

## Chapter 5: Economic Development Strategy

### 5.1 Aim

That Offaly County Council, within its capacity, will positively contribute towards the promotion of the maintenance and growth of employment across every sector in County Offaly that is sustainable, competitive, inclusive and resilient, so that the people of Offaly will have access to a range of quality employment opportunities enabling them to live and work in the county.

This section is prepared in the context of the following documents:

- Project Ireland 2040: National Planning Framework (2018)
- National Development Plan 2018-2027
- Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Eastern and Midland Region (2019)
- Food Wise 2025: A 10 Year Vision for the Irish Agri-Food Industry (2015)
- Offaly Local Economic and Community Plan 2016-2021
- Enterprise 2025 Renewed (2018)
- Realising Our Rural Potential (2017)
- Midlands Regional Enterprise Action Plan 2019-2020
- National Policy Statement on the Bio-economy (2018)
- National Mitigation Plan (2017)
- Climate Action Plan 2019
- National Broadband Plan (2012)
- Offaly Digital Strategy (awaited)
- National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2019-2022
- Just Transition Progress Report 2020
- Powering the Regions, Enterprise Ireland Regional Plan Report, 2019

## 5.2 Context

This chapter sets out the employment and enterprise strategy and policies from a planning and economic development perspective for County Offaly over the Plan period. A national strategic outcome of the National Planning Framework (NPF) includes ‘A Strong Economy supported by Enterprise, Innovation and Skills’. Offaly’s location within the centre of Ireland with accessibility and connectivity, attractive environment and infrastructural provision lends itself to being appealing to the set up and expansion of enterprise development. The Council acknowledges and supports the role of employment and investment promotion agencies within the county, which include the IDA and Enterprise Ireland. The Council administers the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) which serves as a first-stop shop to provide support, expertise and services to start, grow and develop local small businesses.

## 5.3 Economic Profile of County Offaly

This section provides a brief overview of the economic profile of County Offaly. It presents data from a number of key indicators that help to paint a picture of the economic profile of County Offaly and the information has been used to inform economic policy making as part of the Plan.

Located in the midlands, Offaly is bordered by seven counties and shares its western boundary with the River Shannon. The county is traversed along the northern boundary by the M6 Dublin to Galway motorway and along the south-eastern boundary by the M7 Dublin to Limerick motorway. In addition, the Dublin-Galway railway route passes through the County, with stops in Portarlinton, Tullamore and Clara. Strategically located with good transport connections, the County is well positioned to attract economic investment.

### 5.3.1 Existing Employment in County Offaly

Tullamore, a Key Town in the RSES, is Nationally central and serves as a major employment hub for the Midlands, with Professional Services, Manufacturing and Engineering being its largest industries. Tullamore has a Total Jobs: Resident Workers ratio of 1.48, which is relatively high compared to the EMRA average of 0.82 (over 0.7 represents a strong economic function as stated in Appendix A of the RSES). An increasing cluster of medical-tech and biopharma companies are locating themselves in Tullamore; in proximity to the Midlands Regional Hospital, which is the major hospital for the region. This is a Teaching/University hospital for a number of institutions including University College Dublin and University of Limerick, acting as a strong economic driver for the town and also providing a springboard for further linkages to existing and new med-tech businesses and research facilities.

There are almost 1,150 active businesses within 5km of Tullamore, employing nearly 8,260 people each day from the town and the wider region. 26% of these businesses are in less conventional sectors, where emerging business clusters can often be found. These include Med-Tech, FinTech, ICT and Engineering employers (such as Integra, Kelpak Medical and McDonald International). Tullamore is also a growing hub for the Food & Drinks sector, with large employers like Tullamore Dew Distillery, Carroll Meats and Glenisk. Professional services, scientific and technical activities, as well as various public service providers comprise the town’s other key economic pillars, with traditional employment in peat production giving way to opportunities in the green economy.



**Figure 5.1 Tullamore Business Activity and Clustering**

The Midlands Skills Centre in Tullamore, located in the Axis Business Park, is amongst the country's best equipped facilities catering to the specialist training and upskilling of those who wish to seek employment in the rapidly growing biopharma and medical-tech sectors. The centre delivers holistic training solutions in a realistic Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) simulated manufacturing environment, enhancing the learning experience through adjacent IT and meeting facilities. Facilities include a state-of-the-art cleanroom, laboratories and classrooms.

Also located in the Axis Business Park is the Junction Business Innovation Centre, which offers a professional, well-serviced co-working environment for remote workers, freelancers, young companies and entrepreneurs.

The Council recognises the importance of maintaining and supporting emerging clusters in the area of Med-Tech, FinTech, ICT and Engineering employers, by strengthening linkages or facilitating collective action to improve the cluster-specific business environment.

Other settlements in the County have a more localised employment base resulting in fewer jobs. Birr, Banagher and Ferbane are the exceptions with these towns having a healthy Total Jobs: Resident Workers ratio of 0.96, 0.80 and 0.76, respectively. These towns have a significant service function for their surrounding rural hinterland, which generates employment in the schools, retail outlets, hospitality / tourism sector. The employment base in Birr is also supported by established industrial / manufacturing businesses in Syngefield Industrial Estate, Roscrea Road and Crinkill to the south.

Clara has a long established industrial heritage, with the Goodbody Family in the early 1800s being particularly prominent in this regard. Clara benefits from proximity to the county town of Tullamore. A number of pharmaceutical/medical companies are situated along the Kilbeggan Road in the outskirts of Clara notably Bemis Healthcare, Steripack and Europharma Concepts. Clara's other significant sources of employment include local retailing and in community services such as Scoil Bhríde and Ardscoil Chiarain Naofa.

Banagher maintains a strong local industrial employment base, including Banagher Concrete, Liffey Mills and Inland and Coastal Marina Systems, remaining notable employers in the town, continuing to contribute to the local economy. Other businesses in the town such as Bo Bristle and Inland and Coastal Marina Systems reflect a diverse employment base while Silver Line Cruisers and Carrick Craft operate out of the marina.

Ferbane has a number of small or micro-enterprises which trade successfully and generate local employment. Ferbane Food Campus is a state-of-the-art food product development and training facility. It is the first timeshare production facility of its kind to be developed in the midlands and provides a significant opportunity for future growth. Ferbane Food Campus was awarded national winner in the 'Community Business Enterprise Initiatives' category in the annual Pride of Place Awards in 2016.

Kilcormac's employment base is through its role as a local retailing and a community centre with its local shops, Kilcormac Convent National School and Coláiste Naomh Cormac being the predominant examples.

In the east of the county, the economy was traditionally dependent on agriculture and peat production, however given this area's proximity to the Dublin Metropolitan Area, a trend of commuting emerged over previous Development Plan periods, which is evident by the jobs to resident workers ratio for Edenderry (0.63), Portarlinton (0.43) and Daingean (0.35), indicating a large proportion of outward commuting. Edenderry is the largest settlement in eastern Offaly with significant employment in retailing. Other significant employers include the Rosderra Meat factory in Edenderry.

The economy of West and South Offaly has traditionally been and continues to be heavily reliant on the primary sectors including agriculture, quarrying and tourism based on key asset such as the River Shannon, Lough Boora Discovery Park, Clonmacnoise monastic site, Birr Heritage Town and the Slieve Bloom Mountains.

Peat production and peat-fired electricity generation has been synonymous with County Offaly since the mid-1900s. Power stations at Shannonbridge, Edenderry and Rhode provided direct employment with additional contract and part-time staff, while further supporting employment in Bord na Móna for supply of milled peat from bogs. The West Offaly power station in Shannonbridge closed in 2021, the Rhode power station closed in 2003, while Edenderry power station, which is now co-firing with peat and biomass, has permission to stay in operation until 2023. In addition to milled peat for electricity generation, Bord na Móna has provided significant employment in the harvesting of peat for the retail sector, including production of peat briquette and compost.

Other smaller settlements in the County are largely dependent on outbound commuting to sustain employment for their populations.

### 5.3.2 Socio Economic Baseline

#### Labour Force Participation and 'At Work'

In Census 2016 the total labour force in the county was 36,031 people. Labour Force Participation (LFP) measures the percentage of all people aged 15 or over who are available for work, that is either at work or unemployed. The LFP rate for Offaly was 59.8% which is marginally below the State average of 61.4% and generally consistent with the other Midland counties of Laois, Longford and Westmeath, being 62%, 60.2% and 60.8%, respectively. There are also notable variations at sub-county level with higher LFP rates evident for Tullamore at 62.5% and Edenderry at 64.3%, and lowest rate for Ferbane at 48.1%.

**Table 5.1 Labour Force in County Offaly**

	2011	2016
<b>Total Labour Force</b>	35,849	36,031
<b>Total in Employment</b>	27,536 (76.8%)	30,287 (84.1%)

According to Census 2016, 84.1% of the total Labour Force in County Offaly was 'At Work', demonstrating a positive trajectory from the Census 2011 rate of 76.8%. The 2016 Census rate is below the State average of 87.1% but compares well with the other Midland counties of Laois, Longford and Westmeath, being 84.7%, 80.4% and 84.1%, respectively. For the towns in County Offaly, the total Labour Force 'At Work' varies from 70.9% for Kilcormac to 79.9% for Tullamore, all being below the county rate, which is consistent with the urban/rural split at regional level of 79% / 85.9%, reflecting positively on the rural based workforce.

#### Labour Force Unemployment

In Census 2016, the unemployment rate (both unemployed and looking for their first job) for County Offaly was 5,744, representing a labour force unemployment rate of 15.9% compared to the national rate of 12.9%, and positively compared with the other Midland counties of Laois, Longford and Westmeath, being 15.3%, 19.6% and 15.9%, respectively.

At a sub-county level, the rate of unemployment for the towns of Tullamore, Birr, Edenderry, Banagher, Ferbane, Clara and Daingean fall between 19.1% and 23.3%, whereas Kilcormac is relatively high at 29.1%.

### Industry of Employment

The most dominant sectors of employment of resident employees in the county are ‘Commerce and Trade’ (23.9%) and ‘Professional Services’ (23.5%), representing almost 50% of employment of total residents. When compared to State averages, employment in Offaly is characterised by a higher than average dependence on traditional sectors, such as ‘Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing’, ‘Building and Construction’ and ‘Manufacturing Industries’.

