

Chapter 6: Tourism and Recreational Development

6.1 Aim

To promote County Offaly as a quality place to visit and stay with a wide variety of high quality tourist attractions and visitor facilities and infrastructure.

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

- National Planning Framework 2018-2040
- National Development Plan 2018-2027
- Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region 2019
- Outdoor Recreation Plan for Public Lands and Waters in Ireland 2017-2021
- People Place and Policy - Growing Tourism to 2025 by Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2015
- Action Plan for Rural Development, Realising our Rural Potential, 2017
- Offaly Tourism Statement of Strategy 2017-2022
- The Lough Ree and the Mid-Shannon Spirit Level: Wet and Wild Lands; A Shared Ambition, 2017
- A Tourism Masterplan for the Shannon 2020-2030, Waterways Ireland
- A Strategy for Walking and Cycling in Offaly; Connecting People Connecting Places, 2015
- Feasibility Study on the Development of a Major Cycling Destination in the Midlands of Ireland, 2016
- Spatial Planning and National Roads, Guidelines for Planning Authorities 2012
- Policy on the Provision of Tourist and Leisure Signs on National Roads, 2011

6.2 Introduction

The Council recognises that tourism development can make an important contribution to the economic life of the county. County Offaly is strategically located in the centre of Ireland on a rail line, canal, River Shannon and with easy motorway access.



Figure 6.1 Lough Boora Discovery Park

The Government's Tourism Strategy 'People, Place and Policy Growing Tourism to 2025 (Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2015) seeks to develop destination experiences centred on the natural, built and cultural heritage of the country. The Action Plan for Rural Development, Realising our Rural Potential (2017) highlights the potential of activity tourism to contribute to economic growth in rural areas.

Offaly Tourism Statement of Strategy 2017-2022 has two main priorities; focus on developing a range of tourism attractions on public land holdings in Offaly, and secondly, market and promote Offaly as a tourism destination to domestic and international tourism markets.

The Council recognises its role in ensuring a coordinated approach to tourism development. In addition to delivering the actions in the Offaly Tourism Statement of Strategy, in particular working with the Offaly Tourism Marketing CLG (Company Limited by Guarantee), the Council has an important role in the physical environment to enhance the tourism product, for example, by:

- Ensuring key attractions are well linked and easy to access;
- Ensuring attractions are coherently signposted; and
- Ensuring the provision and linkages to surrounding counties.

Figure 6.2 identifies the key tourist attractions in County Offaly, for example, Clonmacnoise Monastic Site, castles and heritage including Birr Castle Gardens and Science Centre, Tullamore Dew Visitor Centre, Lough Boora Discovery Park, Slieve Bloom Mountains, River Shannon, Grand Canal, Clara Bog Nature Reserve, and sport and leisure.



Figure 6.2 Offaly's Key Tourist Attractions

6.3 Branding

Offaly sits within two of Fáilte Ireland's regional tourism brands. The majority of the county is located within Ireland's Ancient East, while the west of the county bordering the River Shannon is located within Ireland's Hidden Heartlands. County Offaly itself has its own brand which it uses to promote the county as a tourist destination; Offaly – Ireland's Hidden Gem.

Ireland's Ancient East

Ireland's Ancient East (IAE) has been developed by Fáilte Ireland as a branded visitor experience encompassing the rich heritage and cultural assets that Ireland has to offer in the Midlands and eastern half of the country.

The IAE visitor experience is based on Ireland's rich built, natural and cultural legacy, made accessible and delivered through stories and interpretation at key historical sites, a significant number of which are owned and managed by the Office of Public Works.

Ireland's Hidden Heartlands

Ireland's Hidden Heartlands is the newest regional brand from Fáilte Ireland and has been developed as a branded visitor experience involving the green heartlands of Ireland's natural beauty, where activity and relaxation are centred around rural communities. The Hidden Heartlands lifestyle can be discovered across a lattice work of land and water trails, showcased by the iconic River Shannon.

Offaly - Ireland's Hidden Gem

The brand 'Offaly - Ireland's Hidden Gem' represents Offaly as a county steeped in treasures of culture, heritage, history and biodiversity. Offaly at the heart of Ireland welcomes the visitor to enormous tracts of wilderness, expanses of bogland, a vast mountain park, esker hills and deep wooded valleys with their streams and rivers. The majestic River Shannon defines its western boundary and the gently rolling hills of the Slieve Bloom Mountains, a national nature reserve, rise up in the east.





Figure 6.3 Ireland's Regional Tourism Brands

6.4 Tourism Development

The Council is aware of the need and of its responsibility to protect the amenities of the county from insensitive or inappropriate development. The Council will control development, including tourist related development, in such a manner as to conserve and enhance the natural environment and therefore to foster the future growth of the tourist industry in the county.

Built development and other activities associated with tourism should be appropriate to the character of the place in which they are situated, having particular regard to scale, design, nature, as well as the land use, economic and social requirements of the surrounding area.

Visitor accommodation, interpretation centres and commercial / retail facilities serving the tourism sector should generally be located within established settlements, thereby fostering strong links to a whole range of other economic and commercial sectors and in turn contributing to sustaining the host community. Section 13.9.8 of Chapter 13 Development Management Standards addresses tourism and recreation.

Offaly Tourist Office based in Tullamore, which opened in 2019, has information on all tourist attractions within the county.

6.5 Tourist Attractions

6.5.1 Monastic Heritage

County Offaly has a rich Early Christian monastic past and the evidence of this occurs on a network of sites across the county.

