



Tionól Reigiúnach Oirthir agus Lár-Tíre Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

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Draft Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly notes the publication of the Draft Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027 and sets out hereunder submissions and observations on behalf of the Assembly. This submission has been prepared by the executive and approved by the members of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly at the meeting of 12th March 2021.

Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES)

As indicated in the Assembly's previous submission to the County Development Plan review process made under Section 27A of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, The Council will be aware of the finalisation of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region, made on 28th June 2019, which consequently initiated the statutory time period within which the Council are required to prepare their Draft Development Plan, as stated at Section 11(1) (b) of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the Act). In this regard, The Assembly welcomes the publication of the Draft Laois County Development Plan which enables the coordinated and timely incorporation of Project Ireland 2040 - the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES), thus ensuring full alignment between local, regional and national planning policy.

Legislative Context

As required by Section 27B of the Act, The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly has prepared this submission, and sent a copy of same to the Minister and Office of the Planning Regulator.

In accordance with the aforementioned Act, a submission shall contain a report which shall state whether, in the opinion of the Regional Assembly, the draft development plan, and in particular its core strategy are consistent with the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy. If, in the opinion of the Regional Assembly the draft development plan, and its core strategy are not consistent with the RSES, the submission / observations and report shall include recommendations as to what amendments, in the opinion of the Regional Assembly, are required to ensure that they are consistent.

This report contains the opinion of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly in relation to the above matters along with recommendations as required under Section 27B of the Act.

The attention of the Council is also directed to the requirements of Section 12 (4) of the Act, whereby a Chief Executive's Report prepared by the Planning Authority shall summarise the issues and recommendations raised by the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly, and outline the recommendations of the Chief Executive in relation to the manner in which those issues and recommendations should be addressed in the development plan.

Submission

The Assembly would like to acknowledge the extensive work that the Local Authority has carried out in order to prepare the Draft Plan and, in particular, that this work follows a period of considerable change, within a planning policy context, that included the publication of the National Planning Framework (NPF), the RSES and the establishment of the Office of the Planning Regulator. Accordingly, the Assembly welcomes the overall approach and effort of Laois County Council to coordinate and incorporate policies and objectives, so that they are consistent with the RSES and NPF. The Assembly is also aware of upcoming guidance to issue from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and acknowledges that the absence of these guidelines, at this time, will create challenges for some local authorities.

The Assembly considers that the overall draft development plan, including its Core Strategy, are generally consistent with the RSES subject to the contents of the remainder of this submission. The submission broadly follows the chapter headings of the Draft Development Plan, under the following headings:

1. Introduction
2. Core and Settlement Strategy
3. Climate Change and Energy
4. Housing Strategy
5. Quality of Life and Sustainable Communities
6. Economic Development
7. Retail and Town/Village Centre Management
8. Tourism
9. Rural Laois
10. Infrastructure
11. Biodiversity and Natural Heritage
12. Built and Cultural Heritage
13. Location and Pattern of Development
14. Implementation and Monitoring
15. SEA, AA and SFRA

1.0 Introduction

The Assembly welcomes the inclusion of the first chapter of the draft plan, which provides an overview of scene setting matters including the vision, objectives and overarching principles, and the review process and statutory context.

The inclusion of Section 1.3 of the Draft Plan, which documents the requirement to review or vary the CDP following the making of the RSES, is a welcome addition in contextualising this plan review. This is supported through the documentation of policy considerations outlined at Section 1.5, including Section 1.5.1 and 1.5.2 relating to the National Planning Framework and the RSES respectively. It is considered that Section 1.5.2 could be strengthened through emphasising the legislative context and planning policy hierarchy with which the County Development Plan is required to be consistent with, including a clear indication that the Laois County Development Plan is required to be consistent with the development objectives specified in the RSES. It is noted that the text of this section refers to figure 1.5, however this text seems to more aptly refer to figure 1.2. In addition, the sentence referring to the making of the RSES, should remove reference to the adoption of the RSES.

2.0 Core and Settlement Strategy

The Assembly acknowledge the work that has gone into the preparation of Chapter 2 which details the Core Strategy and Settlement Strategy.

As part of Chapter 2, the Assembly welcome the inclusion of the chapter aim, that is to 'Provide for the growth of County Laois in line with the National Planning Framework/ Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES)'. In addition, the clear indication at Section 2.1. of the Draft Plan, that Planning Authorities are required to prepare and incorporate a Core Strategy that shows the Development Plan is consistent with national and regional objectives under the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the relevant Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES), is welcome.

2.1 Statutory Requirements

Laois County Council are reminded of their obligations to prepare a Core Strategy in accordance with the provisions of Section 10 of the Act. Relating specifically to this chapter of the Draft Plan, the Assembly draws the attention of the Council to the contents of Section 10 (2A), (2B) and (2C) of the Act and asks Laois County Council to ensure consistency in this regard.