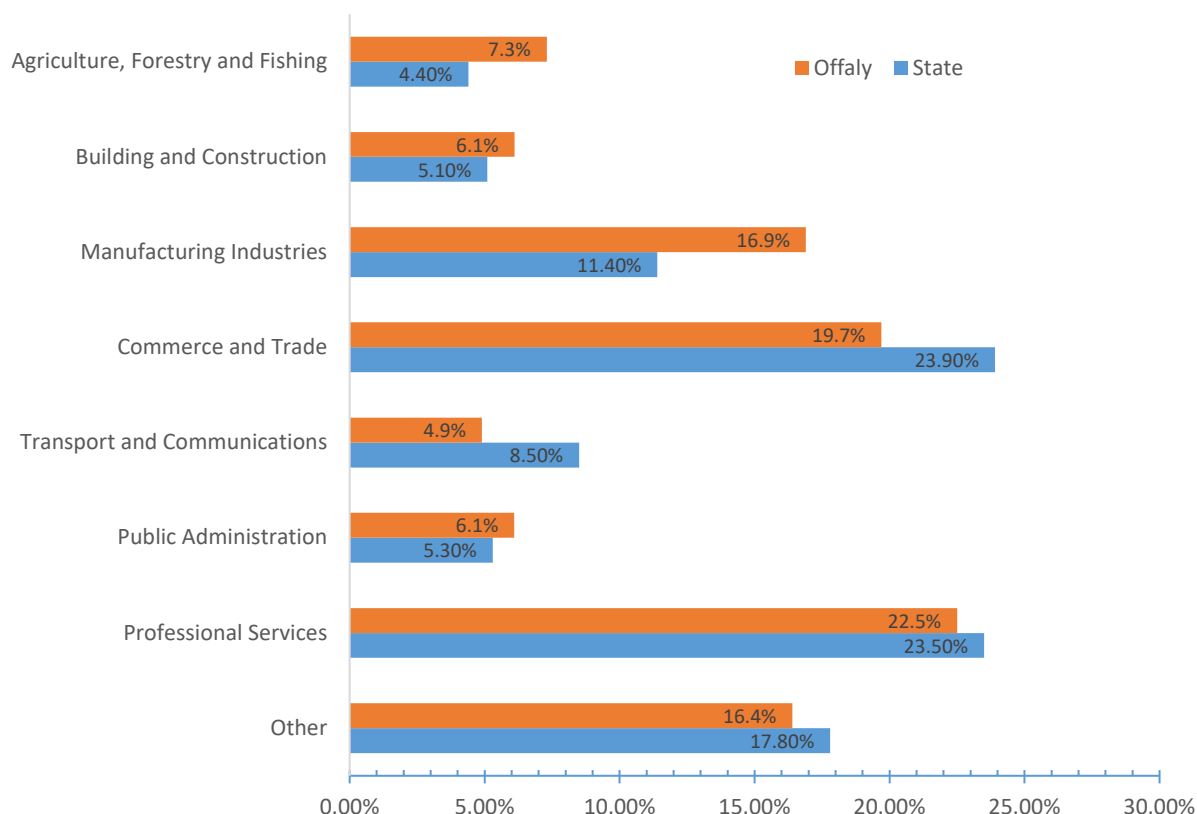


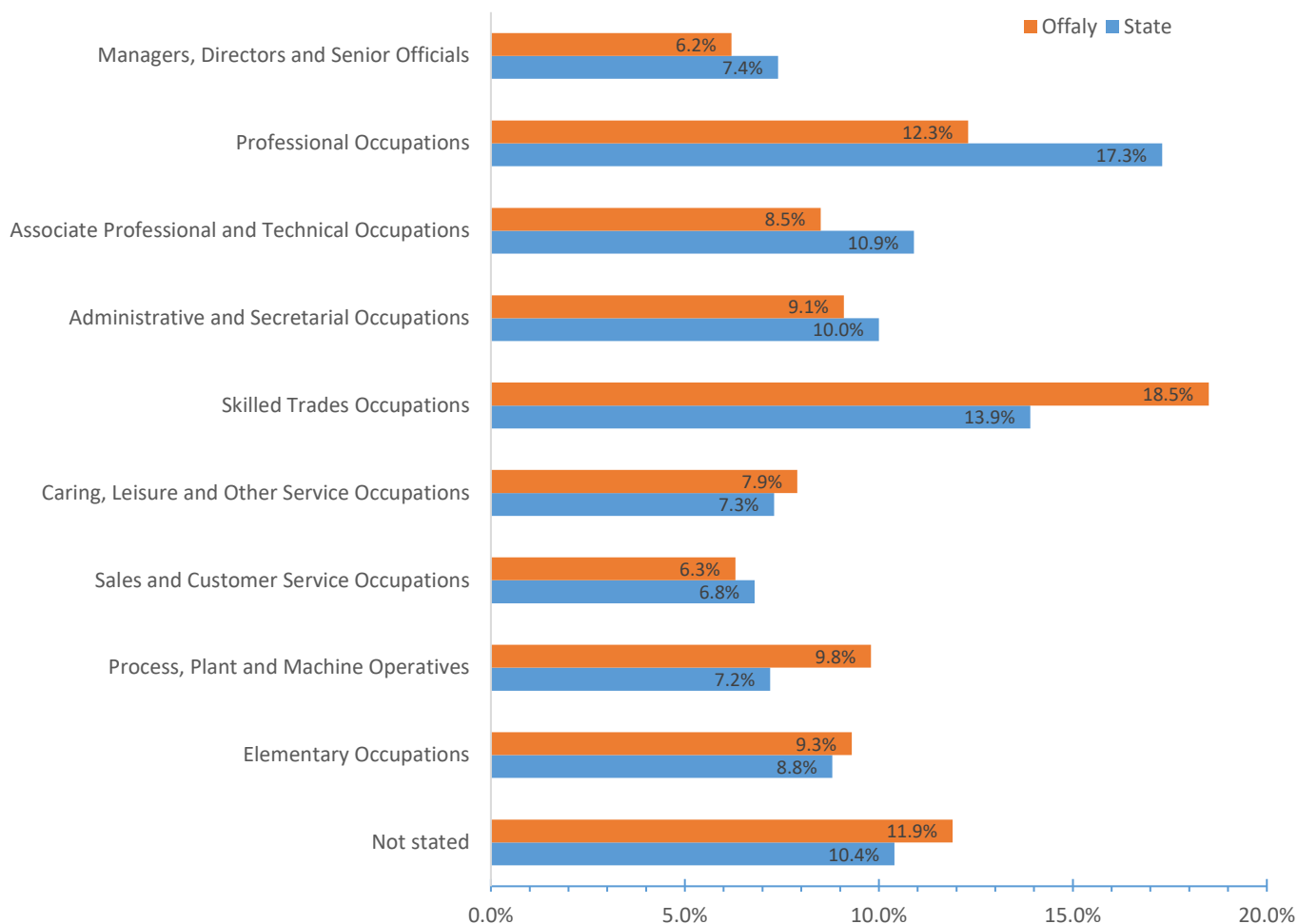
Figure 5.2 Industry of Employment

### Occupations

The graph in Figure 5.3 shows the breakdown of occupations across all sectors of industry in Offaly as a percentage of the total workforce compared to the state average. The data demonstrates that Offaly records above average rates for four occupational groups; ‘Skilled Trades Occupations’ (18.5%), ‘Caring, Leisure and other Service Occupations’ (7.9%), ‘Process Plant and Machine Operatives’ (9.8%) and ‘Elementary Occupations’ (9.3%). These four groups account for 45.5% of the labour force in the county.

‘Occupations’ data is a useful indication of the broad range of employment in the County, in addition to highlighting the skill sets of the workforce. Since 2011, the ‘Caring, Leisure and Other Service Occupations’ occupational group has witnessed the highest rate of increase at 15% (an additional 425 workers), while the ‘Professional Occupations’ group increased by 6.7% (an additional 295 workers)

since 2011. A number of occupational groups witnessed decreases in numbers, most notably ‘Skilled Trades Occupations’ which decreased by 10.02% (657 workers).



**Figure 5.3 Occupations**

## **5.4 Strategy**

Offaly County Council recognises that it has an expanding role in coordinating and facilitating a competitive environment that maintains existing employment and supports employment growth. The Council will prepare and adapt to the changing landscape of enterprise agencies throughout the Plan period and continue to co-operate with and support the relevant enterprise agencies that can do most to promote the economic growth of the county. The Council takes a multi-faceted and dynamic approach in its strategy to promote and encourage employment, recognising the challenges that are outside of its control while also being mindful that each section of the Council has both direct and indirect influence in employment creation and economic activity on a daily basis.

The Local Enterprise Office provides direct financial assistance, enterprise programmes and initiatives that support and promote employment in the county. The Council will continue in its efforts to foster and grow a culture of entrepreneurship throughout the lifetime of the plan.

The Council, however, recognises that the biggest influence that it can have in the promotion and growth of the economy of County Offaly is contained within the policies and objectives of this plan. The Council can have its biggest influence in attracting people to live and invest in County Offaly by taking action to ensure an excellent quality of life for the people living in the county creating and maintaining attractive settlements. The reliable and efficient provision of water, wastewater and roads infrastructure are critical considerations for potential investors and this Plan includes policies and objectives accordingly.

The Council recognises that potential investors in County Offaly want to make sure that they can attract employees with relevant skills who will want to work and stay in the local area and that these decisions are influenced by such factors as the availability of recreational amenities, good transport links, local schools and attractive places.

The Council will strive to ensure that Offaly is an attractive place to live and to visit. By making Offaly a place where people want to be, employment opportunities will follow.