Clonmacnoise 6th century monastic site hosts a visitor centre run by the Office of Public Works which explains early Christian monastic life and the ruins of churches, towers and a cathedral, grave slabs and high crosses which remain. The Council recognises the heritage value of Clonmacnoise and encourages the continued promotion of the site as a tourist destination taking into account its capacity to accommodate visitors.

Other important monastic sites include Durrow with its 9th century high cross, early Christian slabs and St. Columcille's holy well and extensive enclosure; Rahan, Seir Kieran, Croghan Hill, Gallen Priory near Fermbane, St. Manchan's Early Christian shrine in Boher Catholic Church, Lemonaghan, Lynally church and graveyard, Letter church and holy well, Drumcullen and the location of its high cross head on display in Rath Catholic Parish Church, St. Brendan's Church in Birr, Kinnitty and Killeigh.



Figure 6.4 Croghan Hill Extinct Volcano (Photograph taken by James Fraher)

6.5.2 Birr Castle, Gardens and Science Centre

Birr Castle is an impressive castle located within Birr Town. Its award winning 50 hectares of gardens hosts rare trees and flowers, wildlife and walking routes along its rivers, lake and waterfalls and a playground that boasts the largest treehouse in Ireland. It has a science gallery and museum and an astrophysics observing facility known as the Irish Low Frequency Array (I-LOFAR) that connects Ireland to the international LOFAR Telescopes and which is addressed further in Chapter 5 Economic Development. The I-LOFAR facility builds on the science, astronomy and engineering history of Birr Castle, for example, from its 19th century Great Leviathan Telescope as depicted below.



Figure 6.5 The Great Leviathan Telescope at Birr Castle Gardens

6.5.3 Tullamore Dew Visitor Centre

The presence of the Tullamore Dew Visitor Centre signifies the potential to develop Tullamore as a destination for whiskey tourism, and Tullamore potentially could form part of a 'Whiskey Trails' linkage throughout the region and beyond.



Figure 6.6 Tullamore D.E.W. Visitor Centre

6.5.4 Peatlands: Lough Boora Discovery Park and Clara Bog Nature Reserve and Visitor Centre

The development of both Lough Boora Discovery Park and Clara Bog Visitor Centre and Nature Reserve has increased the access and educational value of the vast peatland network in the county. The uninterrupted expanse and biodiversity of these areas are a significant attraction. The Council will continue to seek to promote the existing facilities and their expansion.

Lough Boora Discovery Park was ranked best place in Ireland in 2018 by the Royal Town Planning Institute. It is a 2,000 hectare Bord na Móna cutaway bog, which has been developed as an outdoor amenity area with restored wetland, wild flower grassland and woodland habitats that provide important habitats for a wide diversity of animals, birds and plants. It includes a visitor centre, bike hire, sculpture park, angling, and bird watching facilities and extensive walking and cycling routes.

The Council supports 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 reflecting the current transition from employment based around peat extraction. This has potential for tourism resources, examples of which could include, peatways, bike-hire facilities recreational forestry, wilderness, eco-tourism based on biodiversity and a National Peatlands Heritage Park.



Figure 6.7 Lough Boora Discovery Park



Figure 6.8 Clara Bog Nature Reserve and Boardwalk

6.5.5 The Slieve Bloom Mountains

The Slieve Bloom Mountains extend over approximately 36,000 hectares straddling the borders of counties Offaly and Laois. This upland area of the county has a number of special environmental designations assigned to it. A balance must be maintained between conserving the environmental value of this area of the county and the economic potential that can be generated from such a resource. The Council acknowledges the value of this area as a resource for the county and will seek to encourage the further promotion of the Slieve Bloom Mountains in order to maximise its role within the tourism economy of Offaly.

The Slieve Bloom Mountains are also the focus for a number of walking routes and a mountain bike trail. Offaly County Council recognises the value of these walkways and bike trails to the tourist economy in Offaly and will continue to promote and facilitate tourism development, where appropriate in this area.



Figure 6.9 Mountain Bike Trail on the Slieve Bloom Mountains

6.5.6 Waterways: River Shannon and Grand Canal

Waterways route-based activities includes boating, canoeing, angling and numerous water sports and walking and cycling along greenways and blueways. The waterways product in Offaly builds on the attractions of the River Shannon and the Grand Canal.

Towns and villages that attract tourist traffic from the River Shannon include Banagher, Shannonbridge and Shannon Harbour. Clonmacnoise is a major destination on the banks of the River Shannon.

The towns of Tullamore, Daingean and Edenderry are served by the Grand Canal between Dublin and the River Shannon and play a role of service provider to canal users.



Figure 6.10 Boating at Shannon Harbour

'The Lough Ree and the Mid-Shannon Spirit Level; Wet and Wild Lands; A Shared Ambition' (December 2017) is a shared ambition of a number of local authorities and state agencies which provides a robust foundation for the articulation of a tourism proposition of scale for the Lough Ree and Mid-Shannon area with a view to calling it 'The Lough Ree and Mid-Shannon Wilderness Park'. The shared ambition seeks to capitalise on the region's pivotal location in relation to the emerging blue and green off-road network, and its natural setting within, between and across wet and wild lands.

Waterway Ireland's 'A Tourism Masterplan for the Shannon' (2020-2030) has as an objective to reposition the combined Shannon Navigation and Shannon Erne Waterway as a key destination within Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, identifying world class visitor experiences based on the region's natural and cultural assets. The area includes 5km on either side of the central navigation.