2.2 Core Strategy

2.2.1 Core Strategy Policy

Section 2.2. of the Draft Plan outlines a number of Strategic Aims that relate to the advancement of the plan. These are supported by a number of Core Strategy Policy Objectives at Section 2.8. These are considered to provide a robust framework for the Core Strategy and includes, alignment with the NPF and RSES, achieving sustainable compact growth targets of 30% of all new homes that are targeted in settlements within their existing built-up footprints, acceleration of the transition to a greener, low carbon and climate resilient county, and, the preparation of supporting Local Area Plans.

The inclusion of Strategic Aim VII which outlines that the Planning Authority will monitor and maintain a record of residential development permitted in settlements designated under the Settlement Hierarchy in order to ensure compliance with the population allocations defined by the Core Strategy, is welcomed. It is recommended that this should be amended to also include the monitoring of residential development permitted as single rural houses. This is reflective of NPO 36 of the NPF which outlines that *'New statutory guidelines, supported by wider methodologies and data sources, will be put in place under Section 28 of the Planning and Development Act to improve the evidence base, effectiveness and consistency of the planning process for housing provision at regional, metropolitan and local authority levels. This will be supported by the provision of standardised requirements by regulation for the recording of planning and housing data by the local authorities in order to provide a consistent and robust evidence base for housing policy formulation.'*

2.2.2 Population Allocations

The Core Strategy Table indicates a population increase for County Laois of 10,003 people until 2027 from the 2016 baseline population. This level of overall population growth is considered to be in keeping with the population prescribed for the County at Appendix 2 of the NPF Implementation Roadmap, which details a high-level population projection of 94,000 (high) to 2026 and 97,500 (high) to 2031.

The Assembly also notes and welcomes the graded approach to the allocation of population in line with the Settlement Hierarchy. Notwithstanding the information provided, it is recommended that the Draft Plan be strengthened through the inclusion of a robust evidence base justification for the percentage allocation of growth to each of the tiers identified as part of the Core Strategy.

2.2.3 Table Structure

Notwithstanding the content of the Core Strategy Table, the Assembly consider that further clarification is required to ensure consistency and transparency. As part of the Table, there is no indication as to the quantum of residential land that is zoned as part of the Draft Plan and Local Area Plans. It is therefore recommended that the Core Strategy Table is amended to clearly demonstrate the quantum of land that is zoned for residential purposes in each of the respective settlement categories, across all zoning categories that provide for residential development in accordance with the provisions of Section 10 (2A) (c) and (d) of the Act.

National Policy Objective 3c of the NPF requires that local authorities deliver at least 30% of all new homes that are targeted in settlements other than the five Cities and their suburbs, within their existing built-up footprints. This is reinforced by Regional Policy Objective (RPO) 3.2 of the RSES. Section 2.8 of the Draft Plan and The Core Strategy Table indicates that 33% of Laois' housing need can be delivered on infill and brownfield land. It is noted however, as part of the Core Strategy Table, that this will not be achieved in some settlements. In light of the aforementioned policies, it is therefore recommended that the Draft Plan be amended to clearly provide an evidence-based rationale and justification for same.

2.3 Settlement Strategy

The Assembly notes and welcomes the inclusion of Section 2.4 of the Draft Plan, which details the strategic development of County Laois in the regional context of the Eastern and Midland Region. This includes building on the settlement strategy and hierarchy set out as part of the RSES, to define the settlement hierarchy for County Laois.

It is noted that the Settlement Strategy for the County is also documented at 'Volume 2- Settlement Strategy' of the Draft Plan. The level of detail provided as part of Volume 2, serves to enhance the robustness of the Settlement Strategy of the Draft Plan. It is considered, however, that elements of Volume 2 should be included as part of the Settlement Strategy section within 'Volume 1- Written Statement'. This includes for instance the stated Settlement Strategy policy objectives. In addition, the Local Authority may wish to consider changing the name of Volume 2 to 'Town and Village Planning Statements' or similar, to enhance the comprehensibility of the Draft Plan for users.

2.3.1 Settlement Hierarchy

The Assembly welcome the stated utilisation of an approach similar to the RSES's 'Asset Based Approach' in determining the Settlement Strategy for County Laois, as per Section 2.4.2 of the Draft Plan. This is in keeping with RPOs 4.1 and 4.2 of the RSES which outline that the hierarchy of settlements in development plans shall be determined in accordance with the hierarchy, guiding principles and typology of settlements as set out in the RSES.

The use of consistent terminology, reflective of that contained in the RSES, is appropriate and welcome. The Hierarchy is tiered as follows; Key Towns (Portlaoise and Graigecullen/ Carlow), Self-Sustaining Growth Town (Portarlinton), Self-Sustaining Towns (Mountmellick, Abbeyleix, Stradbally, Mountrath), Towns and Villages, Villages, and Rural Remainder which includes the open countryside.

Given the location of Portarlinton, that straddles the administrative boundaries of both Laois and Offaly, the Assembly consider that this is an apt moment to engage with Offaly County Council on determining the future of Portarlinton as a Self- Sustaining Growth Town.

