Live and Work	7 Scoping for development sites—FDI, Business and Community Facilities.	8 Repurposing of existing sites – FDI, Business and Community Facilities	9 Community Support Fund for Microenterprise, Active Mobility and Circular Economy	14 Improved Local Mobility	

A response to each of the 15 Actions in the draft Plan is given in Section 5. The following should be considered for inclusion or further developed under the Development Needs in the draft TJTP;

1. Modernise Business & Create Employment
 - Produce an **Integrated Asset and Land Use Plan** for the territory as a baseline for the Green Vision and Development Plan for the Territory
 - Supports for the **creative industries** such as Film, Animation and users of big data
 - Provide supports that enable Local Authorities to **make the Territory more attractive for inward investment/expansion** particularly in the Green Tech and related industries.
 - The achievement of **gender equality**
2. Enhance the skills profile
 - Actions should include active engagement between second and third level education and between third level institutions and industry in the Territory
3. Promote Environmental Sustainability and Industrial Heritage
 - Greater emphasis on supports for the **diversification and greening of agriculture**
 - **Microgeneration** – supports for households, businesses, farms and communities to co-locate energy generation and energy use
 - Include actions to protect and promote **biodiversity, natural, industrial and built heritage**
 - **Electric vehicles** – pilot the provision of added supports and incentives for households to change to EVs (similar to action 12 on retrofitting)
 - Investigate the suitability of HVO as a **decarbonising domestic heating fuel** for rural homes and communities
 - **PCAS expansion** – should be contingent on achieving parallel benefits such as the **provision of amenities and access** and should tie in with community-led projects where feasible.
4. Enhance the Potential of the Region as a Place to Live and Work
 - Include in the objective enhancing the potential of the region to **‘visit’** and **‘invest’**
 - The development of **Tourism** products and services should be high priority action
 - Greater emphasis on creating and supporting **community capacity building** and support for voluntary effort
 - In addition to the scoping and repurposing of development sites, the Fund should enable Local Authorities **to acquire and service industrial sites of scale**, to fit with the just transition needs of the region and the country.
 - Explore options under the Fund and also Pillars 2 & 3 of the Mechanism to address the challenge of providing and maintaining **Roads over Peat**, in the context of the PCAS, to ensure social and economic sustainability of communities in the Territory.

The following Development Needs should be added to those in the draft TJTP;

- **Facilitate greater territorial connectivity** – plan to address infrastructural deficits (grid, gas, fibre, water, road etc.) to unlock the potential for green energy production and technologies and associated industries.
- **Promote Research and Innovation** – build on existing linkages with multiple third level institutions and industry to provide career options for local communities and to facilitate balanced regional development outside of the GDA.
- **Provide Social infrastructure** -provide childcare and eldercare facilities and social care training centres
- **Provide Technical Assistance** – building on existing leadership and expertise in project development, management and delivery, provide direct supports to **Local Government** for the duration of the Territorial Plan to facilitate and deliver LG led Just Transition projects across the Territory.

Project of Scale 1 – Direct Supports to Local Government

As well as the Green Energy Cluster Team and Plan for the territory proposed here, it must be recognised that the most impacted Local Authorities within the territory require staffing and other resources to combat the substantial negative impact of accelerated decarbonisation (see also Page 4).

Offaly County Council has an annual loss of €1.7million in commercial rates income due to national decarbonisation objectives and the closure of West Offaly Power as set out in the EnvEcon reports. Its commercial rates income has also been impacted in the early 2000s by ESB closures in Ferbane and Rhode as well as the social and economic impact of reducing BNM job numbers over several decades.

In order to meet the challenge of delivering existing services as well as delivering on its ambition to drive projects that contribute to a sustainable recovery and transition, Offaly County Council requires direct financial supports.

To deliver on the above, Offaly County Council seeks funding to

- Digitalise services and processes within Offaly County Council to provide an enhanced service, reduce costs, maximise staff resources and be an exemplar to other LAs, businesses and communities in Offaly. *Examples include: business process improvements, improved customer service interface, CRM systems, project management tools, planning and housing paperless systems*
- Access technical expertise and resources to drive competitive fund applications and project implementation
- Attract inward investment and enterprise expansion through targeted measures and incentives. These measures would be limited and criteria would apply.

Development Needs Pillars 2 & 3

It will be essential that the Just Transition Fund does not stand alone as a medium term revenue support to the Midlands Region. It must be accompanied by Government Policy and policy-driven investment choices that give the Territory the framework and infrastructure it needs to compete for sustainable investment, skills, and visitors.

As the Territorial Plan will underpin actions under all three Pillars of the Just Transition Mechanism, the Plan must give consideration to the key, large scale Development Needs of the Territory that cannot be met by Pillar 1 but may be met by Pillars 2 and 3.

The Territory has many large scale infrastructural and other deficits which, if addressed, will make it competitive and attractive for further investment especially by Green industries. Investment in large scale capital infrastructure will connect the territory and allow companies to be central actors and employers in the economy. The infrastructure required is that listed as eligible under Pillars 2 & 3 below.

Similarly, realising the Green Vision for the Territory by further developing actions supported by the JTF will require larger capital and other investments under Pillars 2 & 3. An example might be the acquisition and development of enterprise and industrial lands identified under JTF scoping actions.

Clarification will be required regarding the mandate for agencies of the state to borrow or avail of supports under these pillars subject to the impact on the State’s balance sheet.

The Just Transition Mechanism		
Territorial Just Transition Plan		
Pillar 1	Pillar 2	Pillar 3
Just Transition Fund	Invest EU	Public Sector Loan Facility
Grants	Public/Private	Public
Development Needs	Development Needs	Development Needs
Microenterprises job creation research new technologies, renewable energies, digitalisation, connectivity sustainable local mobility district heating land restoration circular economy upskilling, reskilling social infrastructure	Decarbonisation Economic diversification Energy Transport Social Infrastructure	Projects which do not generate revenue Energy Transport Infrastructure District Heating Networks Renovation/insulation of buildings Environmental infrastructure (waste, water) Circular economy Land & Ecosystem restoration Upskilling, re-skilling, training Social infrastructure including care facilities and social housing.

Pillar 2 – Invest EU Instrument

There are world class, large scale private sector interests based in the most affected territory with project proposals that may be eligible for Pillar 2. These projects and investors have substantial job creation capacity. There is therefore an urgency in making the advisory hub as described below available and in making Pillar 2 supports available without delay. These projects include many forms of economic diversification including social infrastructure, Green Hydrogen home heating, renewable energy generation and storage.