Figure 6.11 Extent of the Shannon Masterplan Area (Source: A Tourism Masterplan for the Shannon)

6.5.7 Greenways

The Grand Canal Greenway is a valuable recreational and amenity route used by walkers and cyclists and has potential to link to the Barrow Blueway in County Kildare via County Laois and to link to the Royal Canal in County Westmeath. The Grand Canal links to Lough Boora Discovery Park's extensive walking / cycling routes. 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 published 'A Strategy for Walking and Cycling in Offaly; Connecting People Connecting Places' (2015), which set the vision for County Offaly to connect to, embrace and build on the opportunities for walking and cycling in the county. Following from this the 'Feasibility Study on the Development of a Major Cycling Destination in the Midlands of Ireland' was published in 2016. Chapter 8 Sustainable Mobility and Accessibility also addresses walking and cycling.

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, enhancing amenities, strengthening rural economies and communities, health and wellbeing, job creation and settlement connectivity. In light of this the council working in conjunction with key stakeholders, promotes the establishment of walking / cycling ways along rivers, canals, disused railway lines and peatlands indicated in Figure 6.13 and Figure 6.14 below. The Council recognises that additional infrastructural requirements need to be met such as signage, bicycle stands, service facilities, seating and where necessary car parking.

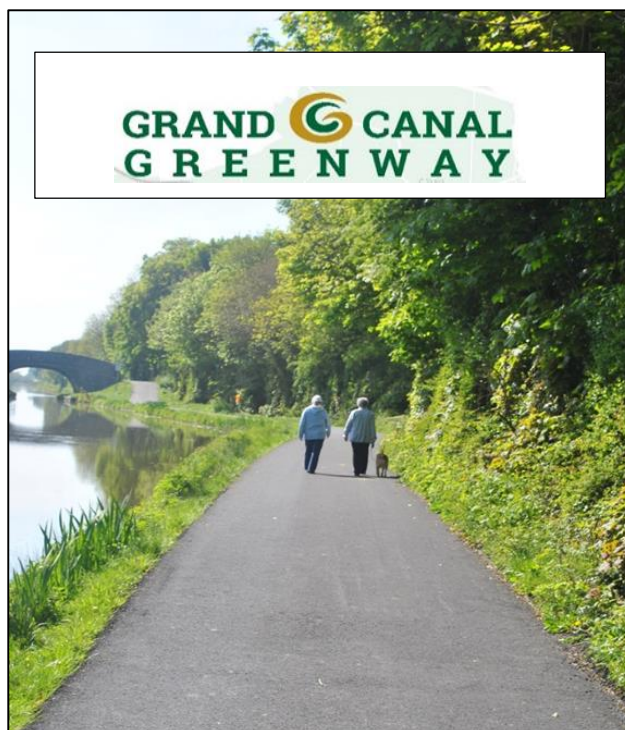


Figure 6.12 Grand Canal Greenway

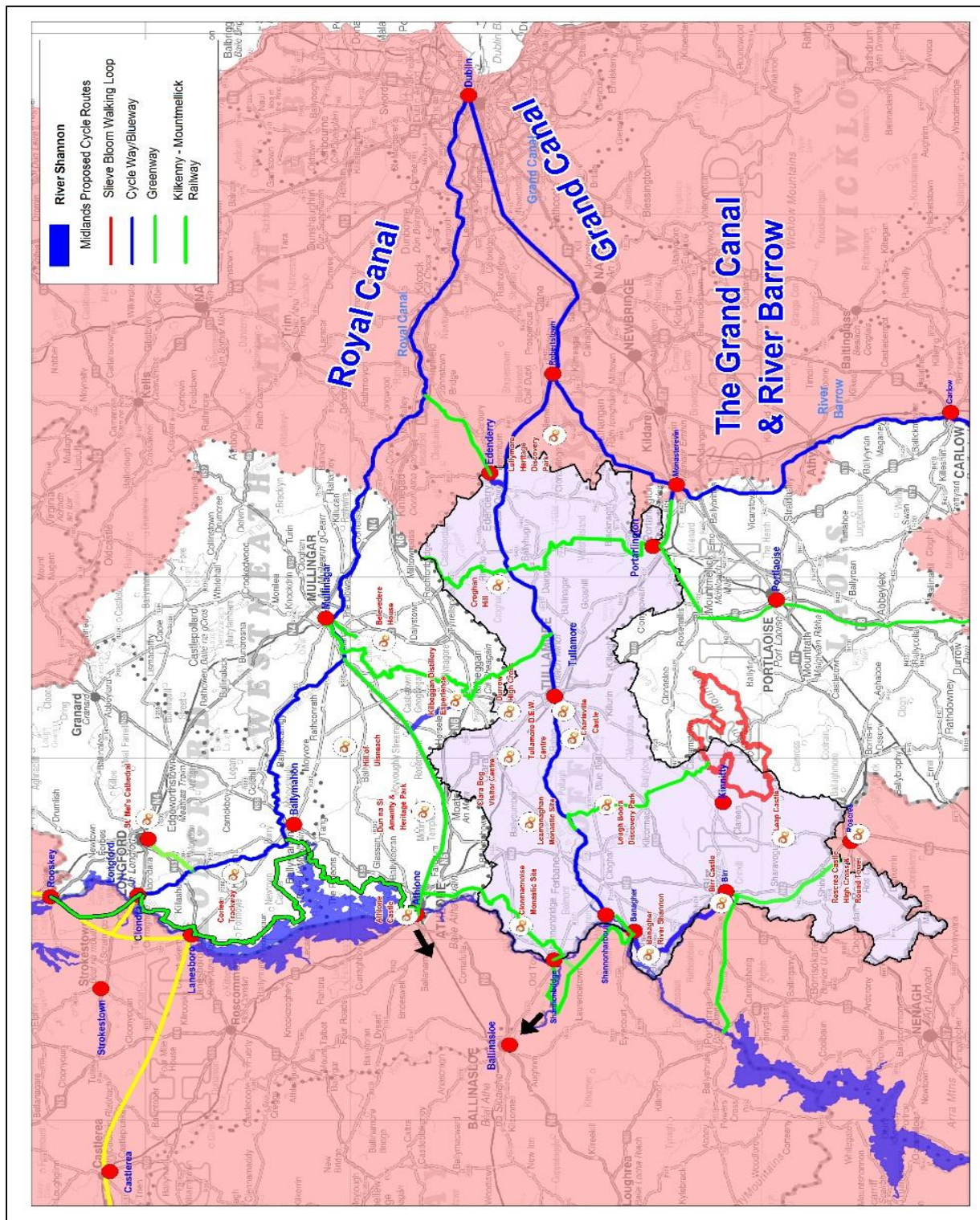


Figure 6.13 Proposed Midlands Cycle and Walking Routes
 (Source: Midlands Senior Planners Regional Implementation Group)

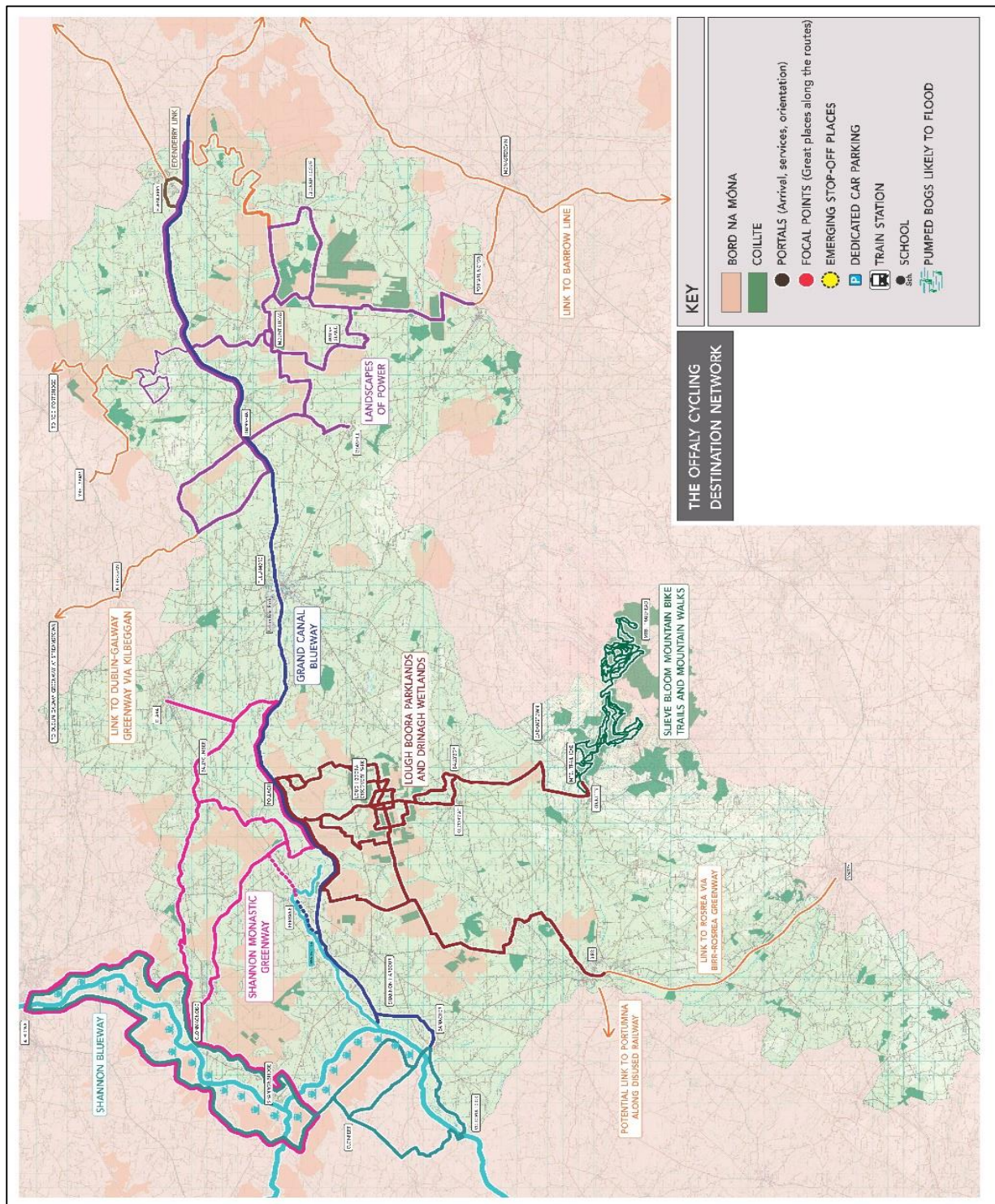


Figure 6.14 Midlands Cycling Destination, Offaly Network Map

(Source: Feasibility Study on the Development of a Major Cycling Destination in the Midlands of Ireland, 2016)

6.5.8 Sport and Leisure

Offaly is a sporting county and has a wide diversity of recreational and sporting activities available to locals and tourists which are a source of adventure / active tourism. Examples include walking, cycling, golf, angling, canoeing, boating, kayaking, cruising, equestrian, swimming, bird watching, parachute and skydiving club, playgrounds, gyms, shooting centre, adventure centres and interpretative centres.