2.3.2 Settlement Strategy Policy

The overarching Settlement Strategy policies are found at Volume 2 of the Draft Plan. As previously mentioned, the Assembly consider that it would improve the document if some of these policy objectives were incorporated into Chapter 2, Volume 1 of the Draft Plan.

Notwithstanding this, the Assembly consider that the inclusion of policy related to particular settlement tiers, at Section 2.10 of the Draft Plan, is an extremely positive addition to the Draft Plan. It is noted that this section is reinforcing of policy contained within the RSES, and in particular policies 4.71 to 4.74 relating to Portlaoise.

2.4 Housing Requirements

2.4.1 Future Housing Requirements and Housing Need Demand Assessment

The Assembly welcomes the inclusion of housing policy that has been informed by the Housing Strategy that includes a Housing Need Demand Assessment (HNDA) as indicated at Section 2.3.2 of the Draft Plan. The HNDA ensures that the draft plan is supported by a robust methodology to inform policies and funding initiatives around housing and land requirements, whilst supporting the preparation of the housing strategy and other related housing policy outputs. It is acknowledged that Laois County Council have undertaken a HNDA, as part of the Housing Strategy, in accordance with National Policy Objective (NPO) 37 and Regional Policy Objective (RPO) 9.5, during a time when the finalised HNDA guidance at national level was still to be confirmed. The initiative of the Council in this regard is extremely welcome. Notwithstanding this, the Local Authority will be aware of the recent publication 'Housing Supply Target Methodology for Development Planning' issued as Guidelines for Planning Authorities under Section 28 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 (as amended) in December 2020. In light of the content of this publication it is recommended that the Draft Plan, (including Sections 2.7, 2.8, the Core Strategy Table and Chapter 4) is updated to reflect the contents of this recent publication. Please note that officials within the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage have indicated that they are available to assist Local Authorities in applying these Guidelines to their respective areas.

2.4.2 Residential Densities

It is noted that provisions within the Draft Plan, including for instance, the Core Strategy Table and Policy Objectives CS 15, 20 and 24, provide for a graded reduction in residential densities in line with the Settlement Hierarchy, reflective of the existing character of the settlement and linked to infrastructural capacity. This is in keeping with the RSES and NPF, including for instance page 73 of the NPF which states *'Rural town living requires a proportionate and tailored approach to residential development. This means that it is necessary to tailor the scale, design and layout of housing in rural towns to ensure that a suburban or high-density urban approach is not applied to a rural setting and that development responds to the character, scale and density of the town'*.

3.0 Climate Action and Energy

The Assembly welcomes the inclusion of a chapter dedicated to Climate Action and Energy within the Draft Plan, and supports the overall chapter aim which is 'To reduce our carbon footprint by integrating climate action into the planning system in support of national targets for climate policy mitigation and adaptation objectives, as well as targets for greenhouse gas emissions reduction.'

3.1 Climate Action

It is noted that Climate Action is one of the cross-cutting principles of the Draft Plan to support a transition to a low carbon and climate resilient society. The Chapter also includes key action areas and the integration of specific climate adaptation and mitigation objectives into each chapter where appropriate. The reference to the RSES Key Principle of Climate Action, and the associated RSOs, is acknowledged. The terminology used at Section 3.2.3.5 should be changed to 'RSO' in place of 'RPO'.

The use of defined 'Key Action Areas' are positive additions to the Plan. This includes actions relating to sustainable transport, built environment, land use and energy. In this regard, the Council's attention

is drawn to RPO 3.6 and the preceding paragraphs of the RSES which outline the requirement of Development Plans to assess their impact on carbon reduction targets. To this end, it should be noted that EMRA is leading an ESPON EU research project (QGasSP) to identify a robust method for quantifying the relative GHG impacts of alternative spatial planning policies, the outputs of which are anticipated in 2021, and should inform the Draft Plan as it progresses. The Eastern and Midlands Climate Action Regional Office (CARO) also play a key role in assisting and supporting the respective local authorities in the region in implementing their climate action strategies and have organised training workshops to help inform potential measures, policies and regulatory tools for the preparation of the Draft Development Plans. It is understood that the forthcoming Development Plan Guidelines will provide similar guidance in this area. Notwithstanding this, the Council are reminded of their obligations to comply with Ministerial Guidelines including the Interim Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Statutory Plans, Renewable Energy and Climate Change published in 2017.

In addition to the above, the Council will be aware of the recent Circular Letter LGSM01-2021, issued on 10th February 2021, regarding Local Authority Decarbonisation Zones. The Regional Assembly form part of the established steering group, aimed at structuring and guiding the response of the local government sector in identifying Decarbonisation Zones. In line with the contents of the aforementioned Circular Letter, it is recommended that the Draft Plan provide information to enable the development of a Decarbonising Zone in County Laois, including the location and details of same. The Assembly notes that the Portlaoise Demonstrator Project is specifically referenced as part of the Circular Letter.

