

Forward Planning Section,

Offaly County Council,

Áras an Chontae,

Charleville Road,

Tullamore,

County Offaly

Re : Submission to DRAFT Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027

Date: 5<sup>th</sup> October 2020

A Chara,

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Draft Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027 on various topics, policies and objectives se proposed, particularly in relation to

- Chapter 2 -Core Strategy / Settlement Strategy
- Chapter 5 – Economic Development
- Chapter 6 – Tourism and Recreation
- Chapter 8 - Sustainable Mobility and Accessibility

### **Chapter 2 - Core Strategy/ Settlement Strategy and Housing Strategy**

In particular we wish to make a submissions in relation to the designation of Portarlington town which has been designated as a “Self Sustaining town” in the Draft Plan.

*Whilst Portarlington is very much a self sustaining town, we request that Offaly County Council consider it as a **Self Sustaining Growth town**.*

*The RSES defines ‘Self Sustaining Growth Towns’ as ‘Towns With A Moderate Level Of Jobs And Services – Includes Sub-County Market Towns And Commuter Towns With Good Transport Links And Capacity For Continued Commensurate Growth To Become More Self-Sustaining’.*

The population of Portarlinton in the 2016 Census is 7,138 persons (Laois County Council Area) and 1,772 (Offaly County Council Area). The combined population of 8,910 persons is greater than Birr (5,052 persons, 2016) which has been designated by Offaly County Council as a **Self Sustaining Growth Town**.

While it is acknowledged that the Jobs Ratio is below that considered to be healthy where a healthy area is considered to be one where the jobs ratio is around 70%. While not all towns will be able to reach this level, it is considered reasonable that the plan should aim to increase the jobs ratio proportionately to accord with the town’s characteristics and level in the County settlement and employment hierarchy.

As indicated in Census 2016 Portarlinton has a **total labour force** of 3,798 persons. The census also indicates that there are 1,349 **jobs** within the settlement of Portarlinton. Given an indicated resident worker population of 3,103, Portarlinton has a jobs to resident workers ratio of 0.435.

We note from the guidance by EMRA in relation to Local Authorities “developing their core strategies and settlement hierarchies will consider the following growth enablers for every part of the Region to meet its potential including;

<b><i>Growth Enabler</i></b>	<b><i>Commentary in relation to Portarlinton</i></b>	
<b><i>Economic Growth</i></b>	<i>Harness opportunities for economic growth by supporting synergies between talent and place, building on identified assets to strengthen enterprise ecosystems and provide quality jobs. Re-intensify employment within existing urban areas, complemented by strategic employment growth in the right locations and diversification of local and rural economies to better withstand economic shocks and sustain national growth.</i>	<p><i>Portarlinton has a jobs to resident workers ratio of 0.435. which is below the definition of a healthy area where it is considered to be one where the jobs ratio is around 70%. However it should be noted that since 2016 a number of new enterprise / employment opportunities have been established namely – Portarlinton Enterprise Centre is now at full capacity, sites within the Enterprise park have been further developed, investment in the Garden Shop, etc should be factored now into the figures going forward.</i></p> <p><i>Portarlinton has a range of employment and enterprise opportunities which have been appropriately zoned for in the Portarlinton LAP 2018-2024 ranging from commercial development at Portarlinton Enterprise Centre and Botley Lane to larger industrial developments such as those at Jamestown Engineering . These represent an important opportunity to develop a cluster of complementary enterprises and more generally</i></p>