Figure 6.15 A Woodland Walk



Figure 6.16 Croghan Hill Challenge

6.5.9 Towns and Villages

The towns and villages of the county are important attractions in themselves and can increase visitor dwell time and expenditure in local businesses and communities. They act as focal points / service zones for nearby attractions. Investing in making the public realm attractive encourages further investment and increased visitor numbers.

Fáilte Ireland is investing in Destination Towns across Ireland. The purpose is to raise the standard of these towns so that they satisfy the need and desires of tourists. Birr has been chosen by Fáilte Ireland to be a Destination Town. It is also an objective in the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy to support Tullamore's role as a tourism hub and development as a Destination Town.

Moneygall hosts the ancestral home of former U.S.A. president Barack Obama which has potential to generate tourism revenue for the village.

6.5.10 Arts and Culture

The Arts encompass many forms including the visual arts, music, literature, performance and drama. The Council's Arts Office continues to provide funding and a developmental information and advisory service. A vibrant arts scene will continue to make Offaly a more attractive place to visit. A multi-disciplinary arts and community centre is under construction in Tullamore.



Figure 6.17 Art Exhibition, Birr Civic Offices

6.5.11 Major Events / Festivals / Conferencing

A number of festivals and cultural events attract tourists to the county on an annual basis. The festival and event programme varies annually but some of the regular annual festivals include the Birr Vintage Week and Arts Festival, the Slieve Bloom Walking Festival, the Tullamore Agricultural Show, Tullamore TradFest, OFFline Film Festival in Birr, Shakefest Cultural Dance and Music festival in Tullamore and Hullabaloo! Offaly Children's Arts Festival. The Council will continue to facilitate the staging of these events where appropriate and will seek to build on the county's successful experience in hosting such events.

The Council recognises that conference business is an important generator of revenue, particularly by reason of Offaly's accessibility, central location, its facilities and experience in holding successful large events.



Figure 6.18 Tullamore Agricultural Show (Photograph by Paula Nolan)

6.6 Public Rights of Way

Existing public rights of way constitute an important amenity and the Council recognises the importance of maintaining established public rights of way and supporting initiatives for establishing walking routes in the county.

Section 10(2)(o) of the Planning and Development Acts 2000 as amended state that a Development Plan shall include an objective for *‘the preservation of public rights of way which give access to seashore, mountain, lakeshore, riverbank or other place of natural beauty or recreational utility, which public rights of way shall be identified both by marking them on at least one of the maps forming part of the development plan and by indicating their location on a list appended to the development plan’*.

This is, by its nature, a lengthy process which will be conducted throughout the lifetime of this Development Plan. Table 6.1 below provides a list and Figure 6.19 shows the extent and location of such public rights of ways, identified to date, in accordance with this provision. It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive list and that the omission of a public right of way from this list shall not be taken as an indication that such a right of way is not a public right of way.

Table 6.1 Public Rights of Way in County Offaly

Public Rights of Way	Ref no.
Slieve Bloom Way (an 84km long, circular walking trail, which includes 6 key trailheads)	1
Offaly Way	2
The Grand Canal	3
Slí Mór – Pilgrims Path	4
Slí na Sláinte: Cloghan, Tullamore and Clonbullogue	5

There are significant stretches of land that were formerly in use as railway lines within the county / region. To the extent that these are engineering works negotiating difficult topographical obstacles, they constitute significant resources, with potential for use as corridors for amenity access, free from motorised traffic, and even have potential for a revived railway use. The Council encourages the consideration of proposals for development in these areas for local heritage and outdoor activities including the provision of recreational walkways or cycling routes.

