

12th April 2019

Offaly County Council would refer in particular to the 5 “Key Points” amongst the proposed amendments the Council proposed to the draft RSES. A large number of proposed amendments do not appear to have been accepted. The Economic Development, Tourism and Planning SPC has considered the proposed material amendments and has decided that the following points in particular require to be addressed in the final RSES.

Midlands

In all previous submissions and to the NPF, this Council has asked for a specific designation for the Midlands SPA with positively-biased jobs and population growth targets. The Council’s previous comment [OY08] still applies in that the growth strategy map contains no strategy for the midlands other than the designation of Athlone. It also made reference to the settlement strategy map as follows:

*“While it is recognised that this is a high-level map and not all settlements should be listed, it is respectfully suggested that the **settlements per figure 4.2** (settlement strategy) be placed on it to reflect balance. Also that **key strategic corridors and proposed improved spatial linkages could be shown**”.*

Athlone

Proposed material amendment no. 9 refers. The Council’s previous submission requested that the strategic vision for Athlone be stronger and more spatially expressed in the RSES, with particular regard to its network of supporting towns and intervening rural areas across the midlands. OCC’s proposed amendment to the draft read as follows:

“[OY10] The RSES should have a spatial representation of this requested designation which links the Key Growth Centre of Athlone with the Key Towns and others within the Midlands. Furthermore, the role of Athlone needs to be much more ambitious and stronger as an anchor / driver for the region. The western part of the region should have a positive bias to avoid the business as usual approach and ‘counterbalance’ the eastward pull”.

This is still requested.

Regional Enterprise Plan for the Midlands to 2020

Proposed material amendment no. 81 refers. The Council notes the proposed new RPO, ‘Regional Enterprise Strategies’ but strongly requests that this RPO be amended to specifically support the Regional Enterprise Strategy – Midlands and the seven Strategic Objectives therein. The proposed material amendment includes general support for the regional enterprise plans (in general) and mentions a selection of only three of these objectives contained in the Midlands Plan.

Inter and Intra-Regional Accessibility

OCC’s submission to the draft RSES states as a key point: *“The Council considers that a RPO for intra-regional connectivity be included, specially focussing on (i) the N80, N52 and N62 which link the M4/6 and M7, (ii) important Regional routes which perform roles similar to national secondary routes (e.g. R420), (iii) the network of towns in the Midlands - Athlone, Tullamore, Birr, Portlaoise and (iv) onward (potentially imperative depending on Brexit) connections to the Ports of Bellview and Rosslare”.*

Furthermore, our submission to the draft RSES suggested a change to the Strategic Infrastructure map:

“[OY74] “

This map should reflect the Regional Roads in the Midlands which perform functions akin to National Secondary Routes and which should be considered for upgraded status in the future e.g. R420 Tullamore to Monasterevin and R402 Edenderry to Enfield”.

Both are still requested.

Peatlands afteruse

Proposed material amendment no. 81 refers. The proposed material amendments, by way of an amendment to RPO 7.27, mention the 'Transition Team' as requested and also the development of partnership approaches to integrated peatland management. Firstly, the Council considers that the landscape chapter, while important, is not the correct place to contain such an important RPO and secondly the proposed RPO remains weak and not reflective of the NPF aspiration or that of the current RPG's. OCC's submission to the draft RSES stated "*The RSES should note and support the Transition Team in place to deal with both the immediacies of job losses and the longer term strategic planning for the 80,000+ ha, of peatlands, together with a large array of workshop buildings, associated industrial sites and offices which will come available for a range of afteruses. This must be set firmly in train while the transition from peat extraction is ongoing as opposed to waiting for the use to cease and the local expertise being lost*".