		<p>a larger, more robust and diverse economic basis for the town.</p> <p>Portarlington is designated as Level 3 Town in the table 6.1 Retail Hierarchy for the region and hosts many of the larger retailers such as Supervalu, Lidl and Aldi within the town which sustains the current population.</p>
<p><b>Align Population, Employment and Housing Growth</b></p>	<p>Divergence between the places people live and work leads to long-distance commuting and congestion, which is having a negative impact on quality of life. To address this, promote sustainable growth in the right locations and ‘catch up’ investment and consolidation in local services, amenities and employment in areas that have experienced large scale commuter driven housing development.</p>	<p>It is recognized that Portarlington has had large scale commuter driven housing, particularly in the location of the Train Station and many commute on a daily basis by train to other locations within the Dublin and Midland region. However “catch up” investment is now being targeted to developing economic opportunities on lands also in close proximity to the train station – the “Avon Site”, the Siac Butler Steel Site, Odlums, the Industrial Park and at Portarlington Enterprise Centre.</p> <p>Investment in Education and local amenities has also started to be enabled.</p>
<p><b>Compact Sustainable Growth –</b></p>	<p>Promote compact, sequential and sustainable development of urban areas from large to small to realise targets of at least 50% of all new homes to be built, to be within or contiguous to the existing built up area of Dublin city and suburbs, and a target of at least 30% for other urban areas. Support co-ordination across local authorities and agencies to promote active land management and better use of under-utilised, brownfield and public lands.</p>	<p>Through the production of the Joint Local Area Plan since 2012, a joint approach to zoning of lands has been undertaken.</p> <p>Both Councils have identified opportunity sites on both sides of the border which would support the objective of compact growth and this will be further developed in the preparation of the next LAP for portarlington.</p>
<p><b>Regeneration and Development</b></p>	<p>Identify significant ready-to-go regeneration projects in the existing built areas of our cities, towns, villages as well as rural regeneration</p>	<p>Rural Regeneration and Development Funding opportunities are being targeted by Laois County Council.</p> <p>Laois County Council has recently taken a</p>

	<p>opportunities, which could leverage private and public-sector support and investment, including NPF and European funding with a focus on social as well as physical regeneration.</p>	<p>lease on the old Market House in Market Square and have engaged consultants to develop a Heritage Led regeneration Strategy for the town centre where healthy placemaking will be one of the core objectives and actions will inform future applications for Rural Regeneration Fund and other sources of funding opportunities that may arise.</p>
<p><b>Strategic Connectivity –</b></p>	<p>Protect and enhance global connectivity including the TEN-T network to ensure the best use of existing and planned transport infrastructure, safeguard national assets and improve sustainable mobility. Enhance regional accessibility as part of an integrated land use and transport strategy to enable the development of designated towns on strategic and public transport corridors and in tandem with enabling infrastructure.</p>	<p>Portarlinton is one of the most accessible towns within the Midlands Region by virtue of the Train station which has had substantial investment in recent years.</p> <p>Portarlinton is linked to key neighbouring towns by a series of <b>Regional Roads</b> including the R419 to Portlaoise, the R420 to Tullamore and New Inn Interchange, the R424 to Monasterevin and the R423 to Mountmellick and Rathangan. Junction 15 at Monasterevin which enables easy access to the M7 and M8 motorway network is located approximately 10kms from the town.</p> <p>There are a number of <b>bus services</b> connecting Portarlinton to Kildare, Monasterevin, Portlaoise, Tullamore and Dublin. Portarlinton is therefore easily accessible to the Greater Dublin Area, Dublin City, the M50, national airports and ports. The accessibility of the town provides key advantages for the attraction of economic and residential development.</p> <p>Given that the majority of Portarlinton's population are living within 1.5 km of the town centre, there is great potential for a modal shift from the private car towards walking and cycling as more attractive modes of transport in the town.</p>
<p><b>Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor</b></p>	<p>Safeguard and improve accessibility and service by rail, road and communication between Dublin and Belfast and drive cross border networks between Drogheda,</p>	<p>N/A</p>

**Healthy Placemaking -**

*Dundalk and Newry. Post-Brexit, consideration should be given to a process that can establish protocols for environmental protection and movement of people and goods.*

*To realise sustained economic growth and employment including the integration of better urban design, public realm, amenities and heritage to create attractive places to live, work, visit and invest in. Focus on placemaking to create attractive and sustainable communities to support active lifestyles including walking and cycling.*

*Portarlington Community Development Association offers a large community complex which serves the needs of the population of Portarlington.*

*Laois County Council has invested in a new library which opened in 2016.*

*The town is also served by a Leisure Centre , town park and playground which Laois County Council are proposing to invest further in.*

*The town is also served by a primary care unit at Kilnacourt.*

*Laois County Council has recently taken a lease on the old Market House in Market Square and have engaged consultants to develop a Heritage Led regeneration Strategy for the town centre where healthy placemaking will be one of the core objectives and actions will inform future applications for Rural Regeneration Fund and other sources of funding opportunities that may arise.*

