



Annamarie Delaney
CEO Offaly County Council
Tullamore
Co Offaly
07 October 2020



Barry Cowen TD
LAOIS OFFALY



RE: Public consultation to draft County Development Plan 2020-2021

Dear Annamarie

I write further to the call for submissions following publication of draft Development Plan. I wish to ask if it is possible for professional expertise / advice from relevantly qualified person/persons be afforded by Offaly County Council to its members. I think it is necessary, fair and appropriate that independent professional advice be afforded to ensure proper / robust scrutiny of draft Development Plan / proposals as put forward by Offaly County Council.

I don't doubt but applaud the professionalism and best intentions of the Executive, however, I truly believe its imperative that members views, suggestions, proposals and ideas, matching that of their electorate are afforded independent expert assistance. This allows for their responsibilities to be properly assisted and for their intentions to be tested independently against obligations as provided for by National Spatial Strategy and Regional Development Plans also.

I trust too there has been extensive communication/liasing with various stakeholders throughout the county prior to and since draft Development Plans publication. The process by which a Development Plan is produced is one which should and can be inclusive and the final product be one which has wide ranging support. For example, business leaders, IBEC, employers' reps, Chambers of Commerce, Retail Reps, Hospitality sectors, Farming, Employee reps and Unions etc. should all be afforded the opportunities to partake in the process together and reach compromises and agreement. If this process points to diverging views on the content of the draft, one must not allow the emergence of a process where it's the executives views versus the rest. I note, for example, if I look at Tullamore, where many believe there is too high a concentration of housing proposed north of the canal versus the south of the canal. This has been challenged by many who say there should be a better or more even balance. I also note the proposal of a core retail area in Tullamore is at odds with recent grants of planning for commercial activities. It is imperative I believe to allow and support by way of continued adequate zoning to support permissions granted and awaiting Bord Planála approval and or construction. Our town and county have been starved of investment of such a nature. Commitments based on existing provisions in existing Development Plans should not be compromised and I expect a new Development Plan will not do so.

This Development Plan is the first of which will not have the benefit of the contribution of Bord na Mona as an economic driver. I won't dwell on the historic facts which highlight the massive contribution it made to the economic, social and cultural well-being of our county.

When one considers alone the loss of rates income as a result of the Shannonbridge Power Station closure and associated Bord na Mona rates the loss is €3.3m or 18.5% of our rates book. When one further considers the possible loss of similar proportions of Edenderry powers application for further dual fired burning is refused and when one then considers the implications of the loss of rates income as a result of ongoing covid related issues, it becomes clear that equalisation of local Government fund is challenged to meet the needs of Offaly. It is imperative that the aspirations of Offaly Task force set up to respond to implications of Bord na Mona / ESB closures is aligned to the County Development Plan.

One of the positive elements of the country's response to Covid has been the emphasis on remote working. This allows and provides opportunity to address what was a population exodus from our county against others. This can also afford expanded educational opportunities. It is essential that telecommunication infrastructure is at pace with this transition. I would ask that provision be made for villages and towns to explore the potential to provide digital and enterprise hubs which support and augment remote and house working. It is also essential that we continue the great and commendable work of Offaly County Council in continuing to advance and develop its strategy re greenways. Offaly County Council should redouble its efforts to work with relevant stakeholders and those at the coalface in providing, enhancing and growing our offering in the areas of Sport, Culture and the Arts.

In relation to changing Agricultural practices, not to mention challenges posed by Brexit, Covid and Climate Change, I would ask that the Development Plan carefully study and provide for provisions in soon to be published climate Action Plan and the general scheme of the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Consequent Provisions Bill 2020).

Finally, I wanted to use this opportunity to comment on one of the Local Authorities primary functions, that being the provision of housing. We know in recent years there hasn't at all been progress in this area. It is the greatest recent failing of Government. One provision that I've championed lately is the increased discretion for local authorities to provide social housing from €2m to €6m. This allows for one stage rather than four stage approval from the Department of Housing. This gives greater ownership of housing solutions to members. This allows members demand the expertise within its own local authorities. It puts the relevant pressure on local authorities to increase its stock. It allows future tenants retain the opportunity to buy out their homes. That's an aspiration that should be accommodated and I'd ask that this Development Plan set targets that each local electoral area in Offaly identify sites for such development. I would also ask that this Development Plan commits to eagerly engage and commit to deliver on foot of Government backed Affordable Housing Scheme.

Another element of great concern in recent years has been the hollowing out of towns and villages. While I referred to some recent positive privately funded proposals in Tullamore, our County town, I earnestly ask and would appreciate a commitment in the Development Plan that Offaly County Council play a leading role in the re-energising of major populated centres such as Edenderry, Portarlington, Daingean, Clara, Ferbane, Banagher and Birr. I note the leading role in devising a suitable mixed development site encompassing old Tesco / Granary site in Edenderry.

I also note the recent finding towards Sports Hub in Daingean which has potential to finally expose potential of former reformatory property. It is essential the Development Plan commits to conclude proposals encompassing off road shared parking for schools, playing pitches, housing and public park on lands purchased in Clara. Regarding Ferbane and its central role previously relating to Bord na Mona / ESB, it should be central to piloting community green project such as wind or solar in co-operation with Midlands Just Transition team.

In Banagher the plan should commit to finalise provision of digital hub in vacant property at liberty Square while focusing on continuing to further develop the marina as a focal point of tourism development. Together with OPW and Bord Fáilte, Offaly County Council will also agree to ensure broadening of infrastructure accommodating visitors to Clonmacnoise while developing better links and provisions to assist enhancing tourism product for Shannonbridge. I expect the County Development Plan will prioritise further investment in Birr Technology Centre and for work with the Department of Tourism to maximise further Birr Castles place in the region's tourism trail.

It should be the remit of Offaly County Council to partner with the Department of Rural Development in ensuring community centre properties and facilities cater for proper range of local services and activities. The should further partner with Offaly Local Development Company coordinating audit of presently unused BnaM / ESB lands and plant in order for Just Transition Team to make recommendations to Government for future uses benefiting county and region.

I sincerely hope that this consultation phase of the County Development Plan will generate a robust engagement between all relevant stake holders. I have every faith then in the ability of elected members to provide a plan that has the support and ownership of the wider community in Offaly. As stated earlier, should they require professional help and assistance from relevant independent expertise to do so, it should be forthcoming.

I personally will continue to liaise, assist and commit to using the benefit of my elected office in realising the shared goals contained in the final plan.

Yours sincerely



Barry Cowen TD

