

Minutes of Monthly Meeting of Offaly County Council
Held on 12th December 2022 at 2pm, in Áras an Chontae, Charleville Road,
Tullamore and via Zoom

The Meetings Administrator carried out a roll call to confirm attendance

Present

Cllr. Frank Moran Cathaoirleach

Cllr. John Carroll	Cllr. John Leahy
Cllr. Clare Claffey	Cllr. Tony McCormack
Cllr. John Clendennen	Cllr. Sean O'Brien
Cllr. Noel Cribbin	Cllr. R. McDermott
Cllr. Eamon Dooley	Cllr. Peter Ormond
Cllr. Neil Feighery	Cllr. Danny Owens
Cllr. Eddie Fitzpatrick	Cllr. Liam Quinn
Cllr. Mark Hackett	Cllr. Ken Smollen
Cllr. Declan Harvey	

Apologies

Cllr. John Foley

Officials in Attendance

Ms. A. Delaney, Chief Executive; Mr. T. Shanahan, D.O.S.; Ms. S. Kennedy, D.O.S.; Ms. A. Dillon, D.O.S.; Mr. M. Connolly, H.O.F.; Ms. O. Martin, H. of LEO, S.E.O.; Ms. O. Farrelly, T.O.; Mr. G. Bruton, Meetings Administrator; Mr. E. Fennell, SEO, Mr. C. Kelly, S.O. and Ms. L. Carbery, C.O.

Cllr. F. Moran, Cathaoirleach, joined with the members in congratulating Ms. A. Dillon on her new role as Director of Services and they wished her every success in her new position.

Vote of Sympathy

A Vote of Sympathy was unanimously extended to the following:

Ms. Una Heerey, Offaly County Council, on the death of her mother Susan Heerey.

The Chief Executive, on her own behalf and on behalf of the staff of Offaly County Council, joined with the members in this vote of sympathy.

1. Confirmation of Minutes

On the proposal of Cllr. J. Leahy, seconded by Cllr. N. Feighery, the members resolved to adopt the following:

- Minutes of the In-Committee meeting of Offaly County Council held on Monday 14th November 2022
- Minutes of the Statutory Budget meeting of Offaly County Council held on Monday 21st November 2022
- Minutes of the Ordinary meeting of Offaly County Council held on Monday 21st November 2022

2. Minutes for Noting

The members noted the following minutes:

- Minutes of the Community, Culture & Emergency Services Strategic Policy Committee meeting held on 8th June 2022
- Minutes of the Corporate Policy Group meeting held on 14th October 2022
- Minutes of Land Use, Planning and Economic Development Strategic Policy Committee meeting held on 15 November 2022

3. Planning and Development Act, 2000 as Amended, Part 8 of the Planning and Development Regulations, 2001 as Amended

On the proposal of Cllr. E. Dooley, seconded by Cllr. J. Leahy, the members resolved to adopt under the Planning and Development Act, 2000 as Amended, Part 8 of the Planning and Development Regulations, 2001 as Amended, for the proposed development at Fairgreen Town and Village, Ferbane.

4. Tourism Presentation

Ms. A. Dillon introduced this item and advised that Ms. O. Farrelly, Tourism Officer, would deliver the presentation to the members.

Ms. O. Farrelly started with a review of 2022. She updated the members on the re-branding of Offaly tourism to Irelands Hidden Heartlands, showcased by the River Shannon and the Beara Breifne Way. She brought their attention to two suites of promotional videos targeting the outdoor recreation market. She updated the members on the summer marketing campaigns, which involved radio, social media, TV and publications. She highlighted the visit of Sinead Hussey, RTÉ Midlands correspondent to the Birr Balloon Festival 2022. She advised the members that a PR company was engaged in March 2022 and she outlined the coverage figures, press releases and print advertising that was undertaken. She provided an update on the Fáilte Ireland Keep Discovering campaign which featured Tullamore Dew Distillery, Birr Castle and the Slieve Blooms and she also advised on the promotional materials for Offaly outdoors, Golf facilities and Lough Boora. She welcomed the return of the Tullamore Show and the success of the Visit Offaly stand at the show. She updated the members on training, networking, the Slieve Bloom Destination Development Programme and Leader funding. She highlighted media coverage in various publications, including the 'Ireland of the Welcomes' magazine article titled

'Phoenix from the Ashes'. She advised the members that the stock of Tourism high resolution images has increased to 8,000.