**Climate Action**

*to accelerate a transition to a greener, low carbon and climate resilient region with focus on energy transition, carbon sequestration and reduced travel demand through the promotion of sustainable settlement patterns. Support the Climate Action Regional Offices and local authorities in their implementation of climate strategies.*

*The towns is traversed by the River Barrow which is a designated SAC and SPA and recent intervention to develop Derryounce , Lea Castle and the public Park are all adding to the natural capital within the town and creating green infrastructure linkages throughout the town to encourage a modal shift from driving to walking and cycling. In preparing the Regeneration strategy for the town , Compact growth and sustainable development will be core objectives.*

**Collaboration**

*The Assembly will foster collaboration in the allocation of funds to maximise the value for money and delivery of RSES policy and to promote enhanced collaboration between local and regional stakeholders in relation to enterprise and employment, transport, education, retail and service delivery and in the preparation of local transport plans and urban area plans (UAPs). There will be a need to co-ordinate the sources of funding of infrastructure, including community facilities that will be located within joint urban area plans.*

*Laois County Council will continue to work with Offaly County Council to develop a coordinated approach to the development of Portarlinton and collaborate both locally, regionally and at national level to prepare plans and deliver the necessary infrastructure to sustain the population.*

We refer to Table 2.3 – Summary of Criteria utilised to develop the settlement hierarchy for Offaly 2021-2027 and would make the case that the criteria above be considered. As you will be aware Laois County Council are currently reviewing and preparing a Draft Plan for the same period and have recently completed a review of their settlements in line with the NPF and RSES frameworks for consideration of settlements within our functional areas.

We further note with that there is no policy objective to prepare a Joint Urban Area Plan for Portarlinton as has been prepared over previous plans which has given a coordinated approach to development within the town of Portarlinton.

Laois County Council have and will continue to work with Offaly County Council and all other stakeholders including the local community to prepare a Joint Local Area Plan for Portarlinton.

In recent years much work has been done to improve Portarlinton by both Laois County Council the local Portarlinton Community Development Association(PCDA) and various groups to further the various functions of the town namely, tourism and amenity and now more recently enterprise development. Other stakeholders in the town have also improved their facilities such as Irish Rail with additional car parking at the train station and the Department of Education with investment in the secondary school provision in the town.

We request that the Draft Plan acknowledge and provide an objective to review the Portarlinton LAP once both the Laois and Offaly County Development Plans have been reviewed and adopted and collaboratively prepare a new Urban Area Plan.

Firstly we request that Table 2.1.7 be amended to include Portarlington as a Self Sustaining Growth Town in the Core Strategy Table and on the Core Strategy Map.

Secondly we request that Table 2.4 be amended to include Portarlington as a Self Sustaining Growth Town and the Core Strategy Table be amended to reflect this.

Under Section 2.5 we request that the following policies be inserted to state

- 1. It is Council policy that Portarlington, a Self Sustaining Growth town continues to grow at a sustainable level and a commensurate scale in accordance with the Core Strategy Table and is targeted for “catch up” investment in services, infrastructure , amenities and local employment in an effort to become more self sustaining.*
- 2. It is Council policy to prepare a Joint Urban Area Plan for the Self Sustaining Growth Town of Portarlington in conjunction with Laois County Council and relevant stakeholders.*

## **Chapter 5 Economic Development**

The potential to grow Portarlington as an economic driver remains an objective of Laois County Council which has been developed over the past couple of years with investment in Portarlington Enterprise Centre and the identification and development of industrial/ Commercial land banks.

Section 5.5.4 relates to remote working opportunities and mentions the e working spaces in Edenderry, Birr and Tullamore , however we would respectfully ask that Portarlington Enterprise Centre which has increased its remote working space should also be included as it too serves the population of County Offaly both urban and rural within the catchment of Portarlington.