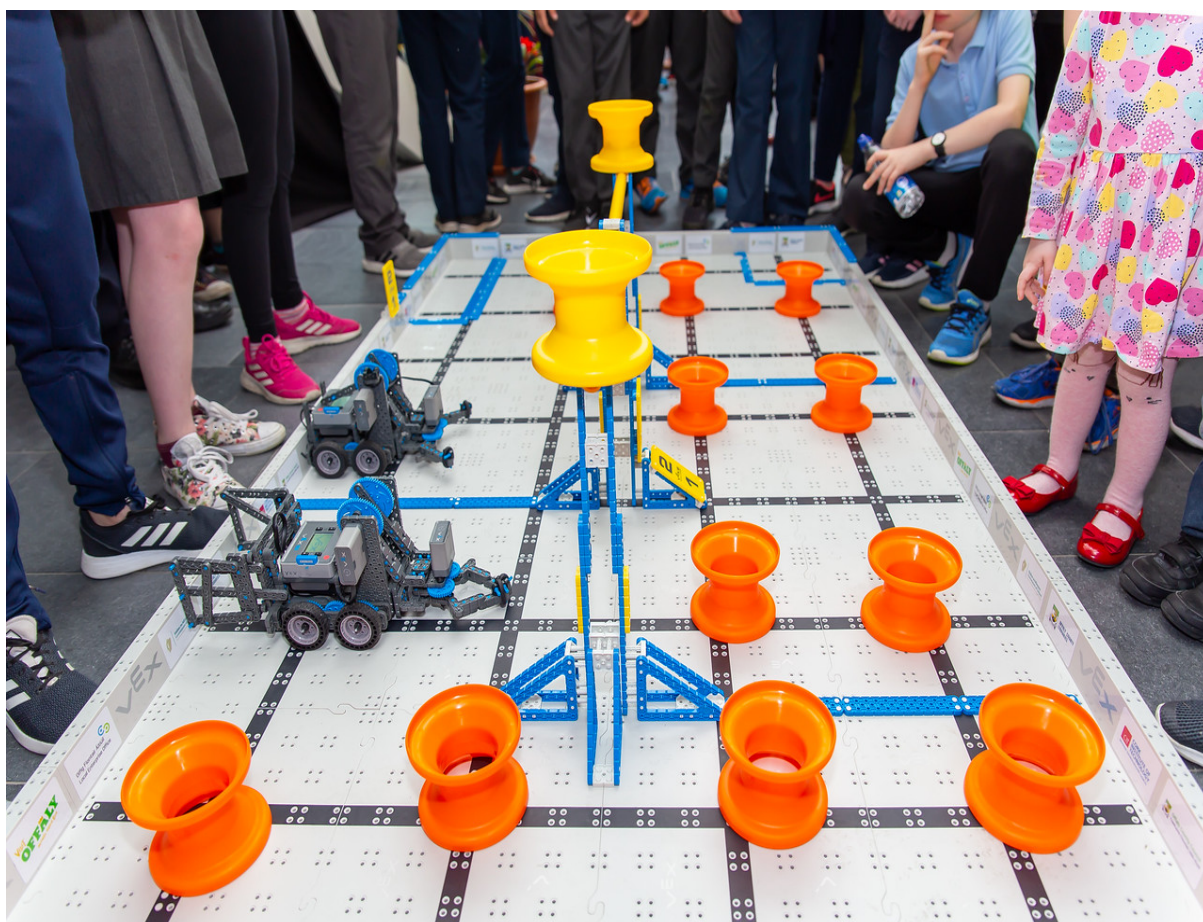


Figure 5.4 Robotics



Table 5.2 Key Initiatives in County Offaly

1. **Strategic Employment Zones** in Tullamore Key Town as indicated in the Tullamore Zoning Objectives Map and chapter 13 of this Plan;
2. Tullamore to support the **Regional Growth Centre of Athlone**;
3. **Opportunity Sites** in many settlements in the county as indicated in chapter 7 of this Plan and in Volume 2 Settlement Plans;
4. **Catch-up investment**, for example, employment and enterprise required in Portarlinton and Edenderry Self Sustaining Towns in order to reverse long distance commuting as indicated in the Settlement Hierarchy in chapter 2 of this Plan;
5. Potential for relocation of **'back-office' facilities** from the Dublin Metropolitan Area to Offaly to take advantage of cheaper land, high quality life and reduce long distance commuting.
6. **Opportunities to capitalise on I-LOFAR** in Birr, for example, in big data and data analytics, recognising Birr as a technology hub based on high quality employment parks and attractiveness of place;
7. **Adequate zoning in towns and villages** to facilitate employment, enterprise and existing initiatives, for example, Ferbane Food Campus as indicated in Volume 2 Settlement Plans;
8. **'Post Peat' opportunities** posed by sites with antecedent industrial use and the ceased industrial peatland sites as indicated in chapter 3 of this Plan;
9. **Potential for new energy initiatives** to facilitate climate action and energy transition as indicated in chapter 3 of this Plan;
10. **Co-working hubs** to mitigate long distance commuting;
11. **Links with third level colleges**;
12. **Infrastructure** to support and attract new economic activity;
13. Development of **Rhode Green Energy Park**;
14. Diversification and growth of **smart specialisation** of local economies with a strong focus on **clustering**, including sustainable farming and food production, tourism, energy and renewables, and bioeconomy.

## 5.5 Strategic Policy

The following main principles establish the overall strategy for the purposes of the County Development Plan, having regard to the identification of potential economic strengths of the county in facilitating the development of its overall economy, enterprise and employment.

The strategic objectives provided in the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan 2019-2020 are recognised namely:

- Ensure that the midlands are well positioned to address the challenges posed by the transition to a low carbon economy and renewable energy;
- Leverage opportunities in big data and data analytics from I-LOFAR;
- Position and support the midlands as an advanced manufacturing centre of excellence;

- Enhance the collective offering of the midlands as a place to live, work and invest in;
- Strengthen the attractiveness of the midlands as destination to visit;
- Harness the potential of the food and beverage industry in the midlands; and
- Ensure the availability of skills and talent to realise the region's economic potential and address upskilling requirements.

Strategic objectives in subsequent versions of the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan will also be recognised by Offaly County Council.

### **5.5.1 Settlement Hierarchy – Type / Scale of Enterprise and Employment**

The Council's strategy for sustainable employment is compatible with the Council's Settlement Hierarchy as outlined in Table 2.4 and Figure 2.5 in Chapter 2 of this plan. Future development must have regard to an individual settlement's location within the overall settlement hierarchy and its capacity to facilitate the scale of such development proposed.

The county's settlement hierarchy provides the framework for the allocation of areas of land zoned for Enterprise and Employment, Industrial and Warehousing, Business / Technology Park and Town or Village Centre / Mixed Use.

### **5.5.2 Large-Scale Development**

Optimum locations for large-scale development proposals are considered in accordance with each settlement's location within the identified tiers in the settlement hierarchy. In general, large-scale multi-national companies display a preference for locations within or within proximity to large urban areas that can provide a labour force, skills, infrastructure, services, accessibility and business and social networks. In contrast, established Irish-owned companies are distributed more widely.

The Council supports that priority be given to IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland to developing sectoral clusters within Tullamore, a Key Town in the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES). Regional Policy Objective (RPO) 4.27 of the RSES states '*Key Towns shall act as economic drivers and provide for strategic employment locations to improve the economic base by increasing the ratio of jobs to workers*'. In response, sites are identified in the Tullamore zoning objectives map as 'Strategic Employment Zones'.

The Council is supportive in encouraging and making provisions for increased employment and enterprise activity in the larger towns, including ensuring that sufficient land is zoned at optimum locations, the provision of necessary infrastructure where possible and measures in encouraging and sustaining critical mass levels within the county's urban settlements to allow their future economic development.

The Council will work with the providers of infrastructure, including Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), telecommunications providers and Irish Water, to ensure that they can respond adequately to

the needs of existing industry and potential investors, contributing positively to a competitive economic environment in the county.

### **5.5.3 Spatial Arrangement**

The strategy of economic development for Offaly should take into account the functional economic areas that are within the county. The Key Town of Tullamore and the large towns in the county, Birr, Edenderry and Portarlinton, command their own catchment areas and will be suitable for larger scale enterprises. The open countryside is not uniform, with agriculture in the east of the county being different to the west and south. Tourism too varies throughout the county, with Tullamore, Birr, the Slieve Bloom Mountains, River Shannon and Clonmacnoise monastic site in the west being the main draws for tourists. The east of the county has greater potential for energy development and has closer transport links to Dublin and to the ports/airports.

#### **Tullamore and Surrounding Area**

Tullamore, a Key Town in the RSES (2019) must function as a driver of economic growth to complement the Regional Growth Centre of Athlone. It has a role as a major employment, retail and services centre with key assets being its existing jobs to resident workers' ratio, excellent quality of life and future strategic development sites known as 'Strategic Employment Zones'. The further development of the med-tech cluster on the IDA business park in Srah provides opportunity to drive development within the town. The need for complementary third level outreach facilities in Tullamore should be examined, particularly with regard to support for the Midland Regional Hospital and where appropriate, its continued development as a Teaching / University Hospital, together with potential for linkages to existing and new med-tech businesses and research facilities. Desirable economic investment for Tullamore would be in the form of green jobs and green technologies, innovation, digital technologies, circular bioeconomy, food and beverage (in particular due to its distilling heritage), advanced manufacturing, tourism, recreation and amenity and high quality town centre retail development.<sup>1</sup>

#### **East of the county**

The economy of East Offaly was traditionally dependent on agriculture and peat production, however given this area's proximity to the Dublin Metropolitan Area, a trend of commuting emerged over previous Development Plan periods. It is considered that the reservation of substantial lands for Enterprise and Employment, Industrial and Warehousing, Business / Technology Park and other employment uses within this area is appropriate and will assist in generating local employment, reducing commuter patterns and contributing to the sustainable development of this area. The Council recognises the contribution that the beneficial after use of cutaway peatlands and those lands in Bord na Móna ownership could play in providing employment opportunities within this part of County Offaly. There is potential for research and development and a higher order element associated with renewable energy in this part of the county.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 4 of the RSES: Section on Core Region Key Towns, Tullamore

### **'West and South' of the county**

The economy of West and South Offaly has traditionally been and continues to be heavily reliant on the primary sectors including agriculture, quarrying and tourism based on key asset such as the River Shannon, Lough Boora Discovery Park, Clonmacnoise monastic site, Birr Heritage Town and the Slieve Bloom Mountains. Birr, Ferbane, Banagher and Kilcormac towns have particular roles in service provision for their wider rural hinterlands. The Council also acknowledges the important role in which the ceased peatlands in ownership of Bord na Móna could play in providing alternative uses and employment and subsequently in increasing the future economic growth of this area within the county. The Council also recognises that there are leveraging opportunities in big data and data analytics from Irish Low Frequency Array (I-LOFAR), which is the Birr-based Irish station in a European wide network of radio telescopes used to observe the universe at low frequencies, and in this regard the Council recognises Birr as a technology hub.

## **5.6 Sector-Focused Approach**

The Council recognises the value of existing employers in the county and will encourage and facilitate the maintenance of existing employment in the county. This will be achieved through facilitating a healthy environment for business networking and promotion and through the considered application of planning policies. The Council will also seek to promote new employment opportunities in traditional and emerging sectors.

### **5.6.1 Traditional Sectors**

#### **Foreign-Direct Investment**

The Council recognises the importance of ensuring that there are adequate serviced lands throughout the county that would attract and maintain foreign direct investment. In Offaly there are a number of state-supported companies and the Council recognises the importance of these companies and acknowledge that their presence and experience in the county is crucial in attracting similar large-scale employers. In settlements throughout Offaly there are serviced sites suitable for large-scale employers and turn-key and greenfield sites available for prospective developers. Offaly County Council maintain a database of suitable sites and will engage with employment agencies and potential investors in order to identify sites for particular investment. In collaboration with the IDA, the Council will endeavour to expand on this database to identify suitably sized land banks and business premises at suitable locations in Tullamore in order to attract foreign direct investment.

#### **Start-Ups**

Many new employment creation opportunities are with start-up companies particularly in the technology sector. These companies are not necessarily land-use intensive and Offaly County Council consider that there is sufficient zoned land and attractive premises within our towns in particular towns that can accommodate this type of business. Where the Council can be pro-active in encouraging such start-ups is by ensuring that our urban centres are healthy and vibrant and that telecommunication infrastructure providers continue to invest in broadband throughout Offaly. Incubation units for new businesses are already a feature of our urban centres in County Offaly and

the Council will work with the relevant employment agencies to ensure that appropriate business education and networking programmes are put in place to increase the support and opportunities for these new businesses in their early years and as they grow.

### **Home Based Employment**

Home-based employment activity assists in dispersing enterprise activity and sustaining smaller settlements within the county. The economic benefits associated with the location of 'start-up businesses' within the home is recognised. The Council recognises that as businesses grow and activity intensifies to the level where additional employees, beyond the homeowner and immediate family, that they will need to relocate to more suitable premises within commercial areas of the county's settlements. It is important that this is communicated to prospective business owners at the outset.

### **Small-Medium Enterprises (SMEs)**

The Council acknowledges that the development of small-scale projects with long-term employment potential are important in sustaining both urban and rural settlements in County Offaly. The Council will work closely with the relevant agencies to actively promote and encourage the development of SME's throughout the county. The Council further encourages such development within its towns and villages in particular. The Council, however, takes a proactive and flexible approach on a case-by-case basis in the identification and location of employment activity, where appropriate.

### **Tourism**

The Council recognises that the tourism sector is emerging as key economic driver for the county. The county possesses a rich array of natural, built and cultural heritage including Clonmacnoise monastic site, 'Birr Castle, Gardens and Science Centre', Slieve Bloom Mountains, Lough Boora Discovery Park, and the River Shannon.

Birr was chosen as a 'Destination Town' under the Government's 'Destination Towns' initiative launched in 2019 by the National Tourism Development Authority. The purpose of the funding, as issued through Fáilte Ireland, is to boost the attractiveness and tourism appeal of the town. The funding will assist in measures to sustain and improve the quality of the tourist experience in the town, a benefit of which is to increase visitor numbers and also to protect and increase direct employment in tourism related businesses in the town and wider area.