*Extract from Europa.eu - The **InvestEU Advisory Hub** will act as a central entry point for advisory support requests to any project under pillars 2 and 3 of the JTM, as well as for some projects to be financed under the JTF. It will provide tailor-made technical assistance and capacity-building support depending on the need of the project promoter. Advisory support will be available for the identification, preparation, development, structuring, procuring and implementation of projects, and for enhancing the capacity of project promoters to build a strong pipeline of projects in those territories.*

Pillar 3 – Public Sector Loan Facility

There are significant infrastructural development needs in the most affected territory that are of a scale that can only be met by Pillar 3 or other large scale public sector investments. Addressing these deficits will make the territory attractive for investment in economic diversification and job creation. These deficits include transport infrastructure, energy infrastructure, social housing, waste management, and connectivity to grid, gas, water, waste water and broadband. Government Departments or Local Authorities may be able to address these needs with Pillar 3 supports. Again, early access to an advisory hub or technical assistance to explore these needs and options around projects to address them are urgently required.

Extract from Europa.eu - The Public Sector Loan Facility is the third pillar of the Just Transition Mechanism. It will combine €1.5 billion of grants, financed from the EU budget, with €10 billion of loans from the European Investment Bank (EIB), to mobilise between €25 and €30 billion of public investment that will meet the development needs of just transition territories. The facility could be extended in the future to finance partners other than the EIB.

This instrument will exclusively target public entities, providing support to projects that do not generate a sufficient stream of own resources to be financed commercially. Projects are expected to include investments in all types of public infrastructures, such as in the area of energy and transport, district heating networks, energy efficiency measures including renovation of buildings, as well as social infrastructure. Support to fossil fuels related investments is excluded.

6. Response to Actions in the draft Territorial Plan

Including examples of Projects of Scale (green boxes)

In this section Offaly County Council gives a brief response to each of the 15 actions in the draft Plan. Examples are also given (in the boxes with green text) of pipeline projects of scale led by Offaly County Council that will meet the requirement of the JT Fund and deliver on the ambition of the Territorial Plan.

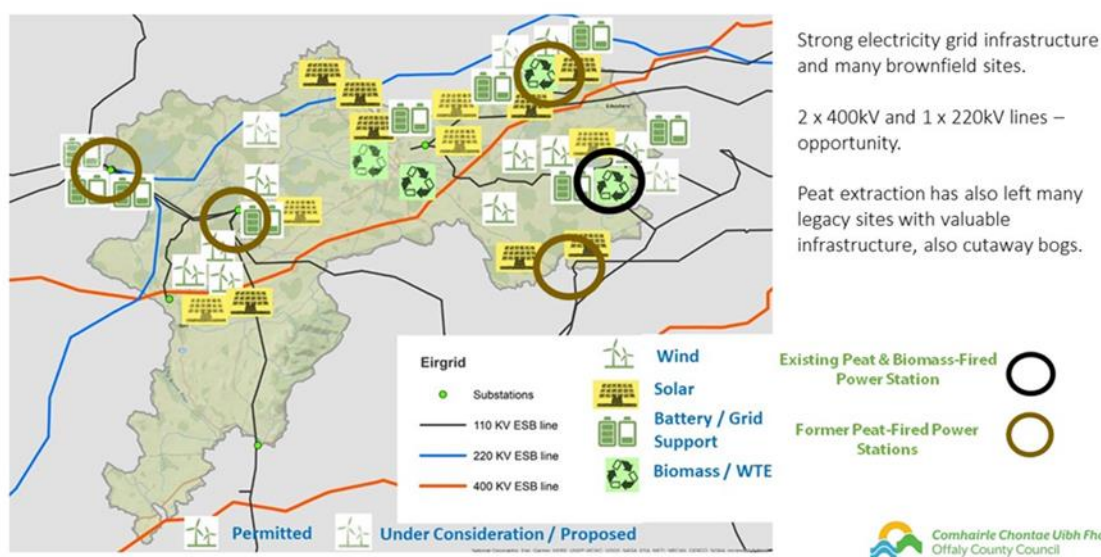
Development Need 1: Modernise the Business Environment and create Employment Opportunities

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 to implementation stage.

OCC Response

Using 'Legacy' Infrastructure – Offaly's Grid Scale Projects 2021



Offaly

Offaly County Council welcomes the inclusion of a Green Energy Hub for the Midlands in the Programme for Government 2020 and that the objective is carried through for investigation and action under the draft TJTP.

County Council can lead on this flagship action, host the dedicated staff team and lead the development of the shared vision and development plan for the Midlands Green Energy Cluster.

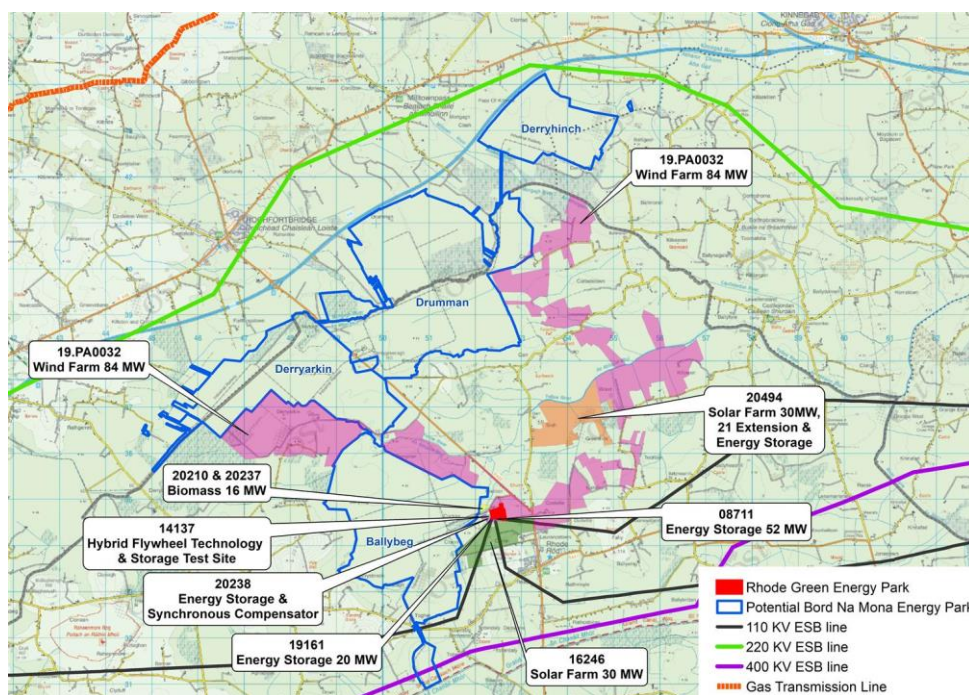
Green Energy policy has been a central feature of Offaly County Development Plans since 2009 and the county is well positioned to be an exemplar to others in achieving, and exceeding, 2030 and 2050 emissions objectives. The evidence for this is summarised hereunder;

2008 – 0 MW renewables operational, c.4MW renewables ‘permitted’ & a further 85MW renewables ‘in planning / pre-application’ in Offaly.