We welcome policy “*ENTP-09 - It is Council policy to encourage job creation in the Self-Sustaining Towns of Edenderry and Portarlington in order for them to become more self-sustainable and balanced considering they have experienced rapid population growth with high levels of commuter focused residential expansion without equivalent increases in jobs and services.*

## **Chapter 6 – Tourism and Recreation**

Laois County Council welcomes the support of Offaly County Council by way of objectives supporting the **principal of promoting the Slieve Bloom Mountains, Derryounce Experience Lakes and Trails** and further upgrading of the amenities (e.g. walks, etc), and linkages with other key tourism assets within the County given the potential to contribute to the tourism, recreational amenity and economic development of both the Laois and Offaly Areas.

The Cross boundary Slieve Bloom Mountain Biking Trail carried out in conjunction with Coilte has the potential to contribute greatly to the rural and tourism development within the Western part of Laois and eastern part of Offaly. We support its continued development subject to proper

planning and development and compliance with SAC/ SPA conservation objectives. In this regard, Laois County Council welcomes reference to the future potential of the Slieve Blooms as a tourist destination *TRP-20 It is Council policy to promote and facilitate the continued development of the Slieve Bloom Mountains bike trail as a key tourism asset for the county and as part of the tourism offer on the Slieve Bloom Mountains, in conjunction with Laois County Council. In addition, it is the Council policy to (i) promote the further development of walking trails on the mountains, (ii) connect to and develop Kinnitty as a service hub for the area and (iii) promote and facilitate links to / from other existing and proposed greenways, blueways and peatways.* and the following policy in relation to walking and cycling and further development of the Derryounce Experience Lakes and Trails *TRP 19 - It is Council policy to further investigate the potential of and opportunities for the development of existing and new trails in County Offaly to include a mixture of walking, cycling and driving trails, for the provision of appropriate services along these trails, and for the development of linkages between these trails and key tourism assets both within Offaly and adjoining counties. An example includes Derryounce Experience Lake and Trails and its potential linkage to the People's Park in Portarlinton and the wider linkages to the Mount Lucas windfarm. The Council will only support such developments where it is demonstrated that no significant environmental effects would arise as a consequence of their construction or operation.*

Laois County Council would respectfully request that the following policy be considered for inclusion :-

*“It is council policy to collaborate with Laois County Council to recognise Portarlinton’s role as a trailhead for the Derryounce Experience Lakes and Trails and develop a strategy to capitalise on this quality natural amenity”.*

## **Chapter 8 - Sustainable Mobility and Accessibility**

We acknowledge objectives to encourage and **facilitate investment in the N80** having regard to its role as an inter-regional route between the Midlands and the South east of the Country and the port of Rosslare. The potential for the provision of a cycle lanes along this route continues to be an ambition of Laois County Council in terms of sustainable transport and climate action.

*SMAP-17 It is Council policy to be supportive of exploring opportunities for the provision of cycle lanes along the N80, preferably off road cycle tracks separated from vehicular traffic where feasible, subject to meeting Transport Infrastructure Ireland’s Guidelines and the undertaking of a safety audit. Roads*

*SMAP-25 - It is Council policy to support the upgrading of the R422 from the M7 motorway in County Laois to Mountmellick in County Laois where it links with the N80 route that links to Tullamore a Key Town.*

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We welcome reference in **Section 8.4.2 Public Transport** and reference to Portarlinton Train Station and the development of Irish rail infrastructure.

We also acknowledge the following objectives to continue to support **rural public transport** initiatives such as “Laois – Offaly Local Link” which provides a much needed service for both counties.

*SMAP-16 - It is Council policy to support the Local Link Rural Transport Programme 2018-2022 in County Offaly and subsequent programmes.*

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Laois County Council welcomes the inclusion of Portarlinton in objective SMAO 14 which seeks to protect future relief road lines.

*SMAO-14 - It is an objective of the Council to examine the feasibility of providing future relief roads adjacent to the following towns and villages, taking into account environmental sensitivities as identified in the SEA Environmental Report and the policies and objectives of the County Development Plan relating to sustainable mobility. Where feasibility is established, the Council will seek to pursue and / or facilitate the relevant project, subject to other provisions in the Plan, including section 8.5.4 Corridor and Route Selection Process.*

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We welcome the opportunity to work with Offaly County Council on a coordinated plan and strategy for Portarlinton to achieve the objectives threaded through the Core Strategy. We also look forward to working on further joint rural development initiatives which can benefit both counties and the Midlands in totality.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Angela McEvoy

Senior Planner