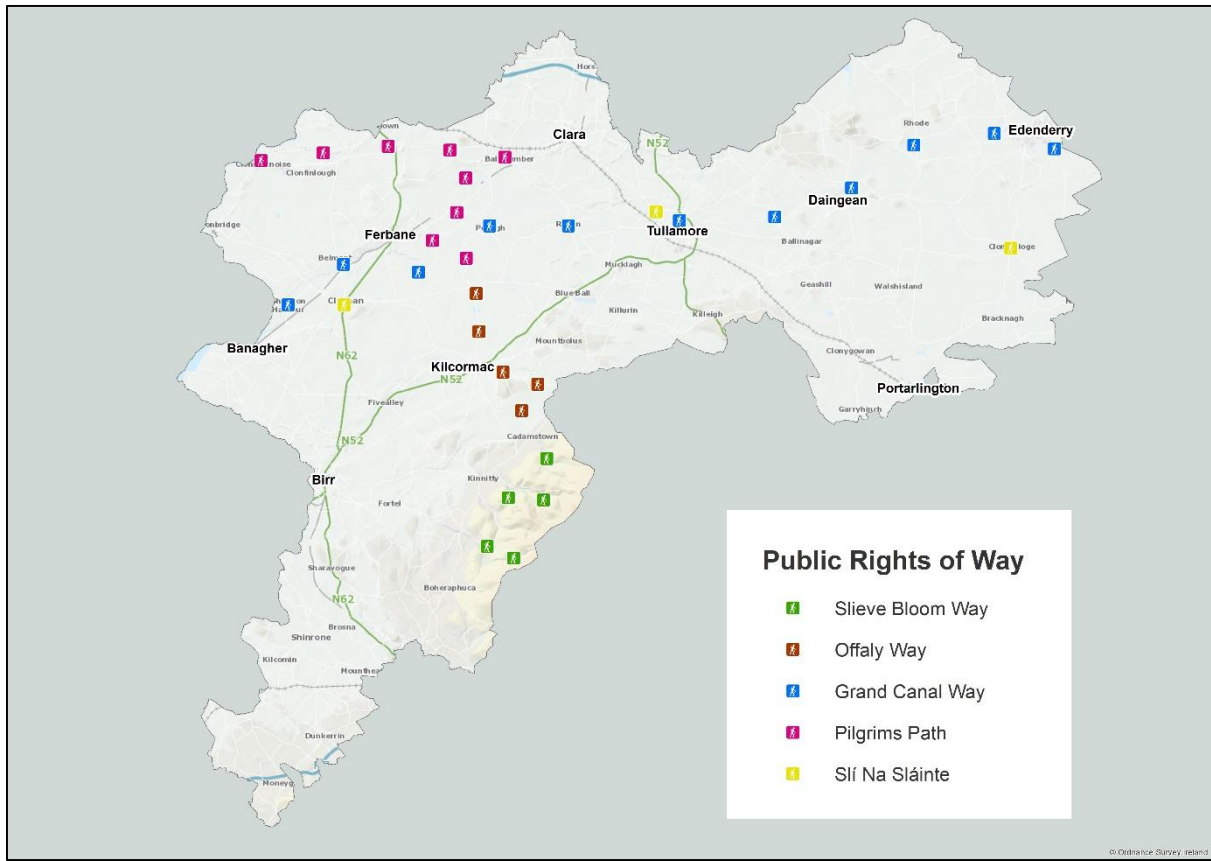


Figure 6.19 Public Rights of Way in County Offaly



Figure 6.20 Slí na Sláinte, Clonbullogue

6.7 Tourism Policies

Tourism Development

TRP-01 It is Council policy to implement Offaly Tourism Statement of Strategy 2017-2022 and any subsequent editions.

TRP-02 It is Council policy to continue to support and encourage increased co-ordination, cohesion and linkages between agencies involved in tourism development, for example, Fáilte Ireland, Waterways Ireland, Bord na Móna, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Coillte and Offaly County Council.

TRP-03 It is Council policy to co-operate with strategic partners such as Bord na Móna, National Parks and Wildlife Service and Coillte on the identification of land use strategies for appropriate areas of peatland and forestry within the county focusing on the tourism, environmental and heritage value of these areas.

TRP-04 It is Council policy to encourage tourism related developments inside existing settlements where the scale and size of the proposed development is appropriate and in keeping with the character of the settlement.

TRP-05 It is Council policy that tourism related developments outside of settlements will be considered where there is proven sustainable need. The need to locate in a particular area must be balanced against the environmental impact of the development and the benefits to the local community and adhere to Section 13.9.8 of Chapter 13 Development Management Standards which address tourism and recreation.

TRP-06 It is Council policy to support the provision and improvement of visitor facilities, infrastructure (including signage, bicycle stands, service facilities, seating and if necessary parking) and accommodation (including self-catering, hotels, hostels, guesthouses, B&Bs, caravanning, camping, motorhome service areas and glamping) at appropriate locations, including rural areas in proximity to tourist attractions, in order to expand the visitor experience provided to serve tourist attractions within the county. In so doing, the Council will facilitate increased bed nights supply in accordance with the 2025 targets set out in 'Tourism: An Industry Strategy for Growth to 2025' by The Irish Tourism Industry Federation.

TRP-07 It is Council policy to favourably consider tourism infrastructure related to sport, recreation and information including boating, cruising, angling, walking, cycling, pony trekking routes, golf courses, bird watching, adventure centres, and interpretive centres subject to proper planning, environmental protection and sustainable development and policies of this plan.

TRP-08 It is Council policy to protect natural resources on which tourism is based through the enforcement of policies and relevant legislation in relation to protection of resources, architectural conservation areas, peatlands, water quality, species and populations of conservation concern and biodiversity.

TRP-09 It is Council policy to seek to manage any increases in visitor numbers in order to avoid significant effects including loss of habitat and disturbance and impacts on existing infrastructure. Visitor / habitat management plans will be required for proposed tourism projects as relevant and appropriate.

Branding

TRP-10 It is Council policy to facilitate Fáilte Ireland initiatives for the development of tourism experiences in the county which deliver on the Ireland's Ancient East and Ireland's Hidden Heartland's brands.

TRP-11 It is Council policy to engage with Fáilte Ireland in the making of Ireland's Ancient East '*Ancient Visitor Experience Development Plan*' which will be a long-term tourism plan focused on experiences which bring the region's ancient history to life.

TRP-12 It is Council policy to support the making and implementation of '*Great Houses and Gardens Experience Development Programme*' which will focus on Offaly's rich historic houses and gardens, as part of Ireland's Ancient East '*Tales of Two Worlds Visitor Experience Development Plan*'.

Monastic Heritage

TRP-13 It is Council policy to promote the monastic sites of County Offaly as tourist attractions in conjunction with Fáilte Ireland, the OPW and relevant stakeholders, in particular Durrow Abbey and Monastic Site and Clonmacnoise Monastic Site with a view to developing proposals to enhance their visitor experience through the provision of signage, improved access in the case of Durrow Monastic Site, and associated infrastructure as appropriate and as resources allow.

Peatlands

TRP-14 It is Council policy to promote the continued development of Lough Boora Discovery Park as a tourist and ecological amenity and its linkages with the Grand Canal Greenway and surrounding towns and villages subject to proper planning, environmental protection and sustainable development.

TRP-15 It is Council policy to promote the tourist development potential of 'after use' quarries and peatlands, subject to appropriate reinstatement for their recreational amenity value and potential for habitat nesting sites, subject to proper planning, environmental protection and sustainable development.

Greenways / Blueways / Peatways / Trails

TRP-16 It is Council policy to support the extension of greenways, blueways, peatways and trails within the county and the integration and linkage of them with other existing / proposed greenways, blueways, peatways and trails both within and outside County Offaly.