2022 – c.340MW renewables & storage operational, c.**950MW** renewables & storage ‘permitted’ & a further c.**350MW** renewables & storage ‘in planning / pre-application’ in Offaly.

Relationships with energy and other partners including DECC, EIRGRID, Bord Gais, ESB, BNM, TUS (AIT), LOETB, IDA, EI, communities and private industry stakeholders are already well established by OCC. Offaly County Council established the Midlands Regional Transition team (MRTT) which has been a core support to the Irish Just Transition programme and the Just Transition Commissioner.

Offaly has a strong tradition, infrastructure and expertise in energy generation and is well progressed in its transition to renewables. Projects developed by Offaly County Council with support from ESB at both Ferbane and Rhode in the early 2000s have successfully created jobs and sustained communities. Current development of the site at Rhode as a Green Energy Park, taken together with the potential of the ESB owned site West Offaly Power at Shannonbridge and the BNM owned Edenderry Power co-fired station form a natural Green Energy Cluster, with associated infrastructure, in the heart of the most affected. Lanseboro and the wider Territory of the NUTS 3 Midland counties will form a natural extension to this hub.



Rhode Green Energy Park, surrounded by multiple permitted and proposed ‘next generation’ energy developments.

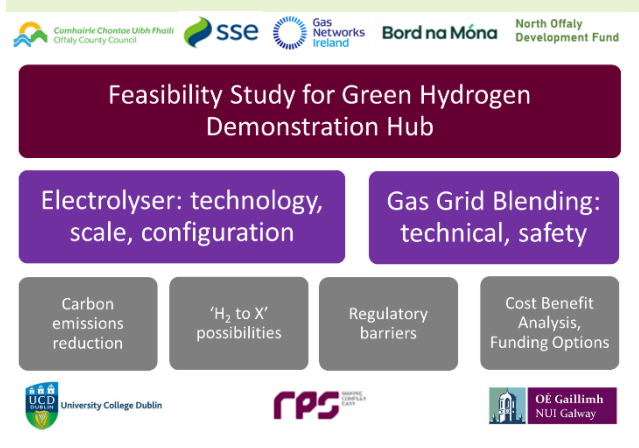
At an energy-related conference in 2013, Offaly County Council suggested the idea of an ‘Energy Park’. This would utilise the land and in particular industrial sites being left over from peat production, the established links between industrial peatlands, the potential for long distance walking and cycling routes using these links, associated adventure, nature and leisure activities and a link with the (then) potential ‘eco-park’ at Garryhinch.

The Irish Just transition Programme has supported aspects of the development of the park. The Programme for Government 2020 contains an objective to “**conduct a feasibility study into the establishment of a Green Energy Hub / Renewable Energy Hub in the Midlands**”.

Project of Scale 2 - Rhode Green Hydrogen Demonstration Hub

Building Ireland’s green Hydrogen ecosystem in the Midlands.

In 2020, an expert report by RPS identified the potential for an energy systems integration hub at Rhode, County Offaly. The project will ignite economic development centred on the energy transition. An important feasibility study combining Ireland’s leading hydrogen experts, energy companies, and the local community is now underway to develop the project.



GNI’s Vision 2050 Report estimates that green hydrogen will represent 13% of the gas network mix by 2050. It will be a key means of capturing curtailed renewable electricity and of meeting Ireland’s target of 7% annual reduction in CO₂ emissions to 2030.

Rhode can form the next step for hydrogen deployment on the Irish gas grid, a stepping stone between current testing at GNI Brownsbarn, and full commercial

deployment. The location is close to the M6 motorway and GNI transmission grid, with a convergence of renewables (wind, solar, battery, biomass and potentially geothermal) and a strong 110kV substation.

Midlands Green Hydrogen Demonstrator Project

A green hydrogen electrolyser will be developed at Rhode, using renewable electricity to create hydrogen gas. The gas will be fed to the nearby gas grid and will also be used to fuel local transport HGV fleets. The project will be the forerunner for green hydrogen growth throughout Ireland. It will be a focal point for upskilling the workforce, developing safety and regulatory standards, and for innovation in hydrogen generation, storage and use. It will learn from and build on hydrogen innovation projects in the UK and across the EU.

- Establish the Midlands as the centre for green hydrogen development in Ireland.
- Encourage development of infrastructure and supply chains for hydrogen in Ireland.
- Enable diversification of employment towards modern clean energy systems.

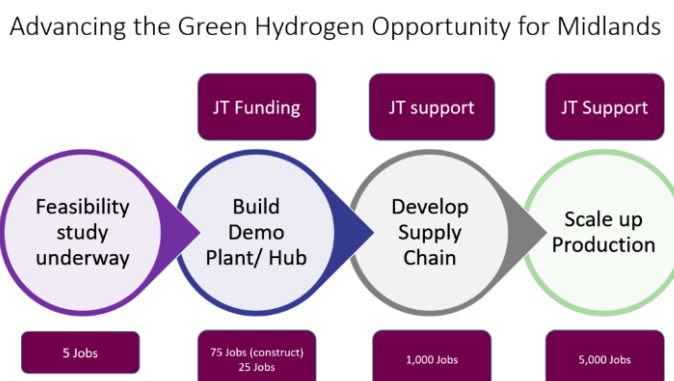
The availability of fully serviced sites and access to the electricity grid at the community-owned Rhode Green Energy Park offers the ideal location. The demonstrator plant creates an opportunity to cluster innovation hub/meeting rooms and a visitor centre creating a focal point for the wider integration of energy systems.

Investment Required: From analysing previous similar projects around the globe, the project capital cost is estimated at €5 - €10 million (depending on scale) from feasibility study to completion.

Employment Creation:

Anticipated Direct employment of 25 people full time to operate the system, with a longer term prospect of **5,000 jobs** in the green hydrogen eco-system.

The project will create a nucleus for research, innovation and will attract a range of employers to the region: transport sector (fuel cell vehicles and retrofit of HGVs), upgrading / retrofitting of gas equipment, focal point for hydrogen training. Industries will also cluster towards sources of green hydrogen, given its attractiveness as a low carbon energy source.



Action 2: Green Energy Cluster Midlands – Business Support 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 business on how to establish and grow one-stop shops for retrofit projects.

OCC Response

The Roadmap of Actions p 70 EnvEcon Challenges Report indicates LEOs (DETE) as the potential lead for this action.