Ms. O. Farrelly updated the members on the outlook for 2023 including efforts to increase membership of Offaly Tourism Marketing (CLG) and the 5 year Strategy 2023-2027 to be completed by Q2 2023. She highlighted the upcoming projects such as Master Plans for Tullamore Harbour, Clonmacnoise and Banagher Marina. She noted Fáilte Ireland's Destination Towns, the Visitor Experience for Mid Shannon region, continuation of works on the Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trails and the Grand Canal Greenway. She also brought their attention to Just Transition projects and Hidden Heartlands priorities.

The Cathaoirleach thanked Ms. Farrelly for her informative presentation; he noted the importance of developing a Tourism Strategy and that this Strategy would be one of the cornerstones of the Economic Strategy for the County.

The Members thanked Ms. Farrelly for her comprehensive presentation and made a number of comments and observations. It was noted that the Grand Canal did not feature in the Presentation and that this was an important tourism asset that could be utilised to a greater extent. It was suggested that the Council should engage with Waterway's Ireland to develop a strategy to make better use of the Canal. It was noted that there was a shortage of accommodation in the county that was affecting visitor numbers. It was also suggested that the Tourism section could work with local hotels to provide accommodation linked with the events held in the county during the year.

The Members noted that Offaly was now part of the "Hidden Heartlands" brand, and that it was promoted as a tourist destination under this brand on the national airwaves. However, they were concerned that County Offaly was not promoted with the same prominence as other Midlands counties. They welcomed the liaison with Fáilte Ireland and noted the success of the Tourist Office established in Tullamore. They noted the success of the Greenways as a tourism asset, and that a number of small business had been established which serviced visitors on the route. The Members noted that there were on-going maintenance costs associated with the Greenways and queried if consideration had been given to funding these costs. They noted the recent installation of the Moby Bike scheme in Tullamore, which was growing in popularity. They sought details on the locations and the number of users on the free Wi-Fi system on the Greenway.

Some of the Members noted that there were assets in North Offaly, i.e. Derryounce Lakes, Croghan Hill etc. which were not advertised under the brand. It was noted that not all major stakeholders in the county engaged with the Tourism section, and that further input from Bord na Móna could be sought. The Members noted that the county should be capitalising on the reduced costs of accommodation in the Midlands as a way of drawing in overseas tourists, who might use the county as a base to explore other parts of the country. They noted that the Tourism section should focus on unique experiences and activities available in County Offaly. They suggested that a survey should be conducted to establish where tourism business was being generated, and the findings of this survey could allow the industry to develop a strategy to retain the visitors in the county for longer periods.

It was noted that the Tourism section had progressed well since it was established in 2014/2015 and the infrastructure in the county had grown despite the challenges of the past two years. It was suggested that Just Transition funding should be sought for the establishment of a National Outdoor Event Centre in the county. It was also suggested that the boglands in the county could be awarded National Park status and the Council should endeavour to seek this status. It was noted that Fáilte Ireland was to receive €68 million from the EU Just Transition Fund, and the members agreed that the

bulk of this fund should be invested in the areas most affected by the de-carbonisation process. The Members agreed that the Council should write to Fáilte Ireland to seek a meeting to discuss their plans for the disbursement of this fund.

The Members discussed the numbers on the Tourism forum and queried if the subscription fee to this forum should be reduced or eliminated to encourage tourism providers to join the forum. They enquired how the Tourism budget compared to that of adjoining Counties.

Ms. O. Farrelly thanked the Members for their positive comments and observations. She responded to the queries raised. She noted that the Fund allocated to Fáilte Ireland was broken down into four general categories; Trails, Amenities, Accommodation and Website development. She noted that County Offaly is well positioned to take advantage of the money allocated towards the development of trails. She advised that Fáilte Ireland plan to commence working on an Action Plan in the New Year in relation to this fund. She indicated that she would review the Tourism budgets in adjoining counties and revert back to the members on same.

She noted that a survey would have to be undertaken in conjunction with stakeholders and that the current strategy worked toward retaining visitors for longer periods. The Tourism Section was engaging with stakeholders, however, staff resources were proving to be a challenge. In relation to the comments on Derrycastle Lakes, she noted that work was ongoing with this asset to establish a unique brand for promotion.