The attention of the Council is also brought to the Climate Action Fund made available under the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, and, in order to be availed of, requires policy support. In this regard, the Council may wish to strengthen the 'Local County Targets' of each action area, as part of the finalised Plan.

3.2 Energy

The Assembly welcome this dedicated section to energy within the Draft Plan, which outlines energy generation relating to renewable and non-renewable energy sources (electricity and gas), and Energy Efficiency and Energy Performance for Buildings.

3.2.1 Wind Energy

The Assembly notes the suite of policies and considerations related to wind energy contained at Sections 3.4, 3.5.5, DM RE 2 and Appendix Five of the Draft Plan. Prior to the finalisation of the Draft Plan, including all related policy and objectives, such as those contained as part of this section and also those contained at Appendix Five, it is recommended that the Council ensure that the Plan has full regard to the provisions of the Wind Energy Development Guidelines 2006, the Interim Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Statutory Plans, Renewable Energy and Climate Change, and the Draft Revised Wind Energy Guidelines published in December 2019, which are expected to be finalised in the near future.

3.2.2 Non-Renewable Energy: Electricity and Gas

The Assembly notes the inclusion of Policy Objective NRE 2 that supports the Laois-Kilkenny Reinforcement Project. This is in keeping with RPO 10.23 of the RSES which supports EirGrid's Implementation Plan 2017-2022 and Transmission Development Plan (TDP) 2016, and any subsequent plans prepared during the lifetime of the RSES, that facilitate the timely delivery of major investment projects. This includes the Laois- Kilkenny Reinforcement Project which will strengthen the network in large parts of the Midlands, provide additional capacity for potential demand growth in the wider region and strengthen the Region's transmission network by improving security and quality of supply and ensuring there is the potential for demand growth.

4.0 Housing Strategy

The inclusion of a chapter dedicated to the provision of housing within County Laois is a positive addition to the Plan, underpinned by the chapter aim that seeks 'To facilitate the provision of housing in a range of locations to meet the needs of the County's population, with particular emphasis on facilitating access to housing to suit different household and tenure needs in a sustainable manner and in appropriate locations.' The Assembly acknowledges the extensive work that has gone into the preparation of this chapter in order to secure the implementation of the Laois County Housing Strategy.

As stated above at Section 2.4 of this submission, The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, in December 2020, published 'Housing Supply Target Methodology for Development Planning Guidelines for Planning Authorities', under Section 28 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 (as amended). Accordingly, it is recommended that the Draft Plan be updated to comply with the aforementioned guidelines prior to the finalisation of the Laois County Development Plan.

4.1 Housing Policy

The inclusion of a number of housing development policy objectives to ensure the provision of housing needs within County Laois is welcome. This includes, for example, policy and objectives related to the provision of an appropriate mix of housing types and sizes, the provision of appropriate residential densities, provision of specific housing needs for groups including the elderly, and securing the implementation of the Laois County Housing Strategy in accordance with the provision of national legislation and relevant policies and standards.

In order to strengthen the Draft Plan, Laois County Council should give consideration to the inclusion of a clearly presented summary of the entire housing need in County Laois, which includes the housing need broken down across tenures, what is required in terms of new housing supply and why this is the case, including social and affordable needs, housing types and sizes. This will present a clear and concise guide as to what is required to successfully deliver the housing requirement for the County over the plan period.

The assembly note the inclusion of policy objective HPO 4 which states 'To engage in active land management and site activation measures, including the implementation of the vacant site levy on all vacant residential and regeneration lands, and address dereliction and vacancy to ensure the viability of towns and village centres, i.e. Portlaoise, Portarlington, Mountmellick and Graiguecullen.' This policy objective is supported by Section 4.5.1 of the Draft Plan which identifies a number of regeneration sites, including key sites in Portlaoise and Portarlington. This is in keeping with RSO 2 and RPO 3.3 of the RSES.

4.2 Open Countryside and Rural Housing

The Assembly notes the inclusion of a rural development strategy as part of this section of the Draft Plan. It is indicated that this is based on 'promoting sustainable rural development aimed at maintaining vibrant and viable rural communities while also seeking to transition to a low carbon society and protect the amenity, recreational and heritage value of the rural landscapes and countryside of the county.' This approach, underpinned by 23 (no.) rural housing policy objectives, is welcome by the Assembly.

The Assembly also consider the inclusion of Section 4.6.5 and rural housing policy RH23, which support the 'Serviced Site Initiative', as positive additions to the Plan. This is in keeping with RPO 4.78 which states that "Development plans should support the development of a 'New Homes in Small Towns and

Villages’ initiative which would augment the delivery of actions by local authorities, Irish Water, communities and other stakeholders in the provision of services and serviced sites to create ‘build your own home’ opportunities within the existing footprint of rural settlements to provide new homes to meet housing demand.”