This action aims to provide business supports and advice to existing and start-up construction/retrofit businesses. LEOs will need to be adequately resourced to provide this service to a growing sector.

LEO Offaly can give generic business advice to retrofit businesses. Those businesses would not be eligible for grants, but we could support with enterprise training (Start Your Own Business Course, Costing and Pricing etc.), Networking, Mentoring and if required assisting with Microfinance Loan Funding.

Action 4: Entrepreneurship & Social Enterprise Training 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.

OCC Response

OCC welcomes the objective of promoting green industry and fostering indigenous enterprise creation. Clarity is required as to whether this action is focussed on the development of Social Enterprises only or a combination of social and mainstream enterprise development. The concept of Sectoral Leads (specialist experts) to support has been proposed by OCC/Offaly LEO previously but requires support. Specialist expertise around Green Technology & Renewable Energy, Science & Innovation Food & Beverages, and Advance Manufacturing enterprise development is considered an urgent requirement.

OCC welcomes the proposal to provide mentorship and training within communities to support the development of local supply chains thereby generating local employment. OCC can provide linkages to communities through Social Enterprise Networks, Public Participation Networks in Offaly and other counties in the territory as well as linkages to multi sectoral Local Action Groups in each county (Local Community Development Committees).

LEOs are suggested as a potential lead for this action with SEAI with the incubator location at AIT/TUS. LEOs would require additional resourcing to administer and oversee this action. Business incubators were proposed through the Irish Just Transition programme by multi agency project promoter EMPOWER-ECO which includes TUS Midlands Midwest/AIIT Enterprise Ireland, Offaly County Council, Offaly LEO and BNM. BNM's Accelerate Green project has since been launched at Boora, Co. Offaly. www.accelerategreen.ie

OCC recognises that this is an enabling action and as such consideration must be given to a Year 1 start on elements that meet the JTF criteria around staff and programmes with exploration of medium and long term support potential from Pillar 2 (Invest EU) and Pillar 3 (Public Sector Loan Facility) ESF+ or ERDF. Offaly County Council and its partners can make available suitable locations as business incubators. It is Offaly County Council's ambition, as part of the development of a Green Energy Cluster, to enable relevant elements of third level campuses to locate within the county. Strong project links are already established with AIT/TUS (EMPOWER ECO, Boora), TCD (STREAM Birr), UCD (Rhode Green Energy Park) and NUIG. Examples of suitable campus locations include Grand Canal Dock Tullamore, Rhode Green Energy Park, Boora, and multiple Council owned properties at Birr, Ferbane, Edenderry, Clara and Banagher.

Action 12 – Expand the 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.

OCC Response

Offaly County Council strongly supports this action as a support for transition to carbon neutrality at the level of the citizen and household.

Offaly has traditionally been heavily dependent on carbon-intensive fossil fuels for home heating. **37.9% of Offaly's households use turf as a primary source of heating fuel**, by far the highest in the country and approx. 13 times the national average. The majority of these homes are in communities which have been hardest hit by the employment losses and while fuel poverty is a real and imminent risk, the Just Transition fund could allow Offaly to be an exemplar and leader in retrofitting and low-carbon home heating.

The potential for job creation /new start-ups from energy retrofit (Action 2) would be greatly increased by creating a fund to support private home owners in the territory to retrofit their homes. A bespoke fund should be created to assist private householders in the affected region to top-up existing grants for retrofitting. The SEAI could administer this fund based on the location of property of the grant applicant within the territory for their existing grants.

There is significant world class research, development and experience in home heating and insulation technologies in the county of Offaly. This expertise should be captured in the Green Energy Cluster steering group membership to build on learning from initiatives in other jurisdictions including Northern Ireland. Feasibility studies funded under the Irish Just Transition programme will also inform this action. A substantial pilot in the use of HVO fuel for domestic heating should be explored.

The demand arising from this action will create substantially more retrofitting business opportunities and will demonstrate to other counties how to achieve greening at the level of the citizen.

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.

OCC Response

This action reflects the objectives of the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan around harnessing the potential of the food and beverage industry in the midlands and positioning the region as an advanced manufacturing centre of excellence. Offaly County Council is an

active member of the Midlands Enterprise Steering group and welcomes the proposal to support these objectives through the JTF.

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

OCC Response

OCC agrees with Action 3 which aims to further support the development of the territory as a Green Energy Cluster by providing and enhancing training facilities for retrofit skills through SOLAS/ETBs including Laois Offaly Education & Training Board. This will directly support impacted workers but also the wider workforce and school leavers interested in apprenticeships relevant to retrofitting. Proposed linkages with the Digital Academy for the Sustainable Built Environment (DASBE) are welcomed.

Offaly County Council has a close working relationship with LOETB/SOLAS and will work in partnership with it on this action. OCC may be in a position to provide a suitable location (or locations) for the planned centre of excellence if located in Offaly.

As proposed under OCC's response to Action 12, incentives for private home owners in the Territory to retrofit their homes will greatly support transition at the level of the citizen and will increase the demand for retrofitting training at Centres of Excellence as well as increasing the potential for retrofitting job creation.

It should be noted that the National Construction Training Centre, located at Mount Lucas in Co. Offaly, offers a vast range of training and testing services in construction related areas for members of the public. The Centre is a Retrofitting and NZEB Centre of Excellence for the midlands and is home to the national apprenticeship in scaffolding run over 2 years. The centre also runs the National Skills Utilities Operator Traineeship.

Action 5: Green Ambassador Enhanced Community 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

OCC Response

OCC welcomes the proposed enhanced CE scheme. Such a scheme was identified in early workshops on Just Transition held by the Offaly County Council executive.

Such a scheme would meet the needs both of former workers and the communities they live in. Consideration might be given to extending this scheme to others in the territory who qualify for CE schemes but are not former BNM workers. This would expand the potential of this action to meet social objectives described in the JTF. An assessment of the demand for the scheme from within the cohort of former BNM workers would be required.

Consideration might also be given to extending the range of community and enterprise functions served by the CE scheme. For example, roles connected to amenity and tourism would complement the green ambassador role. Consultation with existing CE, TUS and RSS scheme sponsors would provide a context and inform a gap analysis. There is also significant potential to contribute to the development of the circular economy and social enterprise (Actions 4 & 9) through such a scheme. See Bounce Back Recycling Galway.

The Lead for this action should be DEASP given its expertise and reach within the territory. Local Authorities and Local Development Organisations across the territory would be critical support partners as well as the Circular economy division of the DECC.

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.

OCC Response

Offaly County Council welcomes this action and suggests that the relationship with students from the territory continues through their third level studies. Also suggest immediate year 1 start rather than year 2. Location might be better suited to a second level school if led by an ETB where direct linkages to DES and educational supports can be facilitated while maintaining strong links with the cluster steering group.