The Council also recognises that the Grand Canal Greenway is a valuable recreational and amenity route used by walkers and cyclists, key infrastructure to link many of the tourism and recreational sites in the county and the wider region. The Grand Canal Greenway has been serviced with free public Wi-Fi which is an innovative use of digital technology and infrastructure to deliver real, tangible benefits for local communities and visitors alike. The Council recognises the importance of continuing to extend and link in the form of a network, greenways and peatways in the interests of sustainable mobility, activity tourism, transition to a low carbon and climate resilient society, strengthening rural economies and job creation.

Offaly possesses a wealth of natural resources, unique heritage and a well-developed network of market towns and villages that could be promoted at international, national and local level for increased tourism potential and create positive economic opportunities locally.

Tourism is dealt with separately in Chapter 6 Tourism and Recreational Development.

## 5.6.2 Emerging Sectors

### Remote Working / Co-Working Spaces

Offaly's central location, good connectivity and excellent quality of life make it a great place to live and work. From most parts of the county, cities like Limerick, Galway and Dublin are just an hour's drive away. The Council recognises the need for remote working in the interests of flexible work arrangements, be it from home or from a designated hub / co-working space. Remote working reduces the need for commuting and accordingly contributes to lower carbon output. Offaly's co-working hubs are ideal for remote workers (working one or more days away from the main office) and for those setting up or growing their own business. Examples of co-working hubs in County Offaly include 'the Junction Business Innovation Centre' in Tullamore (which includes hot desks, office space, business training and mentoring, and facilities for people to develop ideas and business), 'e-hive co-working hub' in Edenderry (which include hot desks, meeting room and canteen facilities). Also 'stream creative suite' in Birr, which uses big data from I-LOFAR Radio Telescope to deliver Regional STREAM Potential, where research and education meet business, all linked with the common theme of big data (and which includes hot desks, I.T. training room and meeting rooms). Portarlington Enterprise Centre on the Laois side of Portarlington provides remote working space for the wider Portarlington catchment.

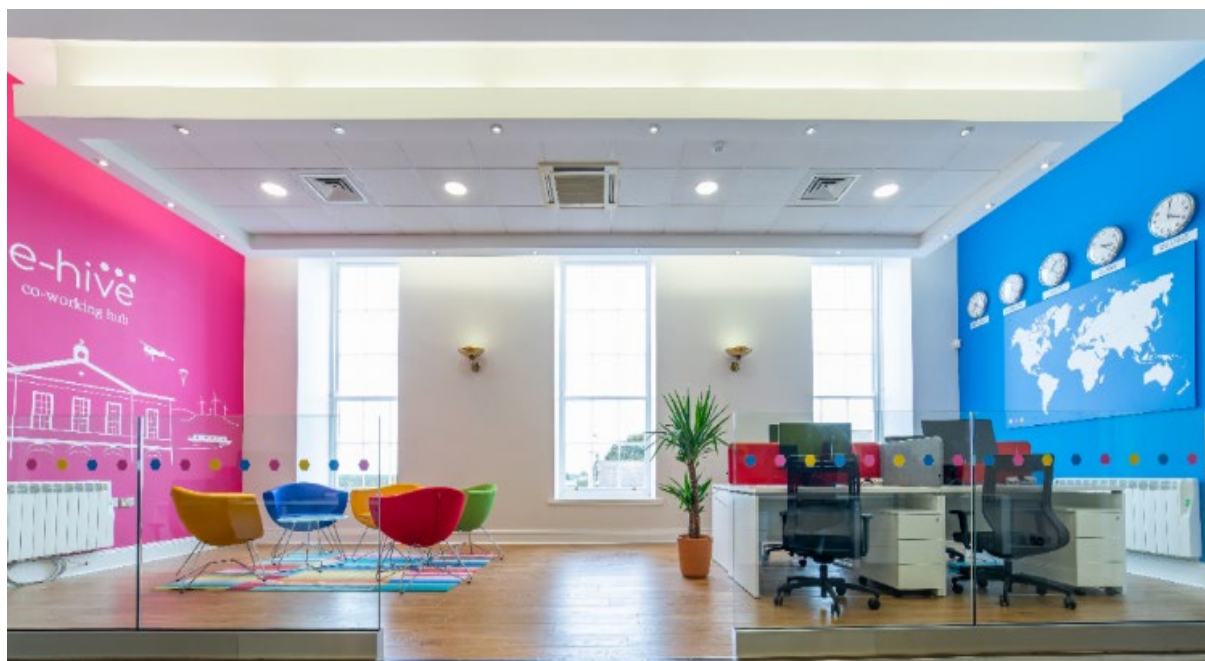


Figure 5.5 E-hive Co-Working Hub in Edenderry



**Figure 5.6 I-LOFAR Array at Birr Castle Gardens**

### **Artisan Foods**

Offaly has a long and strong tradition of producing high quality locally produced foods from cheeses and chocolate to organic beef. There is increasing demand for training, product development and funding for equipment. The area of artisan food is ever expanding and has potential to develop into food trails.

Ferbane Food Campus is a state-of-the-art food product development and training facility, promoting smart specialisation and clustering of the food sector. It is the first timeshare production facility of its kind to be developed in the midlands. Its purpose is to give food entrepreneurs the opportunity to use a state-of-the-art kitchen, training facility and incubator units to develop their product without the prohibitive cost of maintaining their own commercial kitchen. It is operated by Ferbane Business and Technology Park Ltd which is a not-for-profit, voluntary group, whose objective is to support the creation of jobs in Ferbane and in the local region by providing infrastructure and supports to encourage business start-ups. Ferbane Food Campus was awarded national winner in the 'Community Business Enterprise Initiatives' category in the annual Pride of Place Awards in 2016.

### **Medtech (Medical Technology)**

The synergy that exists between the Midlands Regional Hospital in Tullamore, a teaching/ university hospital, and the medtech sector is emerging as a key economic driver for Tullamore. The Council recognises and supports the strong linkages within the local economy between the hospital and the emerging med-tech sector, in which the hospital provides a springboard for further linkages to existing and new med-tech businesses and research facilities. According to the Irish Medtech Association, the medtech sector in Ireland is recognised as one of the five global emerging hubs.

### **Green Energy**

Whilst Offaly has a long history of energy production related predominantly to the commercial exploitation of peatlands, national environmental policies are dictating the wind down of traditional fossil fuel powered stations and a diversification of our energy production towards green energy such

as wind, solar and bioenergy. Offaly County Council recognises the potential economic benefit of a transition from fossil fuel based energy production through to investment in renewable energy, the promotion of the green enterprise sector and the creation of green collar jobs; all components of a local 'smart green economy'.

The Rhode Green Energy Park (GEP) is strategically located on the outskirts of Rhode, just 7 km from the M6 Dublin to Galway motorway. The business park has been established on the site of a former ESB Power Station and occupies approximately 5.3 ha with 13 serviced sites. The area has a strong heritage in energy production and is already home to a number of consented renewable energy generation proposals and facilities in the shape of wind, solar and flywheel battery storage. With the significant development of the business park infrastructure(s) in place and various energy related infrastructure and prospective developments nearby, Offaly County Council has identified the potential for a Green Energy Park at this location which can be a national exemplar of the transition from a historical dependency on fossil fuels to sustainable energy and energy innovation.



Figure 5.7 Location of Rhode Green Energy Park

### Strategic Opportunities

Offaly County Council has commissioned RPS Consultants to prepare an 'Opportunity Assessment Report' for Rhode GEP which has identified three strategic opportunity areas;

1. Energy decarbonisation/ innovation hub built around renewable energy, energy storage, hydrogen gas and electricity system integration.



2. Eco-Industrial Park model whereby large-scale energy intensive employment – for example in data centres, agri-food, horticulture, bio-economy – develops around the electricity and heat resources available.
3. Educational/ Innovation/ Centre of Learning for renewables and electricity grid: to improve awareness within the community of how the energy transition is happening, for collaboration with stakeholders across the Midlands Region and to create partnerships with University and Third Level Institutions.

These strategic opportunities offer considerable potential to;

- develop hybrid renewable energy facilities in co-location with industries and enterprise within the Business Park and renewable energy developments in the surrounding rural area; and
- provide mutual benefits and efficiencies for both energy producers and users by sharing outputs and by-products of their processes in a reliable, sustainable and cost competitive fashion and at the same time export renewable energy to the national grid to help transition to a low-carbon and climate resilient society.

## Rhode Green Energy Park – Overview June 2020

**Offaly County Council** is developing the concept for a new **Green Energy Park** at Rhode, County Offaly.

Located on the site of a former peat-fired power station, the existing Rhode Business Park has a strategic location with respect to electricity and gas grids, data connections, and the M6 motorway.

Already a number of energy projects are underway or planned adjacent to the park, including wind energy, solar energy and innovative energy storage systems.

- WIND
- SOLAR
- GEOTHERMAL
- STORAGE
- CONVERSION

**RHODE GREEN ENERGY PARK**

MULLINGAR  
ATHLONE  
TULLAMORE  
DUBLIN

Environment  
Community  
Innovation  
Synergy  
Employment

The **Green Energy Park** will form part of the **Just Transition** for County Offaly, by enabling low-carbon energy solutions to be developed. This new economic activity will provide employment opportunities in response to the move away from peat harvesting and combustion.

RPS consultants have been appointed to help advance the concept, in relation to:

- Technical aspects – identifying the energy opportunities and potential synergies.
- Economic potential – identifying job creation opportunities in energy, innovation and training.
- Downstream opportunities – scoping the potential for co-location of new activities benefitting from clean energy supply.
- Strategic aspects – how to shape the concept to deliver a successful outcome.

**Selected stakeholders are now being contacted to help inform the process.**

### Guiding Future Development of the Rhode Green Energy Park

In order to maximise the potential of the Rhode GEP, the following principles should apply to the future planning of the Rhode Green Energy Park, in order to realise its potential.

**Table 5.3: Guiding Principles for the Rhode GEP**

**1. Integration/ Interconnectivity of units/ enterprises**

Rather than conceiving each proposal as a stand-alone unit, developers should plan for future integration with other facilities in the park, following an eco-park model. This means interconnection of electricity, a local heat network, and physical connections for transfer of other materials (circular economy co-operation). This translates as a services corridor concept within the park. This can take into account potential for future connection of external services and utilities.

**2. Shared Approach – Wastewater, SUDS, offices/meeting room**

A more coherent and efficient park will develop if some aspects are shared; for example, a central sustainable drainage pond will avoid each plot needing its own system, a central wastewater treatment plant is preferable to several smaller units. A shared hub for office space and meeting rooms will help create co-operation and synergy between tenant companies. Offaly County Council can take a lead in this regard.

**3. Design Approach/ Coherence**

The attractiveness and coherence of the park will benefit from a specific design guide to inform the approach on individual plots. Accordingly, it is an objective of this Plan to prepare a Design Statement for the Rhode Green Energy Park showing the developers the preferred approach to materials, colours, boundary treatment, signage etc. for individual units and sites in the Park. Until this Design Statement is prepared, developers shall as a minimum comply with the requirements of DMS-73. Individual developments will still have freedom meet their own design requirements but following overarching guidance.

**4. Community Integration – Recreation, Connections and Green Infrastructure Provision**

The Park forms part of an informal walking loop popular with the local community. This can be strengthened and expanded, for example with connections to Midland Cycling Destination - Offaly routes in the vicinity, connections to Croghan Hill and connections with potential walking and cycling routes in nearby bogs post rehabilitation. Access to the existing walking loops in the Park should be protected during construction work where possible. It is an objective of this Plan to prepare a Green Infrastructure Masterplan for the Rhode Green Energy Park to advise developers on how to retain and enhance existing green infrastructure and to provide new green infrastructure within and around the Rhode Green Energy Park. Until this Statement is prepared, developers shall as a minimum comply with the requirements contained in DMS-72.

