

**Offaly County Council**  
**Submission in response to the Issues and Choices consultation, March 2017**

Co. Offaly occupies a central position in the Midlands with the M6 just to the north, the M7 to the south, busy rail lines to Dublin at Tullamore and Portarlinton, the River Shannon forming much of the county's western border and the Grand Canal spanning the full width of the county. This submission could focus on Offaly's assets alone, however if the NPF is to be a success, there needs to be intra-regional cohesion, coherence, co-operation and compliance, otherwise it will not deliver the benefits possible for Ireland. Therefore, this submission focuses largely on 'big-ticket' items, which could generally be delivered across the four counties of the Midland SPA with Offaly being a central element in these both spatially and in terms of taking a lead in some of the elements. The Midlands has the lowest GVA of any region (APJ for the Midlands). The Midlands, being home to 370,000 people should have potential to be more of an economic force.

This submission correlates to many actions in 'Realising our Rural Potential – Action Plan for Rural Development, in particular actions 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 13, 42, 45, 108, 109, 122, 123, 124, 152, 153, 155, 161, 163, 167, 168, 169, 171, 172, 173, 174, 186, 187, 191, 192, 232, 234 & 274 mainly across the headings:

- Making Ireland a better place to live
- Empowering Local Communities
- Supporting Sectoral Growth
- Skills and Innovation
- Supporting targeted Rural Tourism Initiatives
- Developing and Promoting Activity Tourism
- Developing and Promoting Natural and Built Heritage
- Broadband

## The potential of the Midlands, recognising Co. Offaly's contribution, 2018-2040.

- **An urban counterweight – the potential of the Midlands Gateway and supporting towns still remains.** The Issues & Choices paper alludes to the need for regional compliments to Dublin. Convention appears to be that there would be a small series of 'counterbalancing' urban centres of appropriate scale, with the main focus on the coastal cities, which already have scale. The Midlands contains a series of urban areas at differing scales, which are far enough from the capital city to operate as functioning & prosperous urban centres in their own right, not as concentric overspill satellite commuter towns.

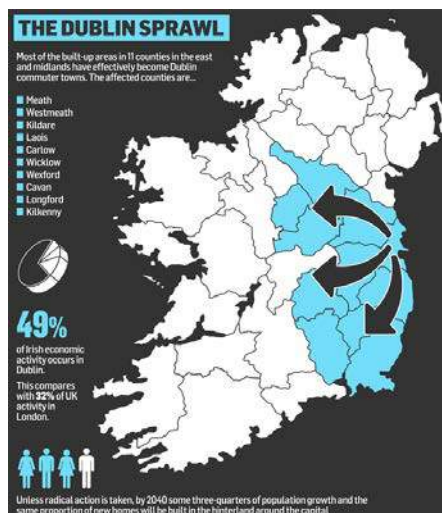
However, economic activity must be the driver for population growth and housing development, rather than commuting. The Midlands has huge potential here. While the NSS lacked follow through & compliance, it did ensure, in light of the Gateway designation, that the ATM towns received significant investment in water services, for example, with the result that there is significant capacity remaining for future growth (approx. 50,000 p.e. capacity in wastewater treatment presently). Similarly, the ERDF continues to deliver major public realm benefits to the towns, again on the strength of the gateway designation.

In general, the main urban centres and in particular the towns within the **ATM Gateway** have retained their positive characteristics during the Celtic Tiger era, partly due to their distance from the GDA. While experiencing population growths of 30-35% over the period of the NSS they did so while largely retaining their structure and character as attractive, robust towns. They also adjusted their long term statutory plans to accommodate accelerated growth. This needs now to be turned into an opportunity.

The ATM towns, supported by Longford and Portlaoise are therefore primed to deliver jobs, homes, services and quality of life sufficiently far from Dublin to be one of the effective counterbalances required. Without the focus which such a designation would bring, the danger is that development would continue as business as usual – i.e. unplanned overspill from the GDA. For this or any designations to be a sustainable option this time round, effective compliance mechanisms need to be specified in the NPF. In addition, resources will be required at regional and national level to monitor and if necessary, adjust the NPF delivery in real time, without succumbing to overcompensation due to inevitable economic cycles.

Copy of a well-publicised media map indicating the 'Dublin sprawl' (Paul Melia, Irish Independent).

The ATM towns, particularly those of Athlone and Tullamore are at the far western edge or outside of the indicated zone making the case for an urban counterbalance at a remove from the existing GDA overspill areas.