Offaly County Council has been the driving force behind introducing robotics to secondary schools in Offaly with the award winning Vex Robotics initiative. This initiative could be extended to the wider territory to encourage STEM engagement and further links with third level including TUS.

Development Need 3: Promoting Environmental Sustainability and Industrial Heritage

Action 10: Extension of Peatland Climate Action Scheme

Expand the current peatlands rehabilitation scheme – the current Enhanced Decommissioning, Rehabilitation and Restoration Scheme – from 33,000 hectares to cover additional hectares designed for rehabilitation or develop and additional/distinct programme for National Parks and Wildlife (NPWS) sites.

OCC Response

The current PCAS is funded to rehabilitate 33,000 hectares of peatland and BNM sites. Action 10 proposes an extension of the programme such that all 79,000 hectares designated for rehabilitation by BNM are included alongside a distinct programme for NPWS sites as well as potentially other private peatlands.

As a local authority OCC has engaged with BNM on PCAS plans for individual bogs in Offaly published to date. It is noted that this action is included in Ireland's Climate Action Plan 2021 Annex of Actions (Action 21) with lead named as DHLGH.

While this action would sustain or temporarily extend BNM PCAS jobs in the short term these jobs are ultimately unsustainable under PCAS alone. **The allocation of a significant proportion of the JTF to this action should be considered with caution as it will not sustain jobs in the long term and will limit the potential of the fund to create sustainable jobs through other JTF actions.**

Offaly County Council considers that any JTF-funded **PCAS expansion** should be contingent on achieving parallel benefits such as the provision of amenities and access and should also tie-in with community led projects where feasible. BNM workers could be deployed to work on the provision of amenities or the maintenance of Roads over Peat. BNM has already engaged with Offaly County Council on the role it could take in addressing Roads over Peat including the transport of the peat base off-site during road reconstruction.

It should be noted that there is significant concern among communities in Offaly regarding the structural impact of Bog Rehabilitation/PCAS on local road structures. As stated under action 14, the provision and adequate maintenance of local roads is central to the social and economic sustainability of peatland communities in Offaly and the wider Territory.

Action 11 – Developing the Midlands Tourism Potential

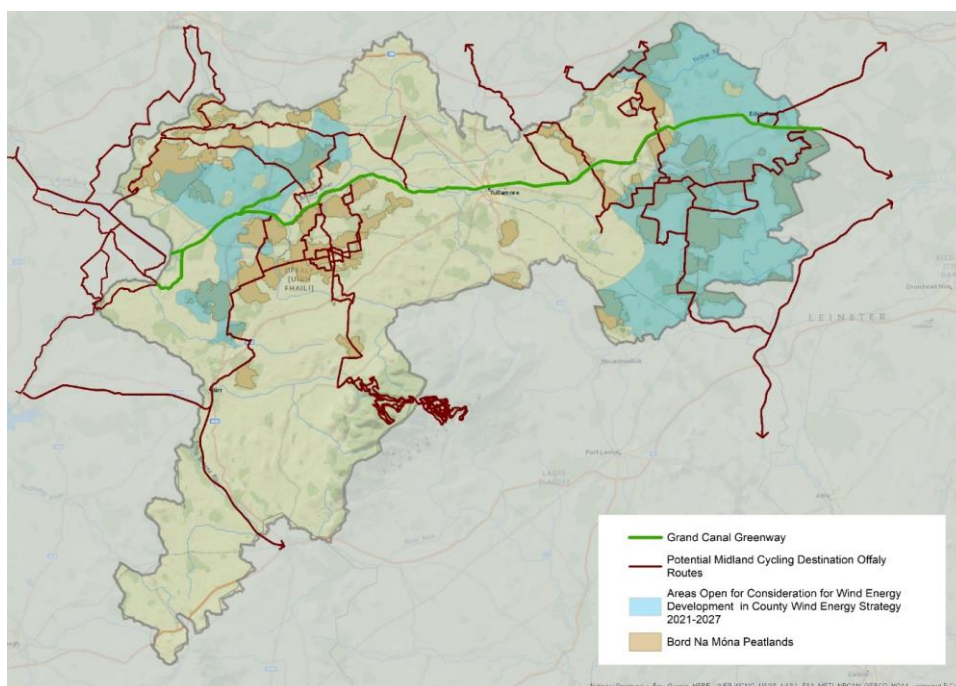
Support Tourism Initiatives in the Midlands links to build on the national JTF tourism projects and Fáilte Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands. Tourism is growing in the Midlands on the back of both the new Hidden Heartlands brand and on the renewed interest in the region from the domestic market 2020 and 2021.

OCC Response

Offaly County Council sees tourism product development and tourism marketing as key priorities that are central to the new economy of the Midlands.

OCC has invested significant resources and effort into initiatives that develop new product (e.g. Grand Canal Greenway and Midlands Cycling Destination, playgrounds, parks) and that enhance the attractiveness of towns and villages (URDF, RRDF, Town & Village Renewal, Birr Destination Town, Tidy Towns, Offaly Heritage Forum) as well as supporting Offaly Tourism Marketing Ltd. directly with staffing. Offaly Sports activities and infrastructure also contribute to the attractiveness of an area and consideration may be given to the provision of sports infrastructure where feasible under the Plan.

The Council has redeveloped its brand around the concept of space – space to grow, space to live, space to innovate etc. The proximity of the county and the region to Dublin offers huge domestic market growth potential as demonstrated in recent years. There is also significant potential also potential in the working holiday market where working hubs are provided in close proximity to attractions and amenities. The Council continues to work in partnership with Fáilte Ireland and other stakeholders to support the tourism trade and develop the brands of Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands and Ireland’s Ancient East.

