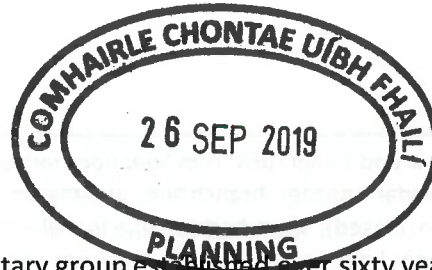




First Stage of Review of County Development Plan 2021-2027
Forward Planning Department, Offaly County Council.

25th Sept 2019

Dear Sir/Madam,

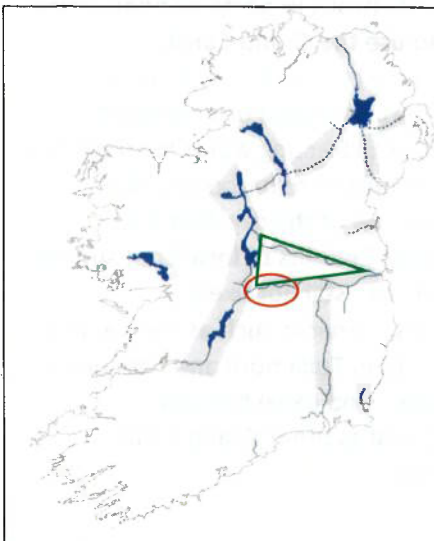


The Inland Waterways Association of Ireland (IWAI) is a voluntary group established over sixty years ago with 25 branches throughout the island of Ireland catering for a wide range of membership interests of several thousand members. Offaly IWAI on behalf of the wider IWAI community welcomes the opportunity to submit to the first stage review of the County Development Plan 2021-2027 within the structure of the council produced Issues Paper, as an organisation with extensive knowledge of canal and inland waterways systems and their overall benefit to communities.

On this, it is suggested the Grand Canal in Offaly, and it's connection to the more extensive inland waterways navigation systems throughout the country could be capitalised on more for both Offaly and it's neighbours, as focus on the local element of the Grand Canal could support the regeneration of this midlands amenity

In recent years the navigation has become more difficult for boating for a range of reasons and IWAI are working to bring the navigation agency's attention to matters of concern through a recent inter-branch project titled Nav-Watch, of which Offaly IWAI is a branch member. Concurrently, while the 'greenways' and 'blueways' brand and infrastructure developments alongside the canal are welcome, IWAI suggest it is imperative the value and ability to use the actual 'waterways' navigation is not lost.

Further tourism development of the waterway – the actual navigation – presents opportunities:



At overall vision level, the plan should take account of the strategic tourism location of Offaly for inland navigation -

- as a central link (red circle) on the boating tourism route between the Barrow & Shannon;
- ditto for Dublin and the River Shannon and its sea access out at Limerick;
- ditto for access from Waterford in the south east to the Erne system in the north west;
- and Offaly within the 'Green & Silver' boating route (the green triangle on the graphic - Dublin to the Shannon via Royal or Grand Canal, linked by the Shannon at the west end and the Liffey in Dublin)¹.

¹ The route of a 1946 famous journey in Irish Inland Waterways see <https://www.iwai.ie/dublin/green-silver/>.

22/09/2020



Offaly – the Grand Canal runs from Shannon Harbour through to Kildare border, branch lines at Ballycommon (to Kilbeggan, closed); short harbour line in Tullamore to closed off inner harbour, and branch line from main line to Edenderry Harbour.

At the county development level, while some boating traffic is benefitting the west of the county on the Shannon in Banagher, Shannon Harbour and Shannon Bridge, the plan should aim to

- activate the navigation agency to focus on the Grand Canal navigation and its needs;
- include points in the plan to facilitate and encourage boating domestic and visitor tourism on the Grand Canal;
- identify several key appropriate stopping points for boats, in specific towns and villages, for access to wider tourism services and local economic gain;
- develop a strategic boating tourism plan for the Grand Canal in Offaly to include smaller towns and villages as beneficiaries as well.



Fabulously successful Edenderry Chamber organised and boaters supported Easter Festival in Edenderry 2019.



At the specific location level, ensure development of awareness among planning staff of the canal as a navigation, and work with the navigation agency (Waterways Ireland) and other relevant agencies e.g. Failte Ireland, EMRA etc

- to recognise key harbours in Tullamore and Edenderry as drivers of boating tourism and develop policies & practices to encourage this;
- to ensure the integrity of the actual navigation and its supports are kept in place during planning and council operational works processes e.g.
 - a pedestrian bridge in Tullamore built recently severely curtailed boating,
 - a recent Part 8 suggestion of a footbridge over the 28th lock would have disastrous impacts on boats being able to use the Grand Canal;
 - water services works some years ago in Tullamore damaged underground pipework extracting water from the dry dock in Tullamore harbour which stopped use of the dry dock and economic benefits to local boat support companies - still not fixed;
- develop multi use services such as shower and WC service blocks in Tullamore and Edenderry for use by boaters and canal heritage enthusiasts as well as other Grand Canal amenity tourists.



Heritage boats passing through Tullamore

On the heritage and amenity level, recognise that the Grand Canal is man made for navigation and should be managed accordingly

- for instance, instead of letting wild weed growth slowly turn it into a marsh (conditions which are already developing on the bottom of the canal) a county policy should be pursued that waterway navigation should be maintained instead of becoming a habitat for fast growing weed species
- including expansion of the items listed in the Record of Protected Structures along the Grand Canal to ensure full cataloguing of these and ensure they are considered in any development
- now the Ballycommon-Kilbeggan line of the Grand Canal has funding allocated for greenway development, include re-watering and re-opening of that Canal Line as a county plan objective,
- and is a component of activities supporting floating heritage (e.g. original canal traffic /trading boats) and other aspects of Ireland's inland waterways included in the National Inventory of Ireland's Intangible Cultural Heritage, launched by Minister Madigan in July.



Boats at Ballycommon

On the sustainable communities level, to encourage boating traffic the plan should identify

- appropriate mooring points in towns for short and medium term visitor access by boating season boating tourists for local economic gain;
- encourage off season tourism and business opportunities to local boat support small service providers by the provision of winter mooring and works points at specific and safe locations along the Grand Canal;
- and should strongly consider the facilitation of live-aboard communities through examination of where this has previously been successfully developed in other jurisdictions;
- how the canal recent extra infrastructure (e.g. broadband at specific points and greenways which could become actual local commuter routes for cyclists) can contribute to sustainable living in sub-urban locations along the Grand Canal.

It is hoped this submission from the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland (Offaly Branch) is taken as a set of constructive suggestions from a national group who have long standing experience of using the canal and inland waterways for community benefit and can contribute positively to their future in Offaly and beyond.

-ends