**5. Sustainable Design Approach**

As part of the energy transition, the park should be developed as an exemplar of sustainability, using for instance low-carbon materials, encouraging sustainable transport, incorporating biodiversity gain, reducing impacts from lighting, and so on. It is an objective of this Plan for the Council to prepare an Energy Efficiency and Climate Change Adaptation Design Statement for the Park. Until this Statement is prepared, developers shall as a minimum comply with the requirements contained DMS-74 in Chapter 13 of this Plan in this regard. One avenue for developers to consider in this regard is to implement a sustainability standard such as CEEQUAL (for park infrastructure) or a community approach under BREEAM or LEED.

**6. Technology/ WiFi zone**

As a landmark, pioneering energy efficient, low carbon centre of industry, the Rhode Green Energy Park would benefit from a Wi-Fi zone to facilitate collaboration spaces in the park and any academic / research ties that the park will develop.

**7. Future Expansion/ Phased Growth**

The Council recognises that while the core area of the Rhode GEP provides several opportunities and already has operational energy facilities, some future proposals such as large scale renewable energy projects or data centres may require larger land banks adjacent to the site or in the general area. In this regard, there exists large tracts of flat peatland and transitional marginal land within

the general area of the GEP which may be capable of accommodating such complimentary developments subject to proper planning and environmental considerations and the design ethos and coherence of the park being respected. The layout should be planned to enable future connections to adjacent land. The possible need to expand infrastructure such as the electricity substation and wastewater treatment installation should also be borne in mind.

### Appropriate and Inappropriate Uses within the Rhode Green Energy Park

Table 5.4 below which is referred to in ENTO-19 outlines appropriate uses that will be considered and inappropriate uses that will not be considered by the Planning Authority within the Rhode GEP. It should be noted that the uses identified appropriate and inappropriate in Objective ENTO-19 relating to the Rhode GEP take precedence over the acceptability or otherwise of uses which apply to 'Industrial and Warehousing' as contained in Table 12.1 Land Use Zoning Matrix in Chapter 12 Land Use Zoning Objectives.

**Table 5.4: Appropriate and Inappropriate Uses within the Rhode Green Energy Park**

Uses considered appropriate for the Rhode Green Energy Park	Uses not considered appropriate for the Rhode Green Energy Park
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Low Carbon Peaking Plant</li> <li>2. Hydrogen Electrolyser and Storage</li> <li>3. Data Centre</li> <li>4. Geothermal Heat Pumps</li> <li>5. Steam Reformation Plant</li> <li>6. Anerobic Digester (Biogas)</li> <li>7. Biofuel Production</li> <li>8. Horticulture/Agrifood (Greenhouses)</li> <li>9. Research and Development</li> <li>10. Other uses which in the opinion of the Planning Authority are in keeping with and complementary to the strategic opportunities outlined in Section 5.6.2.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Batching plants</li> <li>2. Fuel Depots</li> <li>3. Heavy Vehicle Depots</li> <li>4. Light or heavy industry not related to Green Energy or Green Innovation</li> <li>5. Warehousing not related to Green Energy or Green Innovation</li> <li>6. Logistics</li> <li>7. Abbatoir</li> <li>8. Retail wholesale outlets</li> <li>9. Boarding Kennels</li> <li>10. Mart/Co-operatives</li> <li>11. Scrap yards</li> <li>12. Service Stations</li> <li>13. Veterinary surgeries</li> <li>14. Other uses which in the opinion of the Planning Authority are in not in keeping with and complementary to the strategic opportunities outlined in Section 5.6.2.</li> </ol>

### Necessary Infrastructure

Realising the potential of Rhode GEP will require further development of enabling infrastructure provided directly from developers and from national and European funding programs. Table 5.5 below lists a range of new infrastructure and upgrades to existing infrastructure that will be required in this regard.

**Table 5.5: Future infrastructure requirements to facilitate development of Rhode Green Energy Park**

- Upgrading physical environment of the existing Business Park (roads, footpaths, landscaping)
- R400 road improvements
- Footpaths/ cycleways
- Improved telecommunications (fibre) infrastructure
- Upgrade of capacity at Rhode Wastewater Treatment Plant
- Water supply improvements
- Electricity grid connections and potential expansion of existing substation
- Gas grid connection to the site
- Interconnecting services (heat networks, electricity, gas, water, etc.) between companies operating in and around the Park
- Modern Interface (MI) Wholesale High Quality Access (WHQA) to fibre-optic communication

## 5.7 Rural Economic Strategy

Offaly is a rural county, with much of its population rural-based and approximately one fifth of the county comprising of peatlands and the majority of the remainder of the land in agricultural / forestry use.

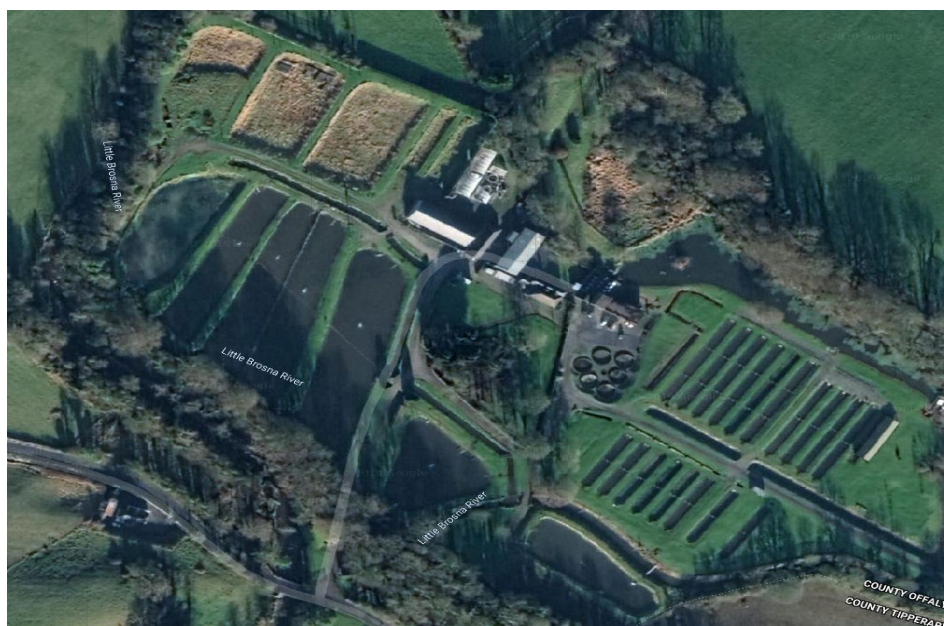
Construction, engineering, manufacturing, quarrying, tourism-related services, transport, energy production, forestry, agriculture, food, education, waste disposal and health are all significant areas of employment in the rural areas of County Offaly. The Council recognises, however, that rural-based employment extends beyond these traditional rural sectors to include all aspects of the economy. A national strategic outcome of the NPF is *'Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities'*. Rural areas play a key role in defining our identity, in driving our economy and our high-quality environment and must be a part of the county's strategic development during the plan period. In addition to the natural resources and food sector as traditional pillars of the rural economy, improved connectivity, broadband and rural economic development opportunities offer the potential to ensure our rural area remains and strengthens as a living and working community. Supporting the following enterprises has the potential to ensure our rural area remains and strengthens as a living and working community;

- Rural resource based industry at an appropriate size and scale;
- Construction, engineering, quarrying, tourism-related services, transport, energy production, forestry, agriculture, food, education, waste disposal and health;
- Connectivity and accessibility;
- On-farm based diversification which is complementary to the agricultural operation of farms;
- Development of cut away industrial peatlands and associated infrastructure for appropriate alternative uses;
- Information and Communication Technology (ICT)-based industries;

- Industries addressing climate action and sustainability, for example, renewable energy, post thermal energy production, afforestation;
- Redevelopment of ESB and Bord na Móna antecedent sites;
- Accommodate home-working; and
- Within villages;
  - o support start up enterprises;
  - o ensure sufficient land is zoned to facilitate employment and enterprise development;
  - o accommodate remote-working hubs; and
  - o encourage high quality and well-designed buildings, structures, public spaces and streets, in order to make places more attractive. Attractive places attract more inward investment, skills and talent, and increase the livability factor of a place.

Improved communications technology mean that remote working is a reality for many professionals and in addition the rise of niche retail and other internet based services may facilitate small-scale commercial opportunities in rural areas of the county.

The Council will continue to implement initiatives that are operated by its Local Employment Office to foster an entrepreneurial culture in the county generally.



**Figure 5.8 Roscrea Fish Farm, County Offaly**

### **5.7.1 Agriculture, Agri-Food, Agri-Tech, Food and Beverage**

Agriculture has always been and will continue to be a strong employer in the county and the Council recognises and values this fact.

The Council will take a positive approach to applications for sustainable agricultural developments generally, subject to the protection of ground waters, residential amenities, designated habitats and the landscape.

The agriculture sector is a significant source of economic activity throughout the county. It contributes to exports, provides the raw materials for the food processing industry and has potential for providing more added value in the artisan food sector.

Food Wise 2025 identifies growth projections in agri-food exports and direct jobs in the agri-food sector. It states that *'environmental sustainability and economic sustainability are equal and complementary – one will not be achieved at the expense of the other'*.

The Council promotes the use of Agri-tech which is the use of technology for farming that is developed to improve efficiency and profitability. It aims to improve farming through information monitoring and analysis of weather, pests, soil and air temperature. Agri-tech also includes the use of automation, such as controlling heaters and irrigation and employing pest control through aerosol pheromone dispersal.

Led by Bord Bia, Origin Green is a voluntary programme that brings together Ireland's food industry. From farmers and food manufacturers, through to retailers and foodservice operators, all come together with the common goal of sustainable food production. Origin Green enables Ireland's food industry set and achieve measurable sustainability targets that respect the environment and serve local communities.



Figure 5.9 An Offaly Enterprise (photo by Paula Nolan)

### **5.7.2 Peatlands and Antecedent Uses**

The Council recognises the importance of cutaway bogs as a major natural and archaeological resource. The Council also recognises the potential for the utilisation of protected peatland areas for tourist, amenity, environmental, educational and research purposes. Bord na Móna is the largest single landowner in County Offaly and owns approximately 27,650ha of the 32,400ha of peatland within the county.

The term 'cutaway' is used to describe the land area left after the major portion of the original peat deposit has been removed or exploited for fuel. This cutaway now presents an opportunity for alternative uses/ rural diversification and to be part of a comprehensive after-use plan.

Cutaway bogs have potential landuses that can enhance both the employment, renewable energy generation, and tourism sectors of the county as well as providing a potential habitat considering much of the area will return to wilderness and contribute to the green infrastructure network.

A number of the peatlands within the county are protected through European and national designations. The Council will seek to achieve a balance in developing such a valuable land resource whilst also protecting the heritage and environmental value of these areas where required.

The Council notes the closure of ESB's peat fired electricity generating plants at Shannonbridge and Edenderry this decade, and recognises the transition that faces Bord na Móna considering the phased elimination of peat-fired electricity generation. The Council supports the longer-term strategic planning for industrial peatland areas. This should include the preparation of a comprehensive after-use framework plan for the peatlands and related infrastructure, which addresses environmental, economic and social issues including employment and replacement enterprise reflecting the current transition from employment based around peat extraction. Though this is in the interests of reducing Ireland's carbon footprint, it is recognised that Bord na Móna face the issue of accommodating staff in alternative work processes. Offaly County Council support the redeployment of Bord na Móna staff in alternative employment.

