



To whom it may concern,

The impact of the recent closure of the two power stations in Counties Longford and Offaly, undoubtedly have impacted adversely on the local economies and communities in terms of job losses and other aspects of quality of life. Creative and innovative concepts and methods in the tourism and leisure sector can substitute for the below mentioned negative impacts.

Those affected by these changes in the first instance include those who were directly employed at the power stations and suffered job losses and those involved in the provision of services across a variety of businesses who relied upon, and who complemented the industry and have lost the opportunity to do this. Those individuals and families who own bogs are also directly affected. A number of our current employees are part of this cohort of people.

The midlands is the area which will be most negatively affected by the transition. While the towns of Lanesborough and Shannonbridge were the locations of the processing plants, the wider Shannon regions have also been negatively affected.

Since the creation of the Irelands Hidden Heartlands regional brand the midlands has experienced increased national visibility and increasing visitor numbers to the area. This is proof that the area benefits from the expertise, guidance and resources of the Irish Government.

As a tourism SME in the Midlands and previously in the West of Ireland, employing up to 80 seasonal workers, and a core team of 8 full time staff, we provide employment to people who have been negatively impacted by the transition. Growth in the industry and the popularity of the area as a tourism destination has led to increased job creation within our organisation. We believe that with further guidance, expertise and resources into the tourism and leisure industry that there will be the potential for more job creation in an industry that requires both skilled and un-skilled workers on a full-time and part-time basis.

A submission by Mola Architecture and Future Analytics to the National Planning Framework suggests that Athlone will play a centre role as a driver of growth in the wider midlands area. - "Athlone town will act as the driver and catalyst of growth in this region over the next twenty years with the support of its sister settlements of Mullingar, Longford Town, Roscommon Town, Tullamore, Ballinasloe and Birr. A proposition that firmly aligns with the Expert Group recommendations based on their review of the NSS".

The report also draws on statistics from FAC which state: "This analysis further illustrates the youthful composition of the local population (Athlone) and the need to ensure the provision of employment opportunities in the future, as well as social and community services and facilities."

In section 2.3 of the Territorial Plan, under the heading Eastern and Midland Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) 2019-2031 it states "The presence of the third level institute in Athlone is identified as enabling the region to play an increasingly strong role as key driver of economic growth. Identified sectoral opportunities for the Midlands include". Athlone Institute of Technology's (AIT) transition to Technological University Status as per the Technological Universities Bill, 2015, was completed in 2021. AIT's Strategic Plan states that "achieve (achieving) TU status, (which we believe) will considerably strengthen the educational and research infrastructure of the region"

While the challenges faced by individuals, families and communities posed by the transition are many, it is necessary for the transition to happen in order to secure the carbon neutrality goals as outlined in the territorial plan. However, provision must be made for those who have been affected. The number of families and communities who are affected and will be affected into the next generations poses a major challenge to the economic and social fabric of the wider midlands area. We believe that the tourism sector is underutilised in the midlands. This poses an opportunity for development of tourism and leisure in the area which will provide both skilled and unskilled jobs on both a part-time and full-time basis.

From our long experience in the tourism and leisure business in the West of Ireland, and latterly in the Midlands (Ireland's Hidden Heartlands) we feel strongly that opportunities beckon, through unique and diverse tourism and leisure programmes and projects which can both compensate for job losses and changes in industry direction and which could bring multiple benefits in terms of quality of life, quality lifestyles and positive environmental enhancements to individuals, communities and locales.

We believe that tourism and leisure projects and facilities play a major role in bringing about social dialogue and appreciation for the natural world, through the utilisation of our natural resources. The familiarisation and immersion of people into nature fosters respect for the natural environment.

We are encouraged by the diverse and holistic approach to the allocation of funding across areas such as economic diversification, up-skilling, re-skilling, training and social infrastructure and transport in an area that has, in the past, been overlooked in broader national development. We welcome any investment in the area which will improve the social and economic fabric of society, whilst paying close attention to the preservation of the natural environment and its integrity.

Going forward, it is hugely important that a diverse range of key stakeholders are included in consultations, planning, monitoring and evaluating the Plan. Local authorities, impacted business, key social and regional actors, agencies, research bodies and communities should all play a key role in determining what supports are needed and best suited to each area. Close monitoring of the implementation of the plan is crucial to the success of the Just Transition. We also believe that increased collaboration and concurrent team work will help in the successful implementation of the Just Transition.

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly is the managing authority for the EU JTF. The EMRA are responsible for areas outside the affected region. We believe that the Midlands could benefit from a governing body who is solely responsible for the region and would prioritise and have a better understanding of the social traditions and economic structures that exist in the region.

In line with the focus on employment skills, lifelong learning and the environment, we are formally requesting that provision is made for indoor and outdoor tourism and leisure facilities which will focus on bringing environmental awareness and social cohesion to the general public in an experiential and immersive manner. The goal of these facilities will highlight the importance of protecting and preserving our natural environs as well as the importance of community and social engagement. We believe that being active in nature and learning about the beauty and complexity of nature, with friends and family can achieve these goals.

We thank you for taking the time to consider this proposal. We would also like to thank you for carrying out this preliminary round of information gathering and consultation. The Midlands is a place of natural beauty, rich heritage and resilient people and in conjunction with the JTF and other stakeholders, the qualities and traits of the Midlands will be enhanced and flourish.

Please do not hesitate in contacting me to discuss this proposal in further detail.

Mise le meas,

11/02/2022