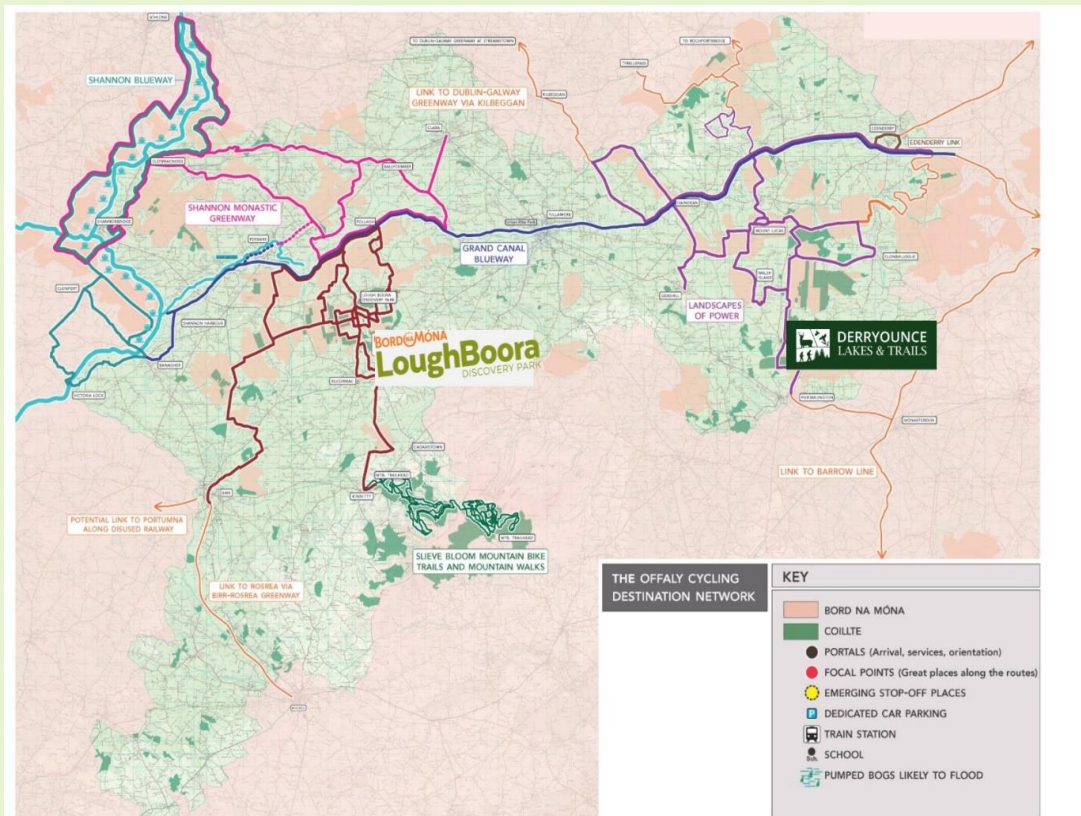


Map showing BNM Peatlands in brown and Wind Energy consideration areas on Blue. The map shows the cross over and potential between the energy landscape, the industrial peatlands and the Midlands Cycling Destination. Grand Canal Greenway in green.

Project of Scale 3 - Midlands Cycling Destination in partnership with Bord na Móna, Coillte & Waterways Ireland

A Feasibility Study commissioned by Offaly County Council in 2016, identified the transformational potential for a network of hundreds of kilometres of walking and cycling trails, largely situated on the former peat-producing bogs for Offaly and the greater region at a scale unprecedented in Ireland.

Map - Midlands Cycling Destination Feasibility Study map



The 300km+ network passes right through the communities' most affected by the 'Just Transition'. It could give a major economic uplift to the communities most affected as well as being a major quality of life attractor to the county.

Offaly County Council, in partnership with Waterways Ireland (North-South body) is nearing the completion of approx. 55 kms of Greenway along the Grand Canal and its branch line to Kilbeggan, Co. Westmeath.

The potential network incorporates approximately 13 possible links to 7 other counties, making it a potentially **major intra and inter-regional tourism and economic development offering**. The phenomenal demand for the Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail on Coillte owned lands and the Grand Canal Greenway on Waterways Ireland lands is testament to the full and real potential of this proposal.

The project is tailor-made for Just Transition funding which would have to include both for a team to deliver it, establish it, market it, support it and then pass on a Just Transition exemplar product for the future.

Project of Scale 4 - Lough Boora Sculpture Park in Partnership with Bord na Móna

The following are extracts from Art in the Landscape study 2021 (OCC & BNM)



Lough Boora Sculpture Park Potential

Lough Boora Sculpture Park is unique in Ireland in terms of scale of the work, number of pieces in the collection and the landscape which it is set in. There are no other sculpture parks or sculpture trails of such significance in Ireland. It is estimated that to recreate Lough Boora Sculpture Park today would cost in excess of €2 Million Euros. Lough Boora Sculpture Park is an important national art collection and as such, there is merit in conversations for national support including with the Department of Culture, Heritage and Gaeltacht and more specifically with the Office of Public Works.

Lough Boora Discovery Park is one of the six lead projects in the Tourism Strategy for Offaly, with Lough Boora Sculpture Park remaining a key element of the customer experience at the Discovery Park. In 2019, Bord na Móna commissioned Tourism Development Ireland to undertake a Feasibility Study / Strategic Report. One of the objectives was to develop 'compelling, exciting and unique visitor experience of national and international significance'. This comprehensive report identifies six principal additions for Lough Boora Discovery Park including 'extending the Park's Art and Nature Sculpture provision through the encouragement of artistic development and growth'. The report also outlined potential opportunities and synergies for an expanded vision for Lough Boora Sculpture Park connected to the 'Boora Works Events Centre' which recommends a repurposing of the redundant industrial buildings close to the entrance of the Park.

The 21st century is about a new, more respectful relationship with nature. A new commissioning series at Lough Boora Sculpture Park is now required and has the potential to address and communicate these issues, in a very powerful and positive way. A new commissioning series at the sculpture park can also work to address the growing awareness of the uniqueness of the Irish bog, its industrial past, the important function of arts and heritage in the cultural identity of the Midlands. The role of the peatlands in economic development of Ireland and the importance of nature to our wellbeing should also be acknowledged. Just Transition of the Midlands and the role of the artist in the climate change debate are also worthy of recognition in this discussion.



Cultural Tourism

A flourishing tourism industry is vital for Ireland's economic well-being. It also contributes to shaping our image and attractiveness as a great place to live, work and invest. While Ireland has a global reputation as a top tourism destination, it is now time to be more ambitious and to tap into the huge potential that exists in this sector. We are, after all, unrivalled when it comes to what we have to offer: breath-taking natural beauty, rich heritage and enviable culture. Ireland's tourism tentacles reach into every village, town and city, employing in the region of 205,000 people, or eleven per cent of the working population. One in nine people are employed in the sector and up to one in five along the Wild Atlantic Way. In total, the sector contributes over €6 billion to the economy, and accounts for four per cent of our gross national product. Any future tourism growth in Ireland will be hard won and the key will be innovation, adding value and strengthening the appeal of Ireland in international markets.

What can we learn from international examples that might help Lough Boora Sculpture Park to lever competitive advantage in the arena of cultural tourism?



Culture and Climate

It is evident that the role of the cultural sector has rarely featured in key climate change reports, strategies and policies. 'Engaging the Public on Climate Change through the Cultural and Creative Sector' Report commissioned by the Creative Ireland Programme 2020 highlights that there is a need to encourage dialogue on how the cultural and creative sectors can engage the Irish public on climate change and in undertaking climate action, and to make themselves an essential part of the climate narrative.