- **The source of Infrastructure and Services.** While the GDA hosts much of the higher order services on which the region and country depends, the Midlands hosts a very large proportion of the infrastructural service raw materials facilitating this activity. For example, in no order of preference, water, amenity, energy generation, power transmission, waste treatment and reuse. It is imperative that this is recognised and built upon in the sectoral aspects of the NPF, in particular by ensuring that the added value of the resources accrues to the sub-region, such as R&D, development, head office, administration etc.
- **Cheaper land and a commuting workforce which would relish the opportunity to work locally.** There is a need for consolidation, catch-up and stabilisation in many of the towns to the east of the region, many of which had double digit population growth in the past three censuses, but with less than commensurate employment growth. Examples would be Edenderry & Portarlington. This, in addition to the availability of good value serviced land presents an opportunity for employment investment at varying scales to a receptive population. The delivery of the **National Broadband Plan** is a fundamental part of making this happen because while 53% of Offaly premises have high speed broadband (30mbs) available, c.90% of the landmass isn't included in this. A potential lower cost alternative to Dublin docklands for tech start-ups exists in sites like Tullamore harbour.
- **Quality of Life and Choice.** The Midlands counties have a well-developed 'market town', hierarchical structure of settlements with attractive settlements of all sizes. This was challenged somewhat by the overspill urban development from the GDA in the late 1990's, through the 2000's. However, for much of the region, the structure remains relevant and a strength for the future. It is imperative that housing development is aligned with employment and sustainable travel patterns in the future. The attractive and relaxed medium and smaller sized settlements of the Midlands have potential to attract the 'grey euro' as a place to retire, enjoy leisure and a good quality of life. The success of this would be dependent on measures to revitalise many towns in terms of public realm, population and services.
- **An existing and rapidly expanding enterprise culture in a central location.** Allied to the points above regarding good value serviced land, excellent quality of life and choice, Co. Offaly hosts an increasing number of exciting start-ups in the technology and food areas in particular. Of the 80 food producers in the Midlands Food Directory, half are in Co. Offaly. Access to Limerick and Maynooth Universities could be built upon in terms of industry outreach, in addition to that existing in Athlone IT. The I - LOFAR (Irish Low Frequency Array) in Birr, under construction during 2017, will connect Ireland to the International LOFAR Telescope and will give new views of the Universe and inspire young scientists and engineers. Offaly County Council applied for and was successful in securing €316,780 towards the creation of an inspirational learning space at the site. This innovative project is recognised to be of strategic importance to Offaly, the Midlands and Ireland. The opportunities arising from this project encompass STEM education, astronomy, economic development (particularly in the area of Big Data) and tourism.
- **A 'Natural' playground.** If an area is to act as an effective counterweight, convention would normally be that it is separated from the large city by a greenbelt. The eastern Midlands hosts an enormous 'brown-belt', that is, tens of thousands ha. of cutover and cutaway industrial peat lands, much of which, will, during the course of the NPF, be ripe for continuing reinvention into amenity and biodiversity purposes among other uses. The total area of peatlands in the Midlands is probably over 100,000 ha. The region also boasts a network of hundreds of kms of fine **waterways** and spatially it represents the 'crossroads' of the two Canals, the R. Shannon and the R. Barrow. Furthermore, there is a wealth of **heritage** features dating back thousands of years, many of which are visible with little

effort and the region has an expanding discovery and **adventure offer**. All of this is within 1 ½ to 2 hours from approx. 2m Irish people and ½ way West and 1/3 way South for overseas visitors. The potential of all of this is enormous in terms of:

- o Overseas tourism, especially long distance walking and cycling, heritage discovery and 'off the beaten track' type activities.
- o Domestic tourism offer, especially walking and cycling, well within the range of a day out for a population of almost 2m people, or a weekend away for more.
- o Quality of life offering as an attractor for business and employment investment.
- o A place to play, relax & breathe for the inhabitants of the GDA.

The potential for a 500km+ linked network of major off-road cycling and walking routes is one of potential international significance if carried out to a high quality standard and in a co-ordinated orderly fashion. That is even before the local links such as Offaly County Council / Bord na Mona / Coillte's *Midland Cycle Destination* (hundreds of kms and which is an action for delivery in the Action Plan for Rural Development) and many other local initiatives throughout the region come into play – linked to the main routes.