It is noted that included as part of this section of the chapter, is criteria detailing the requirement for housing in the open countryside. The intention of the Council to support the sustainable development of rural areas in Laois by encouraging growth and arresting decline in areas that have experienced low population growth or decline in recent decades and by managing the growth of areas that are under strong urban influence to avoid over-development, while sustaining vibrant rural communities, is noted and welcomed by the Assembly. Notwithstanding this, it is recommended that prior to the finalisation of the Draft Plan, the Council ensure that related policy in this regard is consistent with RPOs 4.80 and 4.81, NPO 19 of the NPF and the content of Circular Letter PL 2/2017 “Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities 2005 – Local Needs Criteria in Development Plans.”

It should be noted that the NPF requires that development plans quantify the demand for single housing in the countryside with National Policy Objective 20 outlining the requirement to ‘*Project the need for single housing in the countryside through the local authority’s overall Housing Need Demand Assessment (HNDA) tool and county development plan core strategy processes.*’ In this regard, it is recommended that the Council include the provision of same in line with any revisions undertaken to the Draft Plan resulting from the publication of the ‘Housing Supply Target Methodology for Development Planning- Guidelines for Planning Authorities’ published in December 2020.

5.0 Quality of Life and Sustainable Communities

The Assembly welcome the chapter on Quality of Life and Sustainable Communities aimed at the delivery of social infrastructure throughout the County, improving physical access to services, facilitating the maintenance and upgrading of cultural and heritage facilities for communities and enhancing the environmental, amenity and physical attributes of communities which creates healthy placemaking. Healthy Placemaking is a Key Principle of the RSES (Section 2.3) and underpins many of the Regional Strategic Outcomes and Regional Policy Objectives of the RSES.

As part of this chapter, the Assembly notes the inclusion of Section 5.2.1 which details the role of the Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) and the Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP). The Regional Assembly has a statutory role in overseeing the preparation of LECPs and is mindful of the upcoming review period of the Laois LECP. In this regard, the inclusion and reference to the LECP as part of the Draft Plan is a positive addition and reflects a number of RPOs included in the RSES such as RPOs 9.18 and 9.19.

The inclusion of education, childcare and health policy and objectives as part of this chapter is welcome. The inclusion of policy objective HCPO 5 which aims to support the development and expansion of the Midlands Regional Hospital at Portlaoise in accordance with RPO 4.74 of the RSES, is noted.

6.0 Economic Development

The Economic Development Chapter presented as part of the Draft Plan is welcomed by the Assembly. The overall aim of the chapter is ‘To promote and develop Laois’ economy and create a viable and favourable economic environment for business and enterprise to thrive both in urban and rural areas whilst delivering sustainable jobs, employment opportunity both within the County and beyond.’

Notwithstanding the inclusion of the policy context at Section 6.2, it is considered that the Council should consult with Chapter Six of the RSES, including Figure 6.3, in advance of finalising this chapter

in order to strengthen the chapter structure and content. This includes reference, for instance, to the provision of policy relating to smart specialisation, clustering, placemaking, orderly growth and future proofing.

The inclusion of an economic profile of County Laois is a positive addition to the Plan. However, it is considered that this economic profile could be further developed in order to create a strong and robust evidence base for the formulation of related economic policy.

The Assembly welcomes the inclusion of Section 6.9 related to Climate Action and Jobs. This is reflective of RPO 6.9 of the RSES which seeks to ensure that the Midlands is well positioned to address the challenges posed by the transition to a low carbon economy and renewable energy. The Assembly welcomes the inclusion of reference to the CUBE at Portlaoise, a Low Carbon Centre of Excellence, that will act as a focal point for the development of new business and economic activity and that in turn will support and assist a transition to a low carbon economy. This is a timely development and its inclusion is supportive of RPO 4.72 which supports the transition of Portlaoise to a low carbon town centre.

As part of the related 'Climate Action and Jobs' theme, it is recommended that the Council address the concept of Just Transition given its substantial policy and financial support, both nationally and at EU level, and that it is a significant catalyst for economic and social change in the Midlands representing a significant step forward in the transition towards a low carbon economy.

As part of Section 6.11, the Assembly welcomes the indication that the primary place for job creation will be in the Key Town of Portlaoise and also in the Key Town of Graiguecullen/ Carlow, where job creation and investment opportunities will be developed in collaboration with the Carlow County Council. This is to be supported by job creation in Portarlington. Notwithstanding this, it is considered that the final plan should include an explicit policy objective that reinforces the spatial expression for the development of the County in line with the Core Strategy, ensuring that the economic development hierarchy is reflective of the settlement hierarchy presented.