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 to avail of opportunities in sustainable agricultural activities.

OCC Response

Offaly County Council requested and received a presentation from BNM on its approved Peatlands and People EU LIFE Project in 2020. **It is considered that this valuable project could continue without further support from the JTF at this time.** It is noted that this action is included in Ireland's Climate Action Plan 2021 Annex of Actions (Action 22) with lead named as Bord na Mona.

Skills development for seasonal BNM workers who are also farmers, and other farmers in the territory, is a welcome proposal and would link to the objective to develop food and drink clusters in the territory as well as exploring the potential of growing sustainable biofuels. Training and supports for local farmers on sustainable practices and diversification should be developed further as an action in the draft TJTP.

Development Need 4: Enhancing the potential of the region as a place to live and work (include visit and invest)

Action 7: Scoping for Development Sites – FDI, Business and Community Facilities

Carry out a scoping exercise to identify suitable sites for workspace investment including workspaces 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.

OCC Response

Initial scoping will identify potential development sites for;

- a) Workplaces suitable for IDA business
- b) Workplaces suitable for LEO businesses
- c) Remote working hub facilities
- d) Community Facilities

Scoping through JTF. Development through Pillars 2 & 3 or NDP.

The objective of scoping is to seek support to develop office space and community facilities to invite inward investment, facilitate local enterprise, remote working opportunities and cultural and community experiences.

Regional Assemblies, if leading this action, should work closely with the most affected LAs/LEOs regarding existing properties in their possession and their available baseline studies. Care should be taken to create synergies with URDF and RRDF regeneration programmes and to avoid duplication of effort particularly around existing initiatives on remote working hubs and community facilities. This action offers an opportunity to brand the territory as a lower cost alternative or centrally located secondary site location for inward investors and growing businesses.

OCC envisages that Pillars 2 & 3 can and should be mobilised before 2027 (as stated). Many LAs have properties in their possession which can explore pillar 2 & 3 supports immediately. For example, Offaly County Council has suitable properties in its possession in Tullamore, Clara, Banagher, Ferbane, Birr, Rhode, and Edenderry.

Actions 7 & 8 (Scoping and Repurposing) should be extended to state that the JT Fund will support the provision and servicing of enterprise and industrial sites by Local Authorities. The provision of enterprise parks has been a lasting legacy of the North and West Offaly Development Funds and have been the catalyst for the creation of indigenous, sustainable, high quality employment.

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.

Offaly County Council welcomes such a dedicated fund for repurposing of existing sites (refitting with technology and facilities) further to action 7 above. E.g. unoccupied office space, factories, manufacturing buildings which could conceivably be repurposed as suitable workspace.

Local Authorities are well placed to lead on this action with support from IDA + EI and LEOs. The nature and scale of the work can be informed by existing databases and property inventories held by LEOs /LAs and will be informed by Action 7 also.

(As above) Actions 7 & 8 (Scoping and Repurposing) should be extended to state that the JT Fund will support the provision and servicing of enterprise and industrial sites by Local Authorities. The provision of enterprise parks has been a lasting legacy of the North and West Offaly Development Funds and have been the catalyst for the creation of indigenous, sustainable, high quality employment.

The JTM can facilitate Offaly County Council to actively develop large strategic land banks (as per the Grangecastle model in SDCC) to suit existing and new businesses in the Just Transition. The proximity of the sites to ‘pipeline’ electricity supply, within ‘clusters’ and within an energy-positive landscape and policy background with superb natural amenities as an attractor for investment.

Project of Scale 5 - Grand Canal Dock Development Tullamore in partnership with Waterways Ireland



This is a proposal to create an iconic development and bustling haven of business, commercialism, recreation, leisure and tourism all interacting with the resident population at Grand Canal Dock Tullamore which is in public ownership. Waterways Ireland is intending to relocate the operational depot currently located in Grand Canal Harbour Tullamore to a new greenfield site. A new Waterways Ireland site has been purchased to the East of Tullamore, adjacent to the Grand Canal with planning permission for a new depot. By vacating the site Waterways Ireland and Offaly County Council wish to unlock the unique opportunity to redevelop and revitalise the Grand Canal Harbour, Tullamore area, so that once more it becomes an integral part of the town and works as an economic generator.

A funding award of €200,000 under the Urban Regeneration Fund will advance a comprehensive Masterplan for this key Opportunity Site. The tender for the Masterplan will issue in February 2022, and the indicative date for completion will be December 2022.

Location, size and significance of the site

- (1) Zoned mixed use / town centre site in Tullamore designated as an Opportunity Site.
- (2) Comprises a total area of approx. 1.49 hectares 3.45 acres.
- (3) Located approximately 50 minute rail commute time from Dublin, with Tullamore being recognized a key town in the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy.
- (4) Has excellent waterside aspect overlooking Grand Canal Harbour at Tullamore, with full access to the canal and walkway.
- (5) The site echoes the history of the Grand Canal's navigational journeys and holds treasured memories of the harbour for commerce and recreation.
- (6) Within a short walking distance from Tullamore high street and the boardwalk.
- (7) Excellent local amenities and facilities nearby.

Initial conceptual thoughts on identifying potential development opportunities

- (8) Create placemaking around the Grand Canal Harbour at Tullamore – this could open up the site to the public and provide pedestrian entrances, canal bank walkways, seating, etc.
- (9) Integration of the site within nearby urban setting through provision of connecting walking and cycling routes.
- (10) Consideration of a high density mixed-use waterside development scheme.
- (11) Waterfront town locations are compelling destinations for cafés/restaurants/water sports facilities, visitor experiences, and the day and night-time economy.
- (12) Consideration of creating a scaled down version of Grand Canal Dock Dublin, attracting foreign direct investment and internationally traded jobs and in doing so, unlock opportunity for urban regeneration and balanced regional development.



Action 9: Community Support Fund for micro enterprise, Active Mobility and 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 enterprise. Could play a beneficial role in terms of creating direct employment opportunities for displaced workers.

OCC Response

The action is intended to support employment and economic development through micro-enterprises as well as broader territorial developments including active mobility and circular economy infrastructure in line with a defined local development strategy.

Local Authorities administer and oversee Local Action Groups (Local Community Development Committee) in each of the counties of the most affected territory. The potential for the LAGs in the most affected territory to work in partnership on this action should be explored in partnership with the Department of Community & Rural Development (DRCD) and DECC.

Offaly County Council welcomes the proposed bottom-up approach to JTF decision-making envisaged through this action. The proposal by DRCD (submission to consultants) that the JTF could be appropriately channelled through an existing Community led Local Development group (CLLD) (the Local Community Development Committee) or that a distinct CLLD programme for JTF funds be established should be explored.