As per OCC's submission to the draft RSES, a far more comprehensive RPO must be included in the Rural Areas or the Low Carbon Economy and Circular Economy sections as follows:

"[OY43] [Add] RPO Having regard to section 5.4 of the NPF, to support the preparation, in the short term, of a comprehensive afteruse framework plan for the industrial peatlands and associated workshops, office buildings and industrial sites in the Midlands and adjacent parts of the North West and Southern Regions which meets the environmental, economic and social needs of communities in these areas, also demonstrating leadership in climate change mitigation and land stewardship. Also to lead on the sourcing of E.U. funding to support the transition of the industrial peatlands to sustainable afteruses. The assembly supports in principle the examination of the potential for a Strategic Development Zone or zones in the Midlands to act as a catalyst for job creation to replace such jobs and to act as an economic 'pull' into the midlands SPA".

In addition, as the transition from peat harvesting will be one of the largest landuse, social, environmental and economic issues for a very large part of the region over the duration of the RSES, the Council strongly considers that the issue be dealt with in Regional Strategic Objective 9 – 'Support the Transition to Low Carbon and Clean Energy', as requested in our submission to the draft RSES as follows:

"[OY05] This should in our opinion strongly require that the region must secure the economic benefit from this transition in addition to facilitating the end product machinery, that is, for example, headquarters, servicing, assembly, R&D, possibly financing development etc. It should reference the current transition from employment in peat extraction and the urgency of creating replacement enterprise".

This issue has been continually raised by the Council during this process. Offaly County Council's submission to the issues paper stage stated: "*The industrial peatlands are a resource of probably over 100,000 ha. which will transition to afteruses ranging from amenity, tourism, biodiversity services, 'wild areas', flood management, climate mitigation, energy development, industry, education, conservation and many more. The integrated plan now proposed in the draft NPF was flagged in the MRPG's 2010 with similar potential for afteruses noted in the MRPG's 2004. With the 'post-peat' era coming very soon and with some large industrial peatlands already developed or in planning for after use in an ad-hoc fashion, this is now of critical urgency.*"

Tullamore

Comments regarding the text for Tullamore are attached as an appendix. These reflect our previous submissions. In particular, the Council's SPC is concerned that the following proposed amendment has not been included:

"[OY33] [Add – after 4.46] To support the designation of Tullamore Regional Hospital as a major Trauma Centre and also its continued development as a 'Teaching' Hospital / University Hospital, together with the potential for linkages to existing and new med-tech businesses and research facilities. Also to support the potential for a regional hospice at this location".

International Logistics / Trade Zone

Proposed material amendment no. 116 refers. The Council again requests that the following RPO be inserted:

"[OY78] [Add] RPO The Assembly supports the relevant authorities' examination of the feasibility of a green international trade and distribution zone in the Midlands north of Tullamore, based on international air connectivity".

Regional Greenways

Proposed material amendment no. 86 refers. The Council's comment [OY66] to the draft (and also the issues paper stage) still applies:

"[Add] A map of the Core Regional Greenways (proposed and existing) – see Offaly County Council and Longford County Councils previous submissions to the RSES process – should be included. This is considered to be of critical importance, particularly because the National Greenway Strategy does not include such a map. Such a map will be important to lend RSES backing to these projects."

Midlands Rail

Proposed material amendment no. 113 refers. It adds "Provide for an appropriate level of commuter rail service in the Midlands and South-East.

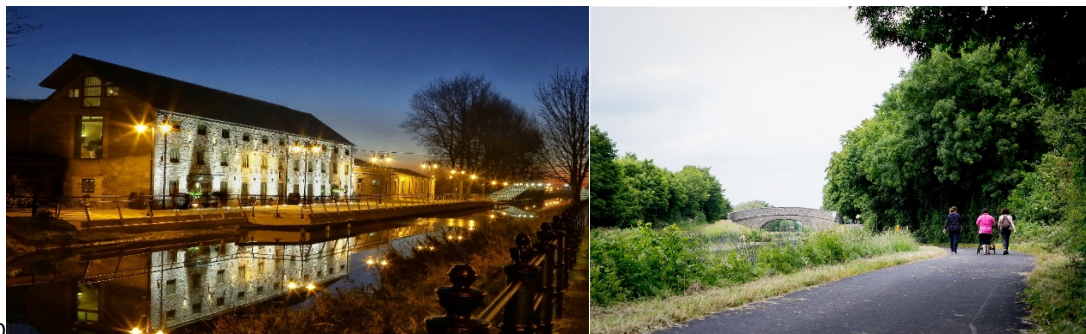
The Council's comment [OY76] to the draft still applies:

"It is considered that this bullet (RPO 8.6) is unacceptable as it does not reflect the role of Athlone as a Key Growth Centre and Economic Driver in its own right, and similarly for the other Midlands Key towns of Longford, Tullamore and Portlaoise, but on a smaller scale. In addition, the presence over time of high-speed and high frequency rail will be important to allow the midlands develop its economic gravity in addition to benefiting commuters to or from the GDA. The ability of the midlands' Key Towns, such as Tullamore to fulfil their roles as expanding urban employment centres is critically dependent on continued investment in the rail service in terms of capacity, high frequency and customer support".

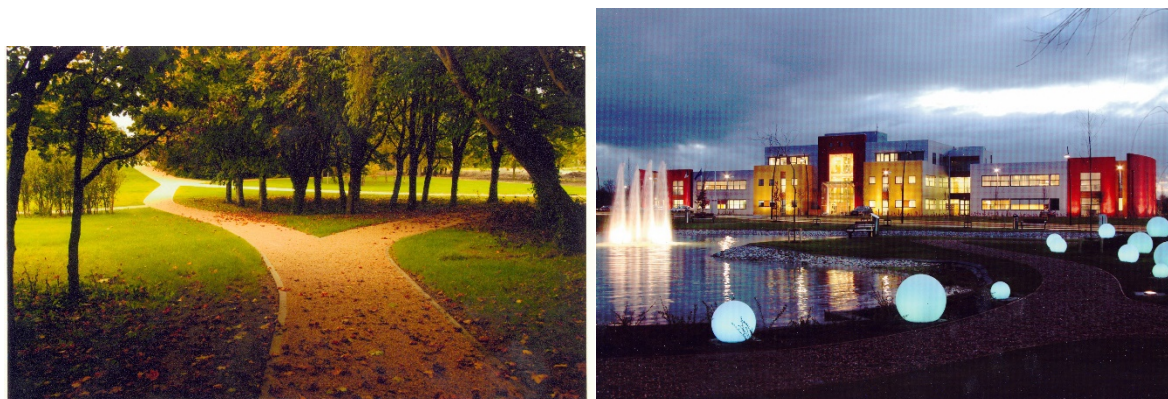
End

(Appendix 1: Tullamore below)

Appendix 1: Tullamore Tullamore



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Introduction

Tullamore is strategically located in the centre of Ireland on the Dublin to Galway rail line, in close proximity to the M6 Dublin to Galway motorways. The N80 & N52 provide key intra-regional road linkages, in particular to both these motorways, the Regional Growth Centre of Athlone and the key towns of Portlaoise, Mullingar and Longford. With a population of 14,600, the town acts as a key population and employment centre for the surrounding hinterland. Tullamore is the primary urban centre in Offaly and has the potential to be an important supporting town to the Regional Growth Centre of Athlone. The town is sufficiently removed from the Dublin Metropolitan Area to do so sustainably, with key assets being its existing positive jobs to resident / employees ratio, excellent quality of life and future strategic development sites.

Flanked by the Slieve Bloom Mountains to the south, and with Lough Boora Discovery Park 23 km to the west, the town offers significant quality of life advantages. The Grand Canal flows through its very centre and will, during 2019/2020 link the town *via* a cycleway to the Lough Boora Discovery Park. In the future, the Grand Canal will link Tullamore by greenway to the River Shannon to the west and Edenderry and Dublin to the east. The Midland Regional Hospital serves as a large employer within the town and is expanding its role as a key teaching hospital.

Continued employment growth, population growth in line with the principles of the NPF, high quality place making and regeneration shall be key priorities for the development of Tullamore.