TRP-17 It is Council policy to promote the provision of appropriate infrastructural requirements to meet the needs of greenways, blueways, and peatways and other pedestrian / cycling tails such as high quality signage, bicycle stands, service facilities, seating and if necessary, car parking (all with regard to Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport's '*Greenways and Cycle Routes Ancillary Infrastructure Guidelines*'), and the provision of visitor interpretation along these routes such as

storyboards, artworks and other media to create a greater sense of place, connecting and immersing visitors in the local heritage and stories.

TRP-18 It is Council policy to support in conjunction with relevant landowners and recreational / tourism agencies, the maintenance of and enhanced access to the countryside, waterways, monuments, historic properties, for recreational and tourism purposes. Access should be planned and managed in a manner that protects environmental sensitivities, ecological corridors and the ability of local infrastructure to support increased tourism.

TRP-19 It is Council policy to further investigate the potential of and opportunities for the development of existing and new trails in County Offaly to include a mixture of walking, cycling and driving trails, for the provision of appropriate services along these trails, and for the development of linkages between these trails and key tourism assets both within Offaly and adjoining counties. An example includes Derrycastle Experience Lake and Trails and its potential linkage to the People's Park in Portarlinton and the wider linkages to the Mount Lucas windfarm. The Council will only support such developments where it is demonstrated that no significant environmental effects would arise as a consequence of their construction or operation.

TRP-20 It is Council policy to promote and facilitate the continued development of the Slieve Bloom Mountains bike trail as a key tourism asset for the county and as part of the tourism offer on the Slieve Bloom Mountains, in conjunction with Laois County Council. In addition, it is the Council policy to (i) promote the further development of walking trails on the mountains, (ii) connect to and develop Kinnitty as a service hub for the area and (iii) promote and facilitate links to / from other existing and proposed greenways, blueways and peatways.

TRP-21 It is Council policy to recognise the value of the Slieve Bloom Mountains as an area of natural beauty with considerable recreation value and potential for diverse opportunities for the tourism industry. The Council acknowledges the designation of the Slieve Bloom Mountains as a Special Area of Conservation and a Special Protection Area and will only support opportunities where it can be demonstrated that they would not result in significant effects to the conservation objectives of the Slieve Bloom European Sites and is carried out in a sustainable manner that protects environmental sensitivities, ecological corridors and the ability of local infrastructure to support increased tourism.

TRP-22 It is Council policy to promote the *'Feasibility Study on the Development of a Major Cycling Destination in the Midlands of Ireland'* (2016) in conjunction with Bord na Móna and Coillte in accordance with 'Outdoor Recreation Plan for Public Lands and Waters in Ireland' 2017-2021 and in particular to recognise Tullamore as a hub in this respect.

TRP-23 It is Council policy to support Fáilte Ireland in the making of *'The Beara Breifne Way Tourism Activation Plan'* which will identify a number of towns as walking hubs along a trail which extends from Cork to Cavan through Offaly.

Towns and Villages

TRP-24 The Council acknowledges that towns and villages act as focal points and service zones for nearby tourist attractions and so it is Council policy to invest in public realm enhancements in order

to increase the attractiveness of Offaly's towns and villages and so in turn encourage further investment and increased visitor numbers.

TRP-25 It is Council policy to support Birr's role as a Tourism Destination Town having particular regard to its built heritage including Birr Castle, Gardens and Science Centre, its accessibility and proximity to key tourism destinations including natural amenities, and recreational opportunities including the Slieve Bloom Mountains, Lough Boora Discovery Park and Banagher marina on the River Shannon.

TRP-26 It is Council policy to support Tullamore's role as a tourism hub and its development as a Tourism Destination Town having particular regard to its distilling heritage including Tullamore Dew Visitor Centre, its accessibility and proximity to key tourism destinations including natural amenities, and recreational opportunities including the Grand Canal and adjoining greenway, Lough Boora Discovery Park, Slieve Bloom Mountains, Durrow Monastic Site and Clara Bog Visitor Centre.

TRP-27 It is Council policy to encourage and facilitate Charleville Castle and Demesne as an amenity area for the longer-term development of Tullamore. The Council acknowledges the designation of Charleville Wood as a Special Area of Conservation and will only support opportunities where it can be demonstrated that they would not result in significant effects to the conservation objectives of Charleville Wood European Site and is carried out in a sustainable manner that protects environmental sensitivities, ecological corridors and the ability of local infrastructure to support increased tourism.

TRP-28 It is Council policy to promote and facilitate conferencing facilities in the county and in particular recognise Tullamore's role as a conferencing and event hub, given its location, accessibility and experience.

TRP-29 It is Council policy to recognise Edenderry's role as a service hub for the Grand Canal Greenway in the east of the county.

Arts, Heritage and Culture

TRP-30 It is Council policy to promote and facilitate the role of arts, heritage and culture in recognition of its importance to people's identity and the potential for economic development through a unique cultural tourism offering, including the development of themed trails to showcase Offaly's rich monastic heritage, culture and food offering.

Public Rights of Way

TRP-31 It is Council policy to support the preservation, protection, promotion and improvement, for the common good, existing public rights of way for recreation and tourism purposes, particularly those which provide access to state and semi-state lands such as archaeological sites, National Monuments and amenities, including upland areas and water corridors, and to create new ones or extend existing ones where appropriate either by agreement with landowners or through the use of compulsory purchase powers, whereby access is planned and managed in a sustainable manner that protects environmental sensitivities, ecological corridors and the ability of local infrastructure to support increased tourism.