The Assembly notes and welcomes the inclusion of Policy Objective ED 2 which aims to support the development of J17-National Enterprise Park in line with RPO 4.73 of RSES. In addition, the inclusion of Policy ED 3 which aims to 'provide a landing space for businesses who wish to establish a second site in a more competitively priced location' is noted. Notwithstanding this, and related policy inclusions, a Midland Economic Paper currently being prepared by the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly, has found a shortage of appropriately sized land banks and FDI/IDA appropriate business premises throughout the Region, including in Portlaoise. In this regard, the Assembly ask that the Local Authority consider the inclusion of a complimentary policy and/or objective, to enable the delivery of same. The addition of a policy to this effect, shall ensure that the inclusion and quantum of any related lands is in accordance with the provisions of the Core Strategy and evidence based. The Midland Economic Paper is forthcoming and may assist the council in the finalisation of the content of this chapter.

7.0 Retail and Town/Village Centre Management

The Assembly welcome the inclusion of the chapter dedicated to Retail and Town/ Village Centre Management, particularly following the heightened uncertainty for our towns and villages resulting from measures to control the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter is supported by an overall chapter aim which is to 'Ensure that the town and village centres of Co. Laois retain their vitality and viability and that all future retail development is plan led in line with the settlement strategy', and underpinned by policy objectives relating to Town/Village Centre Management and Retailing.

It is considered that the suite of policy objectives relating to Town/Village Centre management are positive additions to the Plan, including policies for instance, that support the implementation of LECP

Economic Actions and LECP Community Actions related to the maintaining and enhancing the vitality and vibrancy of Laois Town and Village Centres, encourage the maintenance of town/village centre buildings and improve the quality of the public realm in town/village centres, provision of a night time economy, and, living over the shop arrangements. This is in keeping with a number of RPOs in the RSES, including RPO 6.12 for instance.

The Assembly welcome the inclusion of Section 7.2 and Appendix Four, detailing retail and the Retail Strategy for County Laois. It is noted that the Retail Hierarchy presented is in keeping with the proposed Settlement Hierarchy and the Retail Hierarchy of the RSES (Table 6.1). The stated objectives of the Retail Strategy are welcome, including to provide guidance on policy recommendations and criteria for the future assessment of retail development proposals over the Development Plan Period and to retain and enhance the vitality and vibrancy of the town centre core areas as shopping destinations. With regard to the objective to identify the broad requirement for additional retail floorspace development in the county over the plan period, notwithstanding the information contained as part of the Draft Plan and the Retail Strategy at Appendix Four, it is considered that further clarification is required relating to the quantum of vacant retail floorspace available and the need for the quantum of additional retail floorspace.

8.0 Tourism

The inclusion of a stand-alone Tourism Chapter is a welcome addition to the Draft Plan. The overall aim of this chapter, outlining the role of the tourism sector as an economic driver, is welcomed. It is considered that the aim, however, could be strengthened through recognising additional benefits of tourism for County Laois that includes environmental and cultural advantages for instances.

The RSES recognises the important role that tourism plays in County Laois, including as a Growth Enabler for the Gateway Region as identified at Section 3.2 of the RSES, as a means to enable and sustain the rural economy as per Section 4.8 of the RSES, and as a sectoral opportunity for the Midlands as per Section 6.4 of the RSES. It is considered that the content of the Tourism Chapter is reflective of the RSES, including the suite of related policies, namely RPOs 6.8, 6.15-6.18 and 6.21, that seek to enhance the Tourism Sector, and RPO 6.19 that specially deals with tourism development in County Laois.

The inclusion of Map 8.1 as part of the Draft Plan provides an excellent and visually appealing demonstration of the tourist attractions within the County, which is supported by Key Tourism Initiatives listed at Table 8.1 including reference to the Slieve Bloom Mountains, events and festivals, greenways and blueways, rural tourism and the wealth of heritage attractions the County has to offer such as the Rock of Dunamaise, Aghaboe Abbey, Stradbally Hall, Timahoe Round Tower, Abbeyleix Heritage House and others such as Emo Court and Donaghmore Famine Workhouse Museum. Specific policy objectives relating to Climate Change and Tourism are positive and timely additions to the Draft Plan.

9.0 Rural Laois

The Assembly welcome a specific and tailored chapter dedicated to Rural Laois. The overall aim of the chapter is to ‘support the role of rural areas in maintaining a stable population base through a strong network of villages and small towns and strengthening rural communities by supporting a resilient rural economy and the sustainable management of land and resources.’ The chapter focuses on a number of specific areas including agriculture, sustainable food production, afforestation, peatlands, the future use of Bord na Móna lands (Renewable Energy and Green Infrastructure), mining and aggregates and commercial developments. The Assembly considers that this chapter is in keeping with

the RSES and in particular Section 4.8 (specifically RPO 4.84) and numerous RPOs contained at Chapter 6 of the RSES detailing the rural economy.

10.0 Infrastructure

The Infrastructure Chapter provided as part of the Draft Plan, with the stated aim to ‘to achieve a sustainable, integrated and low carbon transport system for the county and to protect, improve and extend water services and other enabling infrastructure in line with national, regional and local population and economic growth for the county’, provides a robust and overarching foundation for the development of infrastructure services in County Laois.