The Council acknowledges and is in favour of the re-development and/or expansion of currently used and disused sites such as former ESB power station sites and Bord na Móna works.

The Council supports the efforts of the Midland Transition team to:

- Pursue funding opportunities and actions to mitigate the impact of the Bord na Móna job losses on the individuals concerned, and the impact on the local and regional economy; and
- Position the region to develop alternative forms of employment, attract investment and maximise existing employment opportunities and resources.

Chapter 3 Climate Action and Energy, Chapter 4 Biodiversity and Landscape, Chapter 6 Tourism and Recreational Development and Chapter 13 Development Management Standards also address Peatlands.





Figure 5.10 Edenderry Electricity Generating Power Station

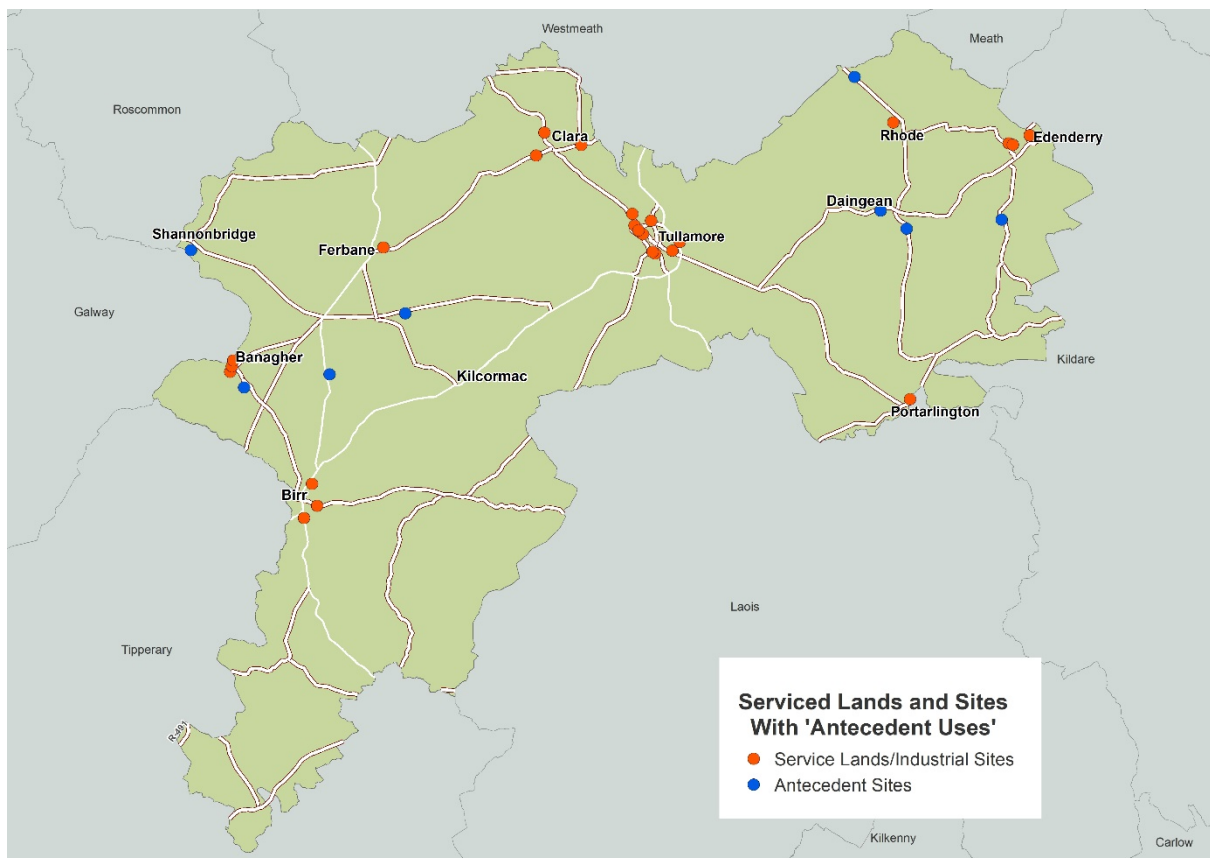


Figure 5.11 Serviced Lands and Sites with 'Antecedent Uses'

### 5.7.3 Farm Diversification

Offaly County Council will favourably consider and promote projects that may be ancillary to farming activities but will contribute to the continued economic viability of the farm and contribute to the vibrancy of rural life generally.

### 5.7.4 Rural Based Industry

Rural areas in Offaly have traditionally sustained some small-scale employment based activities, such as car repair and light-industrial workshops. While Offaly County Council directs industrial development towards serviced sites in urban areas, there is limited scope for small-scale industrial development appropriate to a rural area.

### 5.7.5 Forestry

The Council will seek to accommodate afforestation throughout the county where it is deemed appropriate, both native broadleaf and coniferous species, in accordance with the proper planning and sustainable development of the county. Much of the existing forested land is owned by Coillte.

Woodlands provide recreational opportunities in addition to their heritage and economic benefits. They are also important as links in the county's green infrastructure network.

### 5.7.6 Energy

The Council recognises that the energy sector, both renewables and non-renewables, is currently a significant employer in the county and has potential for considerable growth over the lifetime of this plan. The Council will encourage and facilitate the development of renewable energy projects in rural areas. Please refer to the Chapter 3 Climate Action and Energy for more details.

### 5.7.7 Circular Bio-economy

The bio-economy comprises *'the production of renewable biological resources, such as crops, forests, fish, animals, and micro-organisms and the conversion of these resources and waste stream residues, by-products or municipal solid waste into value added products, such as food, feed, bio-based products and bioenergy'* (E.C. 2012).

The transition to a more circular economy and bio-economy, where the value of bio-based products, materials and resources is maintained in the economy for as long as possible, and the generation of waste minimised, will provide an essential contribution to Offaly developing a sustainable, low carbon, resources efficient and competitive economy.

The Council will support the development of the bio-energy industry in the county (including bio-gas) where appropriate.



Figure 5.12 Bio-economy

### 5.7.8 Aggregates and Minerals

The Council recognises the importance of sand and gravel extractions in the economic life of the county and its importance as a valuable source of employment in parts of the county. It is also recognised, however, that exploitation of deposits can have a seriously damaging environmental impact on the county's natural landscape, in particular its esker network. Offaly County Council acknowledges that a satisfactory balance is required between the needs of the building industry and the need to protect the environment.

The Council recognises the importance of ensuring that those extractions which would result in a reduction of the visual amenity of areas of high amenity or damage to areas of scientific importance or of geological, botanical, zoological and other natural significance including all designated European Sites are not be permitted.

The Council requires that all such workings should be subjected to landscaping requirements and that worked out quarries should be rehabilitated to a use agreed with the Planning Authority. The use of these rehabilitated sites shall be limited to wastes such as soil, stone and subsoils and sites shall be authorised under the appropriate waste regulations.

The Planning Authority will have regard to the Department of the Environment's Guidelines for Planning Authorities for Quarries and Ancillary Activities 2004 (and any updated editions) when

assessing applications relating to the extraction industry in the county. Quarries are addressed further in Chapter 4 Biodiversity and Landscape and in Chapter 13 Development Management Standards.

### **5.7.9 Tourism**

The Council recognises that tourism plays a role in economic development and enterprise activity. Tourism is dealt with separately in Chapter 6 Tourism and Recreational Development.

## **5.8 Information and Communication Technologies**

Offaly County Council recognises that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) play a crucial role in enabling social and economic activity and is therefore committed to enhancing the ICT infrastructure throughout the county. It is acknowledged, however, that this must be managed to ensure a balance between the provision of such infrastructure in the interests of social and economic progress, and sustaining residential amenity and environmental quality.

The Council is preparing the Offaly Digital Strategy which seeks to facilitate and support the rollout of Digital Infrastructure and Skills to all citizens in County Offaly.

### **5.8.1 Broadband and Wi-Fi**

Access to quality high speed broadband is essential for economic growth, sustainable development (by facilitating remote working and reducing long distance commuting), social inclusion and an enhanced quality of life for all. The county broadband services have improved significantly over the past number of years. The Metropolitan Area Networks (MANs) provides broadband to the urban areas of Banagher, Birr, Edenderry and Tullamore. The National Broadband Plan (NBP) is a Government initiative to deliver high speed broadband services to all premises in Ireland.

Under the NBP, the delivery of access to high speed broadband to every home and business in Ireland will be achieved through a combination of accelerated commercial investment and a State intervention in those parts of the country where there is no certainty that the private sector will invest. In this way, it will enable all citizens throughout Ireland to benefit from technology advances including in eHealth and eEducation, smart farming and tourism. Offaly County Council will continue to support the delivery of the NBP and ICT infrastructure in the county in conjunction with the relevant bodies and service providers.

The Council also seeks to promote the provision of Wi-Fi zones in public buildings and tourist destinations across the county. 'Visit Offaly Free Wi-Fi' is currently installed at a number of locations throughout the county.

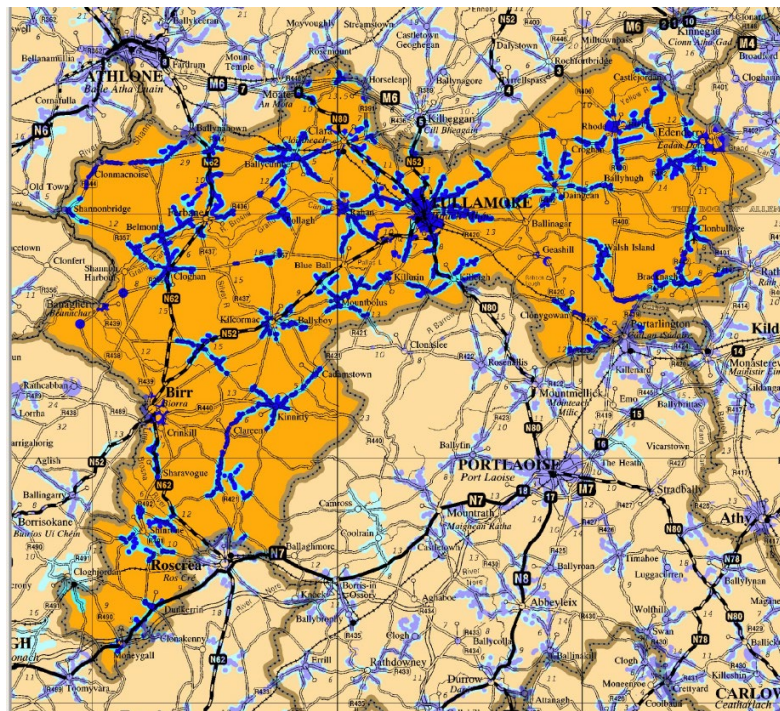


Figure 5.13 High Speed Broadband Map for County Offaly – Quarter 3 of 2019

### 5.8.2 Telecommunications

The Council recognises that there is a balance between facilitating the provision of mobile telecommunications infrastructure and the need to protect residential, visual amenity and the natural and built environment. When considering proposals for telecommunications infrastructure, the Council will have regard to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government’s *“Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures, Guidelines for Planning Authorities”* 1996 and Circular Letter PL07/12 ‘Telecommunication Antennae and Support Structures’ and any amendments thereof.