TRP-32 It is Council policy to seek to ensure that new development will not have a negative impact on established walking routes/public rights of way, in particular in Areas of High Amenity and along the inland waterways of the county.

TRP-33 It is Council policy to identify existing public rights of way and walking routes prior to any new planting, new infrastructural development and any new energy / telecommunications or golf course developments.

Climate Action

TRP-34 It is Council policy to promote and support the enhancement and development of the tourism industry in County Offaly in a manner which contributes to the transition to a low carbon, climate resilient and environmentally sustainable county.

6.8 Tourism Objectives

Tourism Development

TRO-01 It is an objective of the Council to implement the actions and measures in Offaly Tourism Statement of Strategy 2017-2022 in conjunction with the community, businesses, state agencies, and Offaly Tourism Marketing CLG.

TRO- 02 It is an objective of the Council to support the increase in dwell time spent by tourists in County Offaly and to support the development in a sustainable manner of a range of tourism accommodation options for visitors.

TRO-03 It is an objective of the Council to support the preservation, improvement and extension of recreational amenities.

TRO-04 It is an objective of the Council to provide public Wi-Fi in proximity to tourist attractions in County Offaly.

TRO-05 It is an objective of the Council to ensure that the tourist attractions of the county are appropriately signposted and to seek to promote the provision of tourism amenity signs in accordance with the Policy on the Provision of Tourist and Leisure Signage on National Roads (March 2011) and the Spatial Planning and National Roads Guidelines (2012) or any updated editions, and any other relevant Government policy.

Branding

TRO-06 It is an objective of the Council to work in collaboration with other key stakeholders to implement the programmes and plans of the Ireland's Ancient East initiative and Ireland's Hidden Heartland's initiative over the lifetime of the plan.

Monastic Heritage

TRO-07 It is an objective of the Council to support and work with the Office of Public Works who manage Clonmacnoise Monastic Site on behalf of the National Monuments Service to conserve the site and present it appropriately to visitors.

TRO-08 It is an objective of the Council to develop proposals in conjunction with the OPW for Durrow Abbey and Monastic Site to become a key tourist attraction in County Offaly and potentially become a UNESCO World Heritage Site by enhancing the visitor experience through the provision of signage, improved access, and associated infrastructure as appropriate and as resources allow.

Peatlands

TRO-09 It is an objective of the Council to facilitate the development of a tourism resource using cutaway peatlands in conjunction with Bord na Móna and Fáilte Ireland, subject to environmental considerations and nature designations for example, recreational forestry, outdoor pursuits, peatways on the network of bogs and industrial railways and a designation of a National Peatlands Heritage Park.

TRO-10 It is an objective of Offaly County Council to encourage the development of water-based recreation activities on flooded cutaway bog where the opportunity arises, including possibly in Noggus Boy Bog and in Garryhinch, subject to environmental considerations and nature designations.

TRO-11 It is an objective of the Council to promote the existing educational and amenity facilities at Clara Bog Nature Reserve and Visitor Centre and Lough Boora Discovery Park and their expansion, subject to appropriate assessment and environment.

TRO-12 It is an objective of the Council to investigate the feasibility of an Energy Park with educational and amenity facilities, relating to any future development of renewable energy projects of significant scale that comes forward over the lifetime of this plan. Any development of renewable energy on cutaway bog will be required to provide increased opportunities for amenity access and education facilities.

TRO-13 It is an objective of the Council to explore the potential for a Dark Sky area in County Offaly which is an area possessing an exceptionally or distinguished quality of starry nights and a nocturnal environment that is specifically protected for its scientific, natural, educational, cultural heritage and / or public enjoyment.

Greenways / Blueways / Peatways / Trails

TRO-14 It is an objective of the Council to implement 'A Strategy for Walking and Cycling in Offaly; Connecting People Connecting Places' (2015).

TRO-15 It is an objective of the Council to implement the '*Feasibility Study on the Development of a Major Cycling Destination in the Midlands of Ireland*' (2016) in conjunction with Bord na Móna, Coillte, Waterways Ireland, the Office of Public Works and the Product Development Group, in accordance with the Offaly Tourism Statement of Strategy 2017-2022.

TRO-16 It is an objective of the Council to implement the 'Outdoor Recreation Plan for Public Lands and Waters in Ireland' 2017-2021 and any subsequent edition in conjunction with stakeholders, in the design of outdoor recreational facilities.

TRO-17 It is an objective of the Council to protect potential greenway, blueway and peatway routes (i) along and in proximity to abandoned rail lines and (ii) routes identified in Figure 6.14 'Midlands Cycling Destination, Offaly Network Map' from inappropriate development that could compromise the delivery of a cycling or walking route in the future.

TRO-18 It is an objective of the Council to work with the relevant stakeholders to examine the feasibility of developing the Kilbeggan to Ballycommon link of the Grand Canal, as a potential navigational route.

TRO-19 It is an objective of the Council to support the implementation of 'The Lough Ree and the Mid-Shannon Spirit Level; Wet and Wild Lands; A Shared Ambition' (December 2017) Waterway Ireland's Tourism Masterplan for the Shannon, and any other future tourism initiatives by state or semi-state bodies.

Towns and Villages

TRO-20 It is an objective of the Council to build on Birr's role as a Destination Town in particular having regard to its built heritage and proximity to key tourism attractions.

TRO-21 It is an objective of the Council to explore the potential of Tullamore becoming a destination for Whiskey tourism based on the presence of the Tullamore Dew Visitor Centre in the town, and the potential of Tullamore forming part of a 'Whiskey Trails' linkage throughout the region and beyond.