10.1 Transportation

The Assembly welcome the inclusion of the transportation section of Chapter 10 of the Draft Plan, which coincides with Chapter 8 Connectivity of the RSES. Policies such as those relating to integrated transport and land use planning, roads infrastructure, car and cycle parking, electric vehicles, pedestrian and cyclists, and public transport are all positive additions to the Plan.

RPO 8.6 identifies that in order to give local expression to the regional level Transport Strategy within the Region, in conjunction with the NTA, Local Transport Plans (LTP) will be prepared for selected settlements in the Region. This includes the settlement of Portlaoise and in this regard policy objective TRANS 5, which reflects this policy, is welcome. The Local Authority may also consider the identification of other settlements within the County, in line with the Settlement Hierarchy, that would benefit from a similar and coordinated approach. This may include Portarlinton, for instance, which straddles the administrative boundaries of both County Laois and County Offaly, and is currently subject to a regeneration strategy.

The inclusion of Section 10.1.7.1 relating to Greenways is a positive addition to the Plan. It is considered that this section of the Draft Plan, including policies related to the Barrow Blueway, the Slieve Blooms and South Laois, is in keeping with Section 7.7 of the RSES.

10.2 Water and Waste Water Infrastructure

The inclusion of this section is in keeping with Chapter 10 Infrastructure of the RSES. RPO 4.2 is relevant in this regard, requiring Infrastructure investment and priority alignment with the spatial planning strategy of the RSES whereby all residential and employment developments shall be planned on a phased basis in collaboration with infrastructure providers so as to ensure availability of adequate capacity for services (e.g. water supply, wastewater, transport, broadband) to match projected demand and so that the assimilative capacity of the receiving environment is not exceeded.

Having regard to the aforementioned RPO, the inclusion of policies such as WS 1, WS 4 and WS 15 for instance, which promote co-operation with Irish Water during the lifetime of the Plan in the provision, upgrading or extension of wastewater collection and treatment systems in the County, and, to protect existing water infrastructure, to serve existing and planned future populations and enterprise in accordance with the requirements of the Core Strategy, are welcome inclusions within the Draft Plan.

10.3 Environmental Services

The Regional Assembly note the content of this section of the Draft Plan which details Waste Management (Waste Recovery, and Disposal and Enforcement) and Environmental Protection (Water Quality, Air Pollution and Noise) under the heading of Environmental Services.

10.3.1 Waste Management

The Assembly welcomes that the section of the draft plan dedicated to waste management that is framed by the concept of the Circular Economy. This is in keeping with the RSES including RSO 7 with respect to waste and ensuring greater resource efficiency to realise the benefits of the circular economy, and RPO 10.25 which outlines that development plans shall identify how waste will be reduced, in line with the principles of the circular economy

10.4 Telecommunications

The Regional Assembly welcome the recognition in the Draft Plan that the provision of high-quality telecommunications infrastructure is critical to advance the economic and social development of the County. The specific reference to broadband is in keeping with RPOs 8.25 and 8.26 of the RSES which supports the roll out of the National Broadband Plan.

The incorporation into the Draft Plan of reference to the Laois Digital Strategy and provision of public Wi-Fi zones throughout the County, recognises the role of communication infrastructure and services in attracting inward investment and increasing competitiveness, and are considered to be positive additions to the Draft Plan.

The Draft Plan outlines that the vision of Laois Digital Strategy is twofold and includes meeting the needs and aspirations of the people of County Laois in enabling them to benefit from digital technologies and infrastructures throughout the county, and to enable people to carry out their business in a more resilient manner, across all aspects of life including education, public services and entertainment. In keeping with this, it should be noted that the EMRA is participating in an Interreg Europe Project, Next2Met, that seeks to increase the attractiveness of the Midlands using soft digitalisation measures. The Assembly are currently preparing a funding application to enable the roll out of pilot actions, as part of this EU Project, in consultation with Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath County Councils.

11.0 Biodiversity and Natural Heritage

The Assembly welcome the inclusion of Chapter 11 relating to Biodiversity and Natural Heritage of County Laois. It is considered that the array of topics covered as part of this Draft Plan chapter is reflective and supportive of the content of the RSES and in particular Chapter 7.

The Assembly notes the inclusion of Section 11.2.4 of this chapter of the Draft Plan, which details the biodiversity and natural heritage context of the RSES. The inclusion of reference to RPO 3.4 as part of this paragraph is unclear and should be clarified or amended as appropriate.

The inclusion of Section 11.5 dedicated to Green Infrastructure positively enhances the Plan. This includes policy objectives such as BNH 12 aimed at the development and implementation of a Green Infrastructure Strategy for County Laois, and, BNH 13 which requires all Local Area Plans to protect, enhance, provide and manage Green Infrastructure in an integrated and coherent manner. In finalising this section of the Draft Plan, the Council should consult with Section 7.7 of the RSES which details policy for green infrastructure and guiding principles for the preparation of Green Infrastructure Strategies.