## 5.9 Enterprise Policies

### Strategy

**ENTP-01** It is Council policy to support the Midlands Regional Enterprise Action Plan 2019-2020 and any future editions.

**ENTP-02** It is Council policy to facilitate and work pro-actively with interest groups (both public and private sector) in the location of industry, business and enterprise in particular by zoning of lands for enterprise development and activity which can facilitate the provision of large-scale and small-scale development, as appropriate. This includes the identification and possible reservation of lands at suitable locations which will accommodate, where appropriate – for example, business / technology activity, industry, enterprise and retail having regard to proper planning and sustainable development. The Council will protect zoned lands from inappropriate development that would undermine future economic activity or the unsustainable development of such areas.

**ENTP-03** It is Council policy to co-operate with local, regional and national enterprise authorities, most notably the IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland, in the attraction of investment into the county, including both overseas investment and local investment and the provision of employment and enterprise within County Offaly.

**ENTP-04** It is Council policy to promote Tullamore as a suitable location for Foreign Direct Investment.

**ENTP-05** It is Council policy to build a resilient economic base and promote innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystems that support smart specialisation, cluster development and sustained economic growth.

**ENTP-06** It is Council policy to support existing successful clusters in Offaly, such as those in Med-Tech, FinTech, ICT, and Engineering and Food and Drinks sectors, and promote new and emerging clustering opportunities across all economic sectors within the County.

**ENTP-07** It is Council policy to recognise the significant economic and employment benefits of similar enterprises clustering in an area.

**ENTP-08** It is Council policy to prioritise, facilitate and promote the development of infrastructure that supports and attracts new economic activity-related investment in County Offaly.

### Settlement Hierarchy

**ENTP-09** It is Council policy that future economic and enterprise development in Offaly that is urban in nature should be in the first instance located in urban areas and be largely distributed throughout the county's settlement hierarchy, having regard to each individual area's (a) identified role within the region, (b) existing size, (c) existing function (d) capacity for sustainable growth (i.e. growth without detriment to its surroundings, its built or natural assets and/or its character) and (e) available infrastructure capacity. There is, however, a positive presumption in terms of employment creation and therefore it is Council policy to examine such proposals within other locations on a case-by-case basis for example employment related development in a location clearly linked to a rural resource activity.

**ENTP-10** It is Council policy to consider valid propositions for enterprise development where strong locational drivers apply and which do not apply to the same extent elsewhere.

#### **Key Town – Tullamore**

**ENTP-11** It is Council policy to strengthen and channel development into Tullamore the primary driver for economic development within the county, which is designated as a Key Town in the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy.

**ENTP-12** It is Council policy to promote Tullamore as a key location for economic development supporting the provision of increased employment through the expansion of the existing enterprise ecosystem in the town and smart specialisation and support the provision of physical infrastructure and zoned lands to realise the delivery of strategic employment lands in central accessible locations.

**ENTP-13** It is Council policy to support infrastructural development in Tullamore to facilitate the development of Strategic Employment Zones.

#### **Self-Sustaining Growth Town – Birr**

**ENTP-14** It is Council policy to promote Birr as a competitive and attractive location for economic development emphasising Foreign Direct Investment.

**ENTP-15** It is Council policy to promote and support the development of the lands zoned 'Business or Technology Park' in the northern part of the town.

**ENTP-16** It is Council policy to support leveraging opportunities in big data and data analytics from Irish Low Frequency Array (I-LOFAR), which is the Birr-based Irish station in a European wide network of state of the art radio telescopes used to observe the universe at low frequencies, and in this regard recognise Birr as a technology hub.

**ENTP-17** It is Council policy to support economic development and job creation through Birr's role as a Tourism Destination Town.

#### **Self-Sustaining Towns – Edenderry, Portarlington**

**ENTP-18** 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.

**ENTP-19** It is Council policy to support the proportionate economic growth of and appropriately designed development in self-sustaining towns that will contribute to their regeneration and renewal.

**ENTP-20** It is Council policy to promote Self-Sustaining Towns as an employment base for start-up businesses and enterprises.

### **Towns – Banagher, Clara**

**ENTP-21** It is Council policy to promote employment and enterprise development in Towns.

### **Smaller Towns (Kilcormac, Ferbane, Daingean) and Villages**

**ENTP-22** It is Council policy to support the sustainability of Smaller Towns and Villages, by supporting appropriately scaled economic development and services together with the enhancement of local infrastructure and amenities and improved sustainable transport links.

### **Sector Focused**

**ENTP-23** It is Council policy to actively encourage, facilitate and provide for the location and development of knowledge-intensive and technology based specialisation companies within the county, as appropriate, in accordance with development / environmental standards.

**ENTP-24** It is Council policy to actively encourage the redevelopment of sites with antecedent uses or disused sites which were formerly ESB plants and Bord na Móna works for enterprise and employment creation.

**ENTP-25** It is a Council policy to encourage the building of a resilient economic base by means of supporting investment in exporting, innovation, productivity, competitiveness, developing and enhancing accessibility and connectivity, development of talent / skills and the creation of attractive places and suitable infrastructure.

**ENTP-26** It is Council policy to encourage foreign direct investment through greater levels of enterprise collaboration, clustering and global connectivity.

**ENTP-27** It is a policy of the Council to support digital technologies in the interests of efficiency and competitiveness such as robotics, artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, digital fabrication, augmented / virtual reality, blockchain and autonomous mobility.

**ENTP-28** It is Council policy to encourage collaboration in science, technology and innovation with a view to increasing Offaly's innovation capacity. This can be supported by the Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund under the National Planning Framework.

**ENTP-29** It is Council policy to support Advanced Manufacturing as a centre of excellence in the Midlands.

**ENTP-30** It is Council policy to design, develop and roll-out social enterprise practices with a strong emphasis on collaboration.

### **Home Based Employment, Remote Working and Non-Commuting**

**ENTP-31** It is Council policy to support remote working opportunities from home and innovative designated hub/ co-working spaces, in the interests of mitigating long commuting times.



**ENTP-32** It is Council policy to co-operate with and facilitate Government agencies, and other bodies where feasible, in encouraging home-based employment including the provision of small-scale individual enterprises. Proposals which involve the change of use and/or new development for purposes of home-based employment will generally be considered favourably where it can be clearly demonstrated that a) the proposal is of an appropriate scale for its location; b) there are no adverse environmental, health and safety impacts, c) the proposal is without prejudice to residential amenity and d) the proposal will not detract from the vitality and viability of town or village centres.

**ENTP-33** It is Council policy to support local employment creation where it can mitigate against long distance commuting.

### **Higher Education**

**ENTP-34** It is Council policy to encourage and establish links between County Offaly, Maynooth University, Trinity College Dublin, University of Limerick, Athlone Institute of Technology and Cork Institute of Technology and other higher level colleges as appropriate, which will improve the skills base/education of inhabitants within County Offaly.

**ENTP-35** It is Council policy to encourage third level education in County Offaly through the provision of outreach / campus facilities for the accommodation of courses.

**ENTP-36** It is Council policy to support in conjunction with local, regional and national enterprise authorities' efforts to counteract the effects from industrial decline by way of lifelong learning programmes, appropriate business supports and upskilling to facilitate moving to alternative sectors in the locality or region.

**ENTP-37** It is Council policy to support the examination of a need for complementary third level outreach facilities in Tullamore, particularly with regard to support for Midland Regional Hospital Tullamore and where appropriate, its continued development as a Teaching / University Hospital, together with potential for linkages to existing and new med-tech businesses and research facilities.

**ENTP-38** It is Council policy to encourage the provision of incubator units at a scale appropriate to their location, in accordance with the county's settlement hierarchy and to ensure that an appropriate programme of support is in place across the county that will both provide education and networking opportunities for new businesses.

### **Ferbane Food Campus**

**ENTP-39** It is Council policy to promote the development of Ferbane Food Campus as a state-of-the-art food product development and training facility to give food entrepreneurs the opportunity to develop their product.

### **Communications Infrastructure**

**ENTP-40** It is Council policy to promote and facilitate the sustainable development of a high quality Information and Communications Technology (ICT) network in the county in order to achieve balanced social and economic development whilst protecting the amenities of urban and rural areas.

**ENTP-41** It is Council policy to support and facilitate the delivery of the National Broadband Plan and the Offaly Digital Strategy as a means of developing further opportunities for enterprise, employment, education, innovation and skills development.

**ENTP-42** It is Council policy to require underground telecommunications ducting to be provided in all new developments and public realm schemes as appropriate, to support the rollout of all digital infrastructure including the National Broadband Plan throughout the county.

**ENTP-43** It is Council policy to achieve a balance between facilitating the provision of telecommunications services in the interests of social and economic progress and protecting residential amenity and environmental quality. The Council will have regard to the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Governments Guidelines on Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures (and any future editions) and Circular Letter PL07/12 (Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures) in assessing development proposals.

**ENTP-44** It is Council policy to avoid the unnecessary proliferation of masts in the county through co-location of antennae on existing support structures and masts. Masts and antennae shall be restricted in the following areas:

- Upland areas of the Slieve Bloom Mountains, masts will not be permitted in areas above the 150-metre contour, unless it can be clearly demonstrated that it is not possible to locate antennae on the existing mast clusters at Wolftrap Mountain or Coolcreen;
- Designated Areas of High Amenity; and
- Within significant views or settings of recorded monuments and places, national monuments, protected structures, architectural conservation areas and archaeological sites.

### **Climate Action**

**ENTP-45** It is Council policy to support the creation of quality green jobs which are sustainable over the longer-term.

**ENTP-46** It is Council policy to support enterprise development of industries, agencies and communities that create and employ green technologies in the provision of their goods and services, while taking measures to accelerate the transition towards a sustainable, low carbon and circular economy.

**ENTP-47** It is Council policy to support and promote the development of economic and enterprise development and activity in a manner which contributes to the transition to a low carbon, climate resilient and environmentally sustainable county.

## 5.10 Enterprise Objectives

### Strategy

**ENTO-01** It is an objective of the Council to encourage, in co-operation with Enterprise Ireland, the Local Enterprise Office, and other local development bodies, the development of further small / medium-scale industries and services. Further, to promote the establishment of a number of small incubator units, together with a county-wide support programme, within designated areas to accommodate new business start-ups.

**ENTO-02** It is an objective of the Council to continue to liaise and work alongside the enterprise agencies, ESB and Bord na Móna and the private sector, to develop enterprise space at various locations throughout the county, where feasible and appropriate.

**ENTO-03** It is an objective of the Council to work alongside IDA to identify appropriately sized land banks and business premises at suitable locations in Tullamore in order to attract foreign direct investment.

**ENTO-04** It is an objective of the Council to improve the cluster-specific business environment by putting in place a favourable business ecosystem for innovation and entrepreneurship that supports the development of new industrial value chains and emerging industries.

**ENTO-05** It is an objective of the Council to support smart specialisation partnerships at a county and regional level.

### Key Town – Tullamore

**ENTO-06** It is an objective of the Council to facilitate the development of Tullamore, a Key Town under the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy, in accordance with regional policy. This will include measures to seek to reserve lands within Tullamore to make provision for potential nationally and regionally significant activities and to attract specialist large-scale enterprise development within the county.

**ENTO-07** It is an objective of the Council to identify and quantify suitable locations in Tullamore for strategic employment development, for large scale employment and enterprise activity.