LCDC committees in the affected Territory are now beginning the development of their Local Economic Community Plans (LECPs) with plan implementation dates concurrent with JTF implementation. Also, implementing partners of the LAGs (Local Development Companies) are now developing their Local Development Strategies for the next LEADER programme. There is significant potential to build on the existing partnerships, local knowledge and experience of LAGs and their implementing partners in JTF implementation.

The LAGs are best placed to administer this fund with existing statutory supports and systems already in place, close working relationships with statutory and community partners (through LEADER, SICAP and other funding streams) and a new Local Economic Development Plan and Local Development Strategy to be agreed in 2022. There is significant scope for the Midland LAGs to work in partnership on territorial initiatives.

Offaly County Council would welcome year 1 implementation of this action. Offaly LCDC has proven their capacity to deliver substantial supports directly to impacted communities and enterprises. It has ranked in the top performing LCDCs over a number of years. There is a strong base of active community and voluntary groups within Offaly and the Midlands with the capacity to deliver community benefits. The LCDCs have also demonstrated their ability to deliver strong social impacts through the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP) (ESF) and supports for social and mainstream enterprises.

Community Support Fund - Offaly Case Study

In the early 2000s, both Rhode and Ferbane Power Stations closed with significant jobs losses and negative impact on the local economy. At the time, ESB contributed €6m to the county to be provided to the two communities, overseen by Offaly County Council and administered by Community-based companies limited by guarantee. North and West Offaly Development Fund companies were established and were hugely impactful in leveraging other supports and creating local job opportunities. 115 jobs are now located at Ferbane Business Park alone. Partnership boards with community and enterprise representation were the decision-making structures for each fund. This pre-dated the establishment of LAGs with the 2014 Local Government Reform Act.

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.

OCC Response

Offaly County Council is co-operating with the National Transport Authority in its planning for Connecting Ireland regarding required connections, linking destinations, and matching plans to County development plan objectives.

In addition to the requirement for more electric vehicle charging points, Offaly County Council would suggest funding Electric Vehicle Grants for applicants from the territory who apply for standard grants. This would build a critical mass of electric vehicles in the region and would be a pilot/exemplar for the country of greening at the level of the citizen/household. It could operate similarly to the proposed bespoke grant for homeowners in the territory to retrofit their homes. The existing administrative structures could apply with a top-up for applicants from the most affected area. Consideration should also be given to electrifying the fleet of vehicles operated by some or all of the Local Authorities in the most affected Territory.

Consideration should also be given to funding research work already underway by Offaly County Council and the Department of Transport on **roads over peat** in the Territory. Offaly has 2192km of roads in the County with 393km of Regional Roads. Every year Offaly County Council maintains and improves the road network. Roads over peat can require maintenance and repair every 2 to 3 years, returning to the same sections. Problems such as potholes, distortion and transverse cracking return due to the inadequate base layer of this highly compressible and low strength material to support the road. Constantly patching and surface dressing the section of road can increase the problem due to added weight.

The provision and maintenance of Regional and Local Roads over peat in the Midlands is a significant challenge for Local and National Authorities. These roads provide critical access to rural communities and are key to the future social and economic sustainability of the

Territory. Offaly County Council has worked with the Department of Transport to complete a comprehensive study of the peat base in the county and has sought funding to pilot new methods of sustainable repair and maintenance. While this is a project beyond the scale of Pillar 1 of the JTM, Pillars 2 & 3 may offer opportunities to address this significant infrastructural deficit in the Midlands.

7. Governance & Partnership

The Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly will be the Managing Authority for the Plan. Every effort should be made to create efficiencies and to support local decision-making by resourcing existing accountable structures such as Local Authorities, Local Enterprise Offices or Local Community Development Committees to implement the TJTP.

The issue of significant reduction in rates income for the Local Authorities most affected by decarbonisation must be addressed by the Just Transition Mechanism. Impacted Local Authorities must be resourced to lead the most affected territory through the transition and through the ongoing diversification of the economy and community development. These Local Authorities have endured decades of reduced rates income and now need to not just 'catch up' with other counties but to 'leap frog' them so that by 2027 the Midlands JT Plan territory is the territory of choice in which to live, work, visit and invest.

The MRTT was established by Offaly County Council to represent the NUTS3 counties and was later expanded to include other counties based on the JT Commissioner's first report. Its secretariat is the office of the MREP and is funded by the NUTS3 Local Authorities only. The governance of the EU JT fund should be a fully resourced partnership between the Regional Assembly and the four NUTS3 Local Authorities of Offaly, Longford, Westmeath and Laois. A whole of NUTS3 regional approach to EU JTF governance is readily achievable in this way. The Local Authorities of the NUTS3 counties have an established relationship with each other and with EMRA and have County Development Plans referencing EMRAs Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy. The core NUTS3 Local Authorities are best placed to develop and deliver a cohesive common vision for the most affected territory. Coordination around issues such as Planning and Policy issues to facilitate fast-tracking can only be achieved within a defined region made up of full county areas. The inclusion of counties based in other Regions will have an impact on the cohesion, coordination and eligibility for an EU Fund.

Government and DECC have a key role in the ongoing engagement and accountability of the key impacted industry stakeholders in achieving a just transition. Their asset and land use plans are central to the development of any plan for a Green Energy Cluster in the territory and other actions funded by the JTF.

8. APPENDIX - PROJECTS OF SCALE

This table sets out projects of scale in this submission against criteria set out Table 4 page 53 of the EnvEcon 'Challenges' Report

Project Name	Logic	Aligned with Plan Action Nos.	Within JTF Scope	Relevant Organisations	Potential Timing
Direct Supports to Local Government in the Territory	Maintaining the Region as an energy provision centre while assisting Local Authorities with economic diversification	1,2,4,7,8,9,11,13,14	+	RA DECC LAs	Year 1
Rhode Green Hydrogen Demonstration Hub	Supporting the green energy growth potential of region, creating high quality skilled employment.	1,2,7,8	+	OCC GNI BNM SSE NUIG UCD NODF	Year 1
Midlands Cycling Destination	Facilitating economic diversification and the growth of indigenous enterprises	1,9,11,14,10	+	BNM OCC Coillte Failte Ireland	Year 1
Lough Boora Sculpture Series Commission	Facilitating economic diversification and the growth of indigenous enterprises through industrial heritage	1,9,11,10	+	BNM OCC OPW Dept. Tourism, Culture & Arts Failte Ireland	Year 1-2
Grand Canal Dock Tullamore	Providing adequate work and education space to prevent migrating and commuting patterns and provide quality infrastructure in the region	1,2,7, 8	+	Waterways Ireland OCC	Year 1-2