The dedicated section of the Draft Plan which details waterways and wetlands is considered a positive inclusion. A number of policy objectives are reflective of the content of the RSES which includes the promotion and development of the Barrow Blueway, development of the Grand Canal for cycling and walking, and the protection of riparian corridors.

The inclusion of the Peatlands segment at Section 11.8 of the Draft Plan is a positive addition and complements Section 9.4 of the Draft Plan. Notwithstanding the suite of policy objectives already

included within the Draft Plan, it is considered that a dedicated policy objective for 'Just Transition' be included. As previously indicated at Section 6 of this submission, this would recognise the substantial policy and financial support for Just Transition, both nationally and at EU level, and that it is a significant catalyst for economic and social change in the midlands representing a significant step forward in the transition towards a low carbon economy.

12.0 Built and Cultural Heritage

The inclusion of this chapter with regard to the Built and Cultural Heritage of County Laois is welcome. In finalising this chapter, the Council should consult with Section 9.7 of the RSES. It is considered that the policies and objectives of the Draft Plan are in keeping with same, including for instance, a suite of policies that support the protection, reuse and refurbishment of Protected Structures, in line with RPO 9.30 of the RSES.

13.0 Location and Pattern of Development

The Assembly welcomes the inclusion of this chapter on the Location and Pattern of Development which includes zoning principles (including land use zoning acceptability, zoning objectives and density) and design (including residential developments, streetscapes, urban and rural developments). As part of this chapter, it is indicated that an infrastructure assessment has been carried out in order to differentiate between zoned land that is available for development and zoned land that requires significant further investment in services for infrastructure for development to be realised. NPO 72a of the NPF states 'Planning authorities will be required to apply a standardised, tiered approach to differentiate between i) zoned land that is serviced and ii) zoned land that is serviceable within the life of the plan.' This is further developed at Appendix 3 of the NPF which sets out a methodology for a tiered approach to land zoning. Notwithstanding the reference to this approach at Section 13.2 of the Draft Plan, it is unclear how this approach has been applied, including the integration of the indicated infrastructure assessment. In accordance with the aforementioned national policy objective, it is recommended that the Draft Plan be updated to clearly demonstrate compliance with same.

13.0 Implementation and Monitoring

The Assembly welcome the inclusion of the chapter detailing the Implementation and Monitoring of the CDP over its lifespan. The recognition and reference to the numerous funding streams available are positive additions. Chapter 12 of the RSES and Chapter 10 of the NPF, which detail implementation and monitoring measures, may provide further assistance in this regard.

14.0 SEA, AA and SFRA

The Draft Plan is subject to Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and an environmental report has recorded the process to date. The SEA Environmental Report indicates that 'various environmental sensitivities and issues have been communicated to the Council through the SEA, Appropriate Assessment (AA) and Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) processes. By integrating all related recommendations into the Plan, the Council have ensured that both the beneficial environmental effects of implementing the Plan have been and will be maximised and that potential adverse effects have been and will be avoided, reduced or offset.'

The Assembly welcome the indication as part of the Environmental Report and Chapter 13 Implementation and Monitoring, that where appropriate, the measures identified in the RSES SEA have been used, as they are or having been slightly modified, in most instances in order to ensure consistency.

The attention of the Council is drawn to EPA Guidance on SEA Statements and Monitoring (Second Review of Strategic Environmental Assessment Effectiveness in Ireland), published January 2020, which provides best practice on devising meaningful monitoring measures, suitably detailed indicators and the frequency of monitoring and reporting. This guidance shall inform the iterative SEA process and preparation of the monitoring programme as part of the County Plan's SEA statement.

The Draft Plan is subject to Appropriate Assessment and a Natura Impact Report (NIR) has recorded the decisions that were taken during its preparation. Having incorporated mitigation measures, it is concluded that the Draft Laois County Development Plan is not foreseen to give rise to any significant effects on designated European Sites, either alone or in combination with other plans or projects.

A Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) was undertaken of the Draft Plan area having regard to the requirements of the Planning System and Flood Risk Management Guidelines for Planning Authorities and associated circular. It is noted that SFRA recommendations, including those related to flood risk management provisions, have been integrated into the Draft Plan. Notwithstanding this, the Assembly notes that the SFRA indicates that flood risk assessments will be required for specific land use zonings in a number of settlements across the County. Accordingly, it is recommended that the findings of the SFRA are reconsidered and that impacted zonings are reassessed for their suitability for development purposes in accordance with the aforementioned Flood Risk Management Guidelines and associated circular.

Conclusion

It is considered that the Draft Laois County Development Plan, and in particular the Core Strategy, can achieve consistency with the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) 2019-2031 by addressing the recommendations and observations set out above.

The Regional Assembly welcomes the Draft Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027, which marks the beginning of the alignment of planning policy at county and local levels with Regional and National Policy. It should be noted that the officials of the Regional Assembly are available to discuss the matters raised above and The Assembly welcome further opportunities to engage in the statutory process of the making of the Laois County Development Plan.

Regards,



Jim Conway
Director
Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly
15th March 2021