She noted the Members comments on the Irelands Hidden Heartlands brand and advised she would address these concerns with Fáilte Ireland. She noted the comments in relation to the Grand Canal and noted that the Masterplan being drafted for the Canal Harbour in Tullamore might go some way towards addressing the issues raised.

Ms. A. Dillon thanked Ms. Farrelly for her comprehensive presentation and advised the members that the Tourism Section would continue to work with the stakeholders and the partners in the industry. She noted that the Cabinet had recently approved the EU Just Transition Plan and there was a strong focus on Tourism as a job creator in the Plan.

The Cathaoirleach agreed that the Municipal Districts would seek to meet with representatives of Bord na Móna to discuss the issues raised by the Members.

5. Just Transition

Ms. A. Dillon informed the members that a meeting of the Midlands Regional Transition Team (MRTT) was held the previous week. She advised, that at that meeting, a representative of the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications stated that the EU Territorial Plan for the Midlands had been endorsed by the Cabinet in recent weeks. It was anticipated that it will be approved by the European Commission by year end.

She advised the members that the plan will make €169 million available to initiatives and developments within the territory across 3 main themes which can be broadly summarised as

- Jobs, economic diversification and the green economy
- Rehabilitation of Peatlands and repurposing of industrial heritage assets
- Smart and Sustainable Transport

She noted the Managing Authority for the Just Transition Fund is the East and Midlands Regional Assembly (EMRA). EMRA will work through intermediary bodies to implement the objectives of the plan.

Spending will be a mix of direct project development by agencies including Fáilte Ireland, NPWS and Department of Transport as well as calls for funding from enterprises and communities. EMRA anticipate that the call for applications from communities and enterprises will happen in the second half of next year. €120m of the €169m will need to be committed by the end of 2026.

She advised that opportunities for Technical Assistance to develop project plans are available from the Commission immediately. These include funding mechanisms such as START, JASPERS, ELENA, TARGET each of which has different emphasis such as community capacity building, clean energy, innovation in industry, ICT, urban development and transport and the Council will be engaging with the Commission on appropriate supports where relevant.

Cllr. D. Owens raised the issue of the proposals to re-wet the boglands in the county as part of the de-carbonisation process. He noted that the water table in a significant number of areas in the county was very high, and the proposals would see drains being closed in these areas with consequent effect on agricultural lands adjacent to them. He advised that the proposals aimed to re-wet 70% of peatland in the county by 2050. He noted that in the region of 350,000 ha of land would be taken out of agricultural production and this could lead to issues with Food Security. He noted that farmers in areas adjacent to boglands had re-claimed substantial areas for agricultural use during the previous decades and queried if these farmers would be compensated for the loss of these lands. The members supported Cllr. Owens in his comments and noted that farmers needed clarity on what was involved with the proposals. It was noted that the Department of Agriculture needed to circulate maps which outlined the areas involved. The members noted that a number of farming families were being forced to rely on off-farm incomes to make a living.

Cllr. E. Dooley noted that Bord na Móna had indicated that it would create 750 jobs from the de-carbonisation process but to date none of these jobs were created. He noted that there was a lack of support for the county at Government level and observed that Finland had drawn down six times the EU Just Transition Funding that Ireland did. He noted that at a recent meeting on EU funding, there was no EMRA representative and the Department had only sent a junior representative. He commented that there were now nine counties included in the EU Just Transition Fund. He queried why the Government had decided to by-pass the existing fund dispensing mechanisms i.e. LEADER.

Cllr. L. Quinn commented that since EMRA was established, additional counties had been added to the affected area and not all counties were represented on this forum. He queried who would be the awarding body for grants issued under the EU Just Transition Fund, i.e. would this be ERMA or the EU. The members queried what the rationale for the three themes chosen was and who had agreed on this rationale.

The Members noted that Oil Retailers and Distributors in the county had recently circulated a letter which suggested that the government had agreed a strategy to ban the use of oil fired heating systems from 2025. They suggested the use of Bio Fuels should be considered as this was a cheaper heating option than the use of Heat Pumps. Some members noted that this ban would only apply to the installation of new oil fired heating systems.