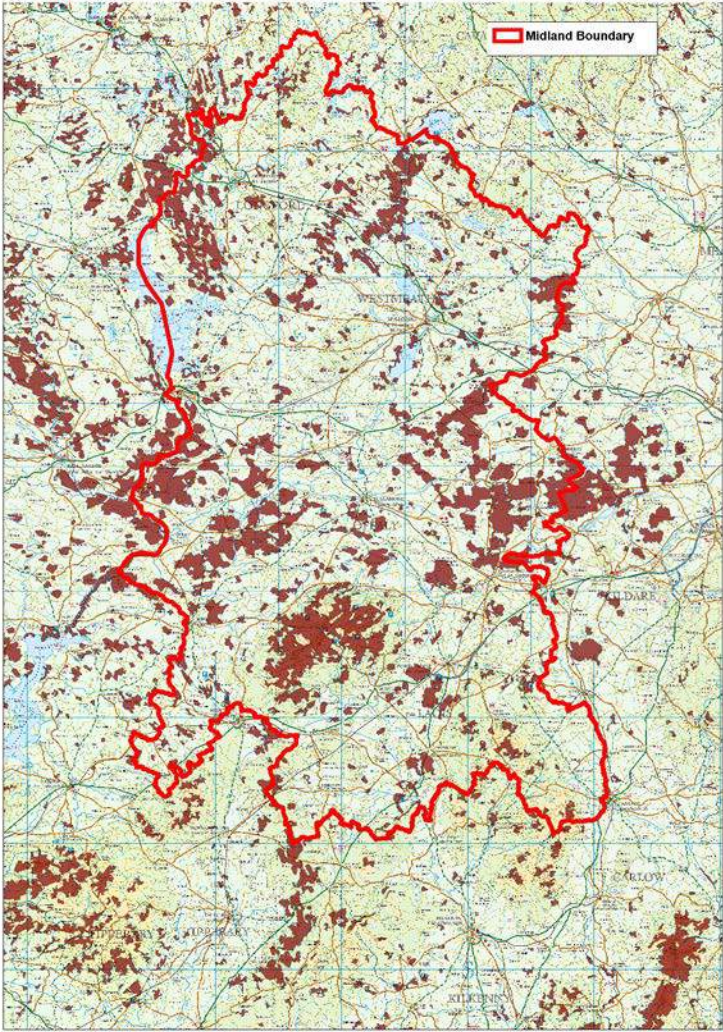
The potential of the **Slieve Bloom Mountains**, only just over an hour from Dublin has been recognised since the 1980's when consideration was given to designating it as a National Park. The area was subsequently designated as an Environment Park with little official recognition / funding. Offaly and Laois County Councils have had a joint policy document for the mountains in place since the 1990's. The mountain range which is one of the oldest in Europe is very popular for walking and rambling with a very successful walking club and festival. The Councils have worked extremely hard in facilitating the potential development of an 80km network of Mountain Bike Trails by Coillte. This would be a National Centre and together with Ballyhoura and Coolaney, Sligo (also proposed) would represent an important **international visitor attraction**. A designation for the mountain range in the NPF would give the impetus to do more. It would also increase the potential for tourism and environmental funding in order to further develop the range in an appropriate, sustainable manner, in particular the necklace of villages surrounding it.

The Midlands hosts some key tourist attractions which are, through Ireland's Ancient East, starting to become a larger connected package. The Midlands is home to an impressive network of monastic heritage. The following tourist attractions are already some of the largest in the country in terms of visitor numbers (2015 figures generally).

- o Laois: Emo Court, Rock of Dunamase, Abbeyleix Heritage House, Heywood Gardens
- o Longford: Centreparcs (under construction – est. 250,000)
- o Westmeath: Athlone Castle, Kilbeggan Distillery, Hill of Uisneach
- o Offaly: Clonmacnoise (160,000), Tullamore D.E.W. (30,000), Birr Castle (50,000), Slieve Blooms, Lough Boora Discovery Park (91,000), River Shannon cruising.



This map shows a general GIS merge of peatlands, large areas of forestry lands and wetlands. It depicts the enormous potential for 'post-peat' Green Infrastructure / amenity developments at a number of locations throughout the region.



- **Peatlands / Publicly Owned Lands.** The Midlands hosts a large area of state owned lands, from peatlands, to forests, to nature reserves, waterways and heritage sites. The figure for Co. Offaly is almost 25%, an advantage which precipitated the development of the *Midlands Cycling Destination* feasibility study which is an action for delivery in the Action Plan for Rural Development. The industrial peatlands are a resource of probably over 100,000 ha. which will transition to after uses ranging from amenity to biodiversity to flood management to energy development to industry and many more. An integrated 'holistic' plan was flagged in the MRPG's 2010 with similar potential for afteruses noted in the MRPG's 2004. With the 'post peat' era coming very soon and with some large industrial peatlands already developed or in planning for after use in an ad-hoc fashion, this is now of critical urgency. Otherwise, the integrated opportunities for the Midlands and Ireland Inc. will be lost. A **Peatlands National Park(s)**, centred around the Bog of Allen and the Boora / Blackwater bogs and also the north midlands bogs (Lough Ree / Mid-Shannon) bogs could bring significant opportunities for outdoor tourism, accommodation, cafes, bike and sports equipment hire, adventure activities, nature tourism, food niche tourism and much more. Because the bogs are quite finite entities, the 'restrictive' element which might normally be associated with a National Park might be lessened therefore and buy-in increased. It is noted that this proposal closely aligns with action 187 of the *Action Plan for Rural Development* - a **National Peatlands Park** & centre of excellence. Combining this offer with the 500+ kms of potential waterways walking / cycling routes further enhances the opportunities of a major international tourism offering.