### Self-Sustaining Growth Town – Birr

**ENTO-08** It is an objective of the Council to support leveraging opportunities in big data and data analytics from Irish Low Frequency Array (I-LOFAR), which is the Birr-based Irish station in a European wide network of state of the art radio telescopes used to observe the universe at low frequencies, and in this regard facilitate the development of Birr as a technology hub.

### Self-Sustaining Towns – Edenderry and Portarlington

**ENTO-09** It is an objective of the Council 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.

**ENTO-10** It is an objective of the Council to require that developments within or adjacent to the area of the Blundell Masterplan, Edenderry, 2020 demonstrate adherence to the urban design, place making and connectivity principles for the masterplan area.

### Towns – Banagher, Clara

**ENTO-11** It is an objective of the Council to facilitate new employment and enterprise development in Towns.

### Smaller Towns (Kilcormac, Ferbane, Daingean) and Villages

**ENTO-12** It is an objective of the Council to facilitate appropriately scaled enterprise development and services in Smaller Towns and Villages, together with the enhancement of local infrastructure and amenities and improved sustainable transport links.

### Communications Infrastructure

**ENTO-13** It is an objective of the Council to facilitate the development / expansion of a further digital/e-commerce hub in Offaly to serve the county in improving and promoting the use of the internet as a key educational and business driver.

**ENTO-14** It is an objective of the Council to support the national objective to promote Ireland as a sustainable international destination for Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructures such as data centres and associated economic activities at appropriate locations. In this regard, the Council will support the provision of data centres at appropriate locations in the county subject to appropriate environmental assessment and the planning process and the criteria set out in Policies CAEP-41 and CAEP-42 in Chapter 3 of this Plan.

**ENTO-15** It is an objective of the Council to work with government agencies and telecommunication providers to facilitate the delivery of high speed broadband to all premises in Offaly.

**ENTO-16** It is an objective of the Council to work with statutory undertakers to make the most efficient use of infrastructure in the delivery of broadband in the county, particularly encouraging the use of existing telecommunications ducting where it is available.

**ENTO-17** It is an objective of the Council to encourage the provision of Wi-Fi zones in public buildings and tourist destinations in the county.

**ENTO-18** It is an objective of the Council to avail of funding opportunities for the provision of Wi-Fi and broadband in the county to support economic development and social inclusion.

### **Rhode Green Energy Park**

**ENTO-19** It is an objective of the Council to support and promote the development of Rhode Green Energy Park for green energy, smart specialization and clustering and other complimentary green uses as outlined as 'Uses Considered Appropriate for the Rhode Green Energy Park' in Table 5.4. 'Uses not considered appropriate for the Rhode Green Energy Park' as outlined in Table 5.4 will not be encouraged.

**ENTO-20** It is an objective of the Council to ensure that proposed developments within the Rhode Green Energy Park adhere to the principles set out in Table 5.3: Guiding Principles for the Rhode Green Energy Park.

**ENTO-21** It is an objective of the Council to support and facilitate the infrastructural upgrades and works outlined in Table 5.5 in conjunction with the development of the Rhode Business Park.

**ENTO-22** It is an objective of this Plan for the Council to prepare the following;

- a Design Statement showing the developers the preferred approach to materials, colours, boundary treatment, signage etc. in the Rhode Green Energy Park;
- a Green Infrastructure Masterplan for the Rhode Green Energy Park to advise developers of how to retain and enhance existing green infrastructure and to provide new green infrastructure within and around the Rhode Green Energy Park; and
- an Energy Efficiency and Climate Change Adaptation Design Statement for the Rhode Green Energy Park.

## 5.11 Rural Economic Development Policies

### Strategy

**REDP-01** It is Council policy to liaise and co-operate with statutory, local development, sectoral and community / voluntary agencies and groups to develop economic, social and cultural benefits for the rural community and its service base.

**REDP-02** It is Council policy to support the regeneration of smaller towns and villages through identification of regeneration projects which could harness untapped assets with community support and wider private and public sector support and investment including the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund.

**REDP-03** It is Council policy to continue to protect existing resource-based industry from encroachment by residential development, for example mining, quarrying, gravel pits, and intensive agriculture.

### Agriculture

**REDP-04** It is Council policy to support the development of agriculture where it is compatible with the sustainable development of the county and commensurate with sustaining the farming community.

**REDP-05** It is Council policy to ensure that agricultural developments are designed and constructed in a manner that will ensure that groundwater watercourses and sources of potable water are protected from the threat of pollution in line with Water Quality Regulations and the requirements of the Water Framework Directive.

**REDP-06** It is Council policy to proactively encourage the Bord na Móna Peatlands Rehabilitation Scheme (which is to be administered by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC) and regulated by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage) to deliver on potential amenity and tourism benefits for example complimenting the delivery of the *Midlands Cycling Destination – Offaly*, where routes pass through the rehabilitated bogs, subject to environmental, biodiversity and hydrological requirements’.

### Food and Beverage

**REDP-07** It is Council policy to have a positive presumption to developments that seek to provide added value in the food sector, including processing and servicing, subject to the relevant environmental considerations. The Council supports the development of the artisan food sector.

**REDP-08** It is Council policy to support food and beverage enterprises with the Origin Green accreditation in view of their sustainable food production.

### Diversification

**REDP-09** It is Council policy to facilitate the development of the rural economy through supporting sustainability and economic efficiency in agriculture and diversification into alternative on-farm and

off-farm activities such as the food and drinks sector, forestry, horticulture, crafts, agri-business, fishing, aquaculture, waste management, rural tourism, renewable energy and the bio-economy, while at the same time noting the importance of maintaining and protecting the natural landscape and built heritage which are vital to rural tourism.

**REDP-10** It is Council policy to favourably consider proposals for on-farm based diversification, which are complementary to the agricultural operation on the farm such as:

- Specialist farming practices, for example, flower growing, equine facilities, poultry, mushroom growing, and specialised animal breeding;
- Farm enterprises such as processing, co-ops, farm supply stores and agri-business;
- The production of organic and specialty foods to meet the increase in demand for such products; and
- The conversion of redundant farm buildings of vernacular importance for appropriate owner-run enterprises such as agri-tourism, as a way of supporting a viable rural community, subject to the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

**REDP-11** As part of Offaly County Council's recognition of the contribution that rural areas make to social and economic wellbeing, it is Council policy to support and protect existing rural economies such as (i) valuable agricultural lands to ensure sustainable food supply, (ii) the value and character of the open countryside and (iii) the diversification of rural economies to create additional jobs and maximise opportunities in emerging sectors, such as agri-business, renewable energy, tourism, and forestry enterprise.

**REDP-12** It is Council policy to enhance the competitiveness of rural areas by supporting innovation in rural economic development and enterprise through the diversification of the rural economy into new sectors and services including Information and Communication Technology (ICT) based industries and those addressing climate action and sustainability.

### **Industry / Business**

**REDP-13** It is Council policy to support rural entrepreneurship and rural enterprise development of an appropriate scale at suitable locations in the County.

**REDP-14** It is Council policy to favourably consider proposals for the expansion of existing industrial or new business enterprise in the open countryside where the proposal;

- a) is an appropriate size and scale,
- b) does not negatively impact on the character and amenity of the surrounding area,
- c) has regard to and complies with guidelines/standards including traffic, noise and environmental considerations, and
- d) is rural in nature by being rural resource based and not urban in nature.

### **Climate Action**

**REDP-15** It is Council policy to support the agricultural sector to employ green technologies in the provision of its goods and services, while taking measures to accelerate the transition towards a sustainable, low carbon and circular economy.

**REDP-16** It is Council policy to encourage the development of environmentally sustainable practices with a low carbon footprint, particularly agriculture, to ensure that development does not impinge on the visual amenity of the open countryside and that groundwater, watercourses, wildlife habitats and areas of ecological importance are protected from the threat of pollution.

**REDP-17** It is Council policy to support the development of renewable energy in rural areas, where it is considered appropriate i.e. where it is demonstrated that such development would not result in significant environmental effects. Such development will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

**REDP-18** It is Council policy to encourage state and private afforestation, both native broadleaf and coniferous species, in appropriate locations, in co-operation with Coillte and the Forest Service and in line with national policy and Forest Service Guidelines. In addition, it is policy to encourage the Forest Service to avoid a proliferation of new forest road entrances, particularly in Areas of High Amenity.

### **Aggregates and Minerals**

**REDP-19** It is Council policy to ensure those extractions (quarries / sand and gravel pits) which would result in a reduction of the visual amenity of Areas of High Amenity, eskers, esker landscapes, protected views or damage to designated sites, habitat types or species shall not be permitted. It is Council policy that all such workings should be subjected to landscaping requirements and that worked out quarries should be rehabilitated to a use agreed with the Council which could include recreational, biodiversity, amenity or other end-of-life uses. Planning applications for extraction shall be assessed against section 28 Ministerial Guidelines. The use of these rehabilitated sites shall be limited to wastes such as soil, stone and subsoils and sites shall be authorised under the appropriate waste regulations. Where the Council considers and accepts that in cases where inert material (for example soil, stones and subsoil) cannot be recycled or otherwise sold, such materials may be considered for the phased restoration and landscaping of the site in line with planning conditions imposed.



## 5.12 Rural Economic Development Objectives

### Strategy

**REDO-01** It is an objective of the Council to support rural employment initiatives across the county, subject to the principles of proper planning and sustainable development.

**REDO-02** It is an objective of the Council to support the progression and delivery of projects in the context of available National and European funding, that support:

- Community structural development;
- Local business and enterprise development;
- Infrastructure and capital development,
- Agricultural development; and
- Tourism and heritage development.

### Agriculture

**REDO-03** It is an objective of the Council to support agricultural development and encourage the continuation of agriculture as a contributory means of maintaining population in the rural area and sustaining the rural economy.

**REDO-04** It is an objective of the Council to ensure that all agricultural activities adhere to any legislation on water quality and biodiversity, for example, Phosphorus Regulations, Water Framework Directive, Nitrates Directive and Habitats Directive.

### Peatland After-use

**REDO-05** It is an objective of the Council to support the longer-term strategic planning for industrial peatland areas, which should include a comprehensive after-use framework plan for the industrial peatlands and associated infrastructure including workshops, office buildings and industrial sites, which addresses environmental, economic and social issues including employment and replacement enterprise reflecting the current transition from employment based around peat extraction. Examples of after use and re-purposing of workshops and production facilities could include outreach training centres, gravel extraction, bike-hire facilities, enterprise space / co-working facilities, aquaculture, birch water harvesting, herb growing, resource management / recycling centre, climate change mitigation (such as through renewable energy, carbon sink, data centres, battery energy storage, afforestation including native woodland, a Green Energy Hub, flood management), and tourism (such as through peatways, recreational forestry, wilderness, eco-tourism based on biodiversity, and a designation of a National Peatlands Heritage Park).

**REDO-06** It is an objective of the Council to support the Midlands Regional Transition Team in developing a 'Holistic Plan for Just Transition in the Midland Region' including an inventory of project proposals and actions to support just transition in the Midlands and to assist the region in identifying potential investment needs for inclusion in a programme of support under the new EU Just Transition Fund.

**REDO-07** It is an objective of the Council to support the development of Lough Boora Discovery Park as a National Peatlands Centre and to support the development of further strategic linkages with the local and regional green infrastructure network.

**REDO-08** It is an objective of the Council to consider proposals for the potential re-purposing of both Shannonbridge and Edenderry peat powered electricity generating plants, and the appropriate rehabilitation of associated lands.