Ms. Dillon addressed the members concerns and agreed that clarification would be sought on the proposals to re-wet the boglands. In relation to the comments on EMRA and the disbursement of the EU Just Transition Fund, she advised that the EMRA representatives were aware that Offaly was the

county most impacted by the de-carbonisation process. She noted that calls for funding would issue by mid-2023 and that the process would be simplified in the meantime. She advised that the three themes were chosen by the Department and the fund would include €84.5 million in match-funding from the government. She noted that the Commission were aware of the concerns expressed in the county and she was confident that the county would see the benefit of this fund in 2023. Responding to Cllr Dooley, she advised that the money for Fáilte Ireland was part of the €169 million EU Just Transition Fund. She clarified that Fáilte Ireland had a number of projects ready to proceed with, which explained the allocation of this fund to that organisation. She advised that an invitation had issued to Fáilte Ireland to meet with the Council.

The Cathaoirleach expressed concerns that Offaly would not receive a fair proportion of the EU Just Transition Fund, which would reflect its status as an area most impacted by the de-carbonisation process.

6. Monthly Management Report

The Chief Executive briefed the members on the Monthly Management Report. She outlined the main items in the Report. She noted that the Report contained an update on the re-classification of the R402; she noted that this road was included in a General Roads Re-Classification Review to be conducted in 2023.

7. Corporate Policy Group Report

The Cathaoirleach advised that the Leas-Cathaoirleach, Cllr. T. McCormack, had chaired the meeting and it had dealt with the agenda items for the Council meeting. Conferences and training items were also approved.

8. Comhdhálacha / Conferences

The members noted the following in respect of conferences and training:

Celtic Conferences Spring 2023

1. 6th Jan. to 8th Jan. '23 – “The Finance Act 2022” in Carlingford, Co. Louth
2. 20th – 22nd Jan. '23 – “Local Authority Procurement Process” in Clonakilty, Co. Cork
3. 3rd – 5th Feb. '23 – “Modular Housing in Ireland” in Carlingford, Co. Louth
4. 3rd – 5th March '23 – “Protecting your mental health as a Public Representative” in Clonakilty, Co. Cork

The three Regional Assemblies are cooperating on AIR 2023 - Regional Seminar and Training Event for members. Date: Tue, 7 Feb 2023, 19:00 – Thu, 9 Feb 2023, 12:30, Location: Four Seasons Hotel & Leisure Club, Monaghan Coolshannagh, Monaghan H18 Y220

Retrospective Approval:

AILG Module 6 - 17 November 2022, Cllr. E. Fitzpatrick

LAMA Autumn Seminar 9-11 November 2022, Cllrs. P. Ormond, E. Fitzpatrick, N. Cribbin, D. Harvey, F. Moran, N. Feighery and D. Owens

Celtic Conference - Innovation in Solar Technology, 28-30 October 2022, Cllr. S. O'Brien

AILG Module 5 - 22 October 2022, Cllrs. E. Dooley, N. Cribbin, S. O'Brien and P. Ormond

AILG Module 4 - 28 July 2022, Cllr. S. O'Brien

9. Comhfhreagas / Correspondence

Cllr T. McCormack requested that the members support the motion circulated by Mayo County Council and this was agreed.

10. Any Other Business

Cllr. J. Clendennen raised the issue of the payment of Covid-19 bonuses to the employees of Health Care Bodies. He requested that the Council should write to the Minister of Health to support their case and requesting that all outstanding payments should be made before Christmas.

Cllr. E. Fitzpatrick noted that the Environment Section of the Council had issued an email in relation to Controlled Burning of waste, which advised that this practice would be banned from 1st January 2023. He proposed that the Council should write to the Minister concerned and express the members concerns with this ban. The members supported Cllr. Fitzpatrick, and noted that this waste could not be dealt with by shredding machines. They noted that farmers disposed of this waste in a responsible manner.

Cllr. J. Leahy expressed the hope that there were sufficient Care Agencies and packages in place to assist vulnerable groups during the current cold spell.

The Cathaoirleach noted that the Minister had indicated in recent correspondence to him that a review of income thresholds for Housing Applicants would take place in the New Year and he would follow this up with the Minister in the early weeks of the New Year.

The Cathaoirleach took the opportunity to wish all the Members, their families, the Management and Staff of Offaly County Council a Happy and Peaceful Christmas and wished them all a Prosperous New Year.

MINUTES CONFIRMED:

CATHAOIRLEACH

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16th January 2023