Regeneration

Tullamore has a number of opportunity sites within the town centre and immediate surroundings. Future development plans / LAPs will be required to further develop framework plans for the opportunity sites already identified such as the Grand Canal Harbour in the town, which has potential for enterprise, recreation, residential, public realm and tourism related development. The regeneration of the former 'Texas' site in the town centre for high quality mixed-use development will also be a priority as shall the former 'Carroll's' and 'Coen's' sites, the Tanyard and the Railway Node, all focused on the principles of compact growth, place making and transition to a low-carbon economy.

Economic & Enterprise Development

Tullamore has a high ratio of jobs to resident workers, reflecting its role as an employment centre and the extent of its area of influence, however it has a significantly high internal trip rate. The town exhibits strong economic and service functions with a wide catchment area. Desirable economic investment for Tullamore would be in the form of green jobs & green technologies, innovation, digital technologies, circular bio-economy, food & beverage (in particular its distilling heritage), advanced manufacturing, tourism, recreation & amenity and high quality town centre retail development. A continued emphasis on place-making is required in order to attract inward investment and expansion of existing businesses. The town is a busy conferencing hub due to its central location, accessibility and existing facilities. There is significant potential to build upon this, in particular given the positive experience of hosting large scale outdoor events such as the National Ploughing Championships for three years running.

Services and amenities

Tullamore has a rich cultural heritage. It has significant potential to develop as a recreation and tourism hub, building on its proximity to attractions such as the Grand Canal Greenway and Blueway, Lough Boora Discovery Park, Charleville Castle Demesne, Durrow High Cross, peatways, the planned *Midlands Cycle Destination – Offaly* and the Slieve Bloom Mountains, including the national mountain bike trail (MTB) centre. The shared vision document, *Spirit Level - Lough Ree and the Mid-Shannon* and the Shannon Masterplan represents an indication of the potential for green and blue tourism in the wider area. The presence of the Tullamore Dew visitor centre, particularly in the context of the development of 'Whiskey Trails' throughout the region and beyond, represents a further area for development. Further social, community and cultural development should be developed to serve the needs of residents, visitors and workers within the town.

Enabling infrastructure

The enhancement of Tullamore's accessibility as a key node between the M4/6 and M7 motorways is important. Improving capacity and journey times on the N80, N52/N62 National Secondary Routes, the R420 to the M7 and the R402 to the M4 would bring benefits in terms of the cohesiveness of the Midlands SPA as an attractor of economic development and in terms of the Midland Regional Hospital's designation as a Major Trauma for the Midlands. Furthermore, the R420 Tullamore to Monasterevin and R402 Edenderry to Enfield roads perform functions akin to National Secondary Routes, supporting Tullamore's linkages to other key towns and the Regional Growth Centre of Athlone and these should

be considered for upgraded status in the future. Ensuring a higher frequency of trains to Dublin is a key priority.

An upgrade to the wastewater network is required to enable the future development of the town. Irish Water have completed a Drainage Area Plan of the Town, which will be used to inform proposals into the future.

Further development of greenways in Co. Offaly, in particular the delivery of the *Midlands Cycle Destination- Offaly* which is centred on the 'spine route' of the Grand Canal are required to enhance the town's and surrounding area's visitor offer. These will partially compensate for the loss of employment in the peat production business during the lifetime of this strategy, with particular reference to the rural communities which were founded and supported by this industry since the 1930's. Walking and cycling permeability also needs to be improved upon with the town of Tullamore and the town should plan to be an exemplar in this regard due to its relatively compact form, flat topography and the presence of key infrastructural corridors through and around the town.

Critically Necessary Regional Policy Objectives: Tullamore Key Town

RPO: Support the enhancement of Tullamore's accessibility as a key node between the M4/6 and M7 motorways by improving capacity and journey times on the N80, N52/N62 National Secondary Routes, the R420 to the M7 and the R402 to the M4. This is necessary in terms of the cohesiveness of the Midlands SPA as an attractor of economic development and in terms of the Midland Regional Hospital's designation as a Major Trauma for the Midlands.

RPO: To support the designation of Tullamore Regional Hospital as a major Trauma Centre and also its continued development as a teaching' hospital / University Hospital, together with the potential for linkages to existing and new med-tech businesses and research facilities. Also to support the potential for a regional hospice at this location.