

Submission

Offaly County Development Plan 2021 – 2027

This submission is made in the context of the Emergency caused by climate breakdown and loss of biodiversity. It puts forward a set of proposals that might be implemented locally to mitigate these threats to the planet and promote sustainable development in the county. It focuses also on ways to address rural decline, particularly as it affects the countryside outside of towns and villages.

The County Development Plan should underpin a transition towards localisation and sustainability. To achieve this, it should facilitate implementation of an urgently required set of measures in the areas of housing, enterprise and the local economy, energy, transport and environmental protection and restoration.

Context

Food security and food sovereignty are vital in the context of climate change and decreasing dependence on, and availability of, fossil fuels. Already there are trends towards more localised production, processing, distribution and consumption of food and this will need to accelerate as the climate crisis deepens and farming has to lessen its dependence on oil. This will require a move away from production of export commodities such as dairy and beef and a return to small-scale mixed farming with a greater focus on organic, agroecological vegetable, fruit and grain (as well as dairy and meat) production. For this transition to take place a substantial number of new entrants to farming, with suitable training, will be required to supplement the declining farming population. In order for these to access land, new arrangements such as land trusts, share-farming and cooperative farming will need to be implemented.

In a broader context, it is entirely possible that, with accelerating climate change and consequent threats to food supply in countries like Ireland, there will actually be a migration of people away from urban areas and into the countryside.

Housing

These trends have implications for planning of rural settlements and the next county development plan needs to anticipate and facilitate predicted patterns of population movement rather than impede them. Specifically, the plan needs to allow for development of clusters of low-impact, natural-build houses in the open countryside along the lines of the traditional *clachan* system. Such developments would provide a dwelling place not only for those involved in food production and other land-based enterprises but also others who wish

to dwell, bring up families and make a living closer to nature. Newcomers can range from young families to older people who want to spend their retirement in the countryside.

There will also be an urgent need to lower the regulatory minimum size requirement of a dwelling in order to allow for Tiny homes, that have minimal material and energy demand.

Granting of planning permission to the types of clustered developments outlined above should be broadened to include persons who are not originally from the locality but have moved, or wish to move, to the countryside. A provision could be put in place requiring residents of these developments to sign up to a set of ecological principles along the lines of those administered by the One Planet Council in Wales. <http://www.oneplanetcouncil.org.uk>

Rural Regeneration

Enabling new people to come to live, work and contribute to building community - with a strong focus on sustainability - would play a role in rural regeneration, while at the same time helping to restore the natural environment and increase biodiversity. It would lead also to a renewed demand for local services, thus reversing the withdrawal of services from rural areas that has been evidenced in recent years.

Climate Action and Energy

Any new clustered developments in the countryside should be, at minimum, carbon neutral, and self-sufficient in energy use. Installation of community-based renewable energy sources such as small-scale wind turbines and solar panels should be permissible under the next county development plan.

With the requirement to reduce fossil fuel emissions, greater emphasis on localisation, and a trend towards healthier lifestyle there is likely to be declining use of private motor transport and an upsurge in walking and cycling as well as public and community modes of transport. The plan should envisage infrastructure such as off-road cycle tracks, walking routes and extended footpaths as well as support for alternative transport models like car-pooling and community bus schemes.

Economic Development

With a renewed emphasis on localisation there will be a growing demand for locally produced and locally sourced products and services. Continued and enhanced support for development of infrastructure such as enterprise units, markets, community kitchens, food hubs, community event spaces, etc. would greatly contribute to the development of the local economy and community self-reliance, and enable locals and new residents to make a living from self-employment and/or employment in their own vicinity.

In addition, new nature-based enterprises could be developed in areas such as eco-tourism and natural healing therapies. County Offaly, which possesses a unique and varied natural

landscape, is in a prime position to respond to the growing demand from city dwellers for immersion in, and experience of, nature. Promotion of low-impact, countryside-based accommodation and customised facilities would be vital toward responding to these needs.

The development of greenways in various parts of the country has had a crucial role in the development of sustainable tourism while, at the same time, providing a recreational amenity for local residents. The County Development Plan should contain a commitment to establish greenways and walking routes. The recently launched Ferbane Community Plan, which incorporates a Green Infrastructure Strategy, contains specific proposals in this regard. One particular route that should be prioritised is Lough Boora to Clonmacnoise, through Ferbane.

Natural Assets

The next county development plan should allow for upscaling supports to Tidy Towns and other community groups who are doing vital work to protect ecosystems and enhance biodiversity around the county. The plan should contain measures to prohibit destruction of habitats by private citizens and public bodies. This includes unnecessary and wanton felling of trees in public spaces and along roadsides, removal of hedgerows and draining of wetlands. Tree preservation orders should be widely enforced and public consultation should be carried out where state agencies are proposing felling or topping of trees.

Notes:

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. <http://www.foodsovereigntyireland.org>

Share farming is where two parties (the landowner and share farmer) carry on separate farming businesses on the same area of land without forming a partnership or company. Both parties share the benefits/risks of farming. There is no fixed payment for the land.

<https://www.teagasc.ie/rural-economy/farm-management/collaborative-farming/share-farming/share-farming-a-short-guide/> <https://www.streamfarm.co.uk>