- **Education – Third Level / Outreach** The IBEC Local Economic Indicators Report 2017 cites the Midlands as having some of the lowest percentage of graduates and STEM graduates in the country, with Westmeath being a relative exception. There is potential for a University in Athlone to keep young people in the region for 3<sup>rd</sup> level so they may be more likely to settle in the region due to spin-off employment, continued personal links etc. Outreach facilities in one or more other towns could focus on the likes of renewable energy, emerging rural based sectors, focus on apprenticeships related to emerging technology, etc., in order that the Midlands gets its share of the added value of such sectors and not just the end products. Similarly, investment in other skills related to the energy industry could pay dividends, particularly if the region is to benefit in terms of added value from energy developments. Tullamore hosts one of the larger teaching hospitals in the country, a facility which has been facilitated by large public investment.

### Sectoral Issues where Offaly and the Midlands have potential:

- **Dublin Water Supply.** Irish Waters 'Needs' report (2015) for the water supply project cites a potential economic benefiting corridor through the Midlands as a result of the pipeline crossing and serving part of the region. The report suggests a supply of (100m<sup>3</sup>/d) from this project, with the associated potential for 150,000 additional population growth (Dublin Water Supply Project Needs Paper, Feb. 2015). This should be taken into account in the NPF, firstly in terms of the potential for population growth but secondly to consider protecting existing supplies in order to keep some of the new supply for employment – allowing sufficient 'headroom' for windfall type developments which may require lots of water.
- **Green Credentials.** A clean environment can attract business. International investment is increasingly dependent on 'green credentials'. The relatively unspoilt Midlands has opportunities here if it is planned and executed correctly. The green 'quid-pro-quo' for industry could be tapped to assist in developing access / amenity / biodiversity / habitat restoration potential, particularly in relating to the industrial peatlands.
- **National Secondary Routes** need to be a major focus for investment now that we have an excellent motorway system through the Midlands. (Passing lanes, realignment, improvement).
- **Sustainable Travel.** This is obviously a challenge given the dispersed nature of the region's population and the small size of even our largest settlements. However the NPF could continue to promote the NSS's aspiration of 'bringing people and jobs closer together', with follow through / review measures, also stipulating that all larger settlements have urban cycling and walking strategies with a particular focus on schools, employment areas and town centres, with cross-departmental investment to match. As the country will have to move towards decarbonisation during the term of the strategy, protection of the expansion potential of existing single track **rail lines** and former rail lines would need to be considered as part of the framework, in addition to consideration of enhanced high speed railways, from Dublin to Galway for example.
- **Tourism.**
  - The NPF, given the proposed alignment with the Capital Plan poses a major opportunity to build on the crossroads / connectivity of the **waterways** across the region, particularly in terms of cycle and walking links. Taking the Grand Canal (c.145km from Dublin to the River Shannon), Royal Canal (c.130km from Dublin to the River Shannon), the callows of the River Shannon (c.95km from Rooskey to Banagher) and the River Barrow (c.120km from Dublin to

St. Mullins, Carlow), there are almost 500km of potential cycle and walking routes possible. This of course doesn't count others already developed - like the NCN from Athlone to Mullingar, others in development and the plethora of local routes such as those in the *Midland Cycle Destination*, Co. Offaly. Approximately half of this 500kms of the aforementioned waterway routes is in the Midlands and passes through some of the richest and most diverse rural landscapes. It goes without saying, if developed appropriately, the Dublin and Mid-East Region and its neighbouring South East sub-region would have a world class tourism offering. The figure for Germans (as an example) bringing their bikes outside the country each year is reportedly 9 million. Large numbers travel from the UK to the Low Countries to cycle on holiday. An offering on the scale as outlined above would surely attract some of this market given in particular given all the other things on offer such as discovery, heritage, food and drink, the Irish welcome etc. Given the high level spatial emphasis of the NPF, we believe such large opportunities should be cited within it.

- **Peatlands** have enormous potential as amenities as part of an integrated after use plan. Most are connected by railway / right of way. See 'Peatlands / publicly owned lands' above.
- The developments of the **Lakelands** brand would advertise the extraordinary water based scenery and activities that the wider area of the centre of Ireland has to offer. A spatial recognition in the NPF would assist this delivery.
- The impressive network of eskers, in particular the Eiscir Riada is not only a geological, landscape and biodiversity treasure, but also often acted as ancient highways east-west through the region, the Sli Mor being a well known example and one which has 'camino' type or geo-park possibilities.
- **Adventure tourism** potential, domestic and overseas. This can be complimentary to the adrenaline packed activities along the coasts and could reduce the pressures on the sensitive tourist spots along the coasts by ensuring visitors spend a few days in the Midlands on their way south, west or north.
- There are opportunities to link both physically and conceptually, the identified gems of **Ireland's Ancient East**.

- **Energy.**

- Offaly and the Midlands are close to the main centre of demand. The region boasts lots of space and a relatively low population density.
- However the Framework for Renewable Energy Development (DCCAE), in preparation since 2013 is urgently needed to inform and involve communities. There must be a 'plan'.
- The 'plan' must be clearly justified on Ireland's climate change obligations and leadership opportunities, also on the advantages for communities and on protection of existing communities.
- The energy industry is stated to already support 4,000 jobs and it is perceived as being only at the beginning. The Midlands needs and has the potential to host the 'added value', R&D, assembly, headquarters associated with existing and new energy technology, not just the 'end product'. The region has the space and the people to work in the industry. Co. Offaly has to date been extremely proactive and responsive to the renewable energy industry. For example, a waste to energy plant is under construction outside Tullamore, a number of biomass and energy storage companies have secured planning permission or are commenced in the Rhode Business Park. The county has had some strong preliminary enquiries regarding energy storage given the legacy of strong electricity grid nodes left behind after the decommissioning of former power stations. Bord na Mona has delivered an initial 7kms of publicly accessible walkways / cycleways through its 80MW Mount Lucas Windfarm, precipitated by planning conditions and has followed on to provide a purpose built education

and visitor centre on the site. The development of the **Midlands Regional Energy Hub** centered on Daingean Co. Offaly will build on the industrial and cultural heritage of the energy industry of the region and links to emerging renewable energy technology, in particular focussing on tangible links with relevant third level centres. All of this should be a factor in securing the higher order, employment generating aspects of the industry as it grows.

- o The Offaly County Development Plan has since the 1990's recognised and promoted the opportunities posed by a large suite of former industrial peat processing / energy sites. Co. Offaly has extensive and positive policy in relation to these and a number of energy developments in particular have been accommodated on such sites.

### Suggestions for what the NPF might deliver at a National Level.

- The NPF needs to look closely at sectors, particularly in the rural area to ensure that different rural area types can focus to their natural advantages and competitiveness. The Issues & Choices paper alludes to this.
- The Issues & Choices paper has given strong commitments to an emphasis on **place**. Sense of place, public realm, connectedness, added value to its surroundings should be central to the analysis of all development, no matter where it is located. Although hard to quantify, if the NPF could specify oversight or review measures under this heading it would give decision makers an impetus to continue striving for measurable quality on place making.
- About 40% of Ireland's population is 'rural'. Reversing the trend for dispersed housing, which is not functionally connected to its place can result in re-focussing much of our rural residential development into our towns and villages, many of which have been in serious decline. Incentivising this over a sustained period of time will be required given the scale of decline in many settlements. Within a properly functioning urban and rural settlement structure, every place has its role. There will still be people who 'need' to live in the rural countryside. For those who seek an alternative, enhanced focus and investment would assist the development and renewal of attractive, functioning rural towns and villages.
- **The NSS wasn't followed through fully.** There was neither a whole-of-government nor a whole-of-local government delivery, and non-compliance was an issue. The €300m Gateway Innovation Fund was not allocated, having accepted applications. Notwithstanding this, much public investment was actually directed and expended as per the NSS.
- The outcomes from the NPF must be ensured by National and Regional **oversight** which isn't allowed to disappear or downsize during a downturn.
- Following from this, it is considered that the NPF should be sufficiently specific to give certainty in roles for regions and larger towns to avoid the non-compliance with the NSS at county development plan level being replicated at RSES level this time around. The size and diversity of the regions would suggest that self selection of roles across a region without clear direction from the NPF could damage the chances of success of the NPF.
- Could the NPF set down simple but well thought out National Indicators? For example by 2040 the overall goals could be things like to be healthier, greener, smarter etc. with associated targets / indicators set out.

End