

## CHAPTER 9 RURAL LAOIS

**Aim:** *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.*

### 9.1 INTRODUCTION

The rural landscapes of Laois are shaped by economic activities such as forestry, peat, quarrying and farming. Unlike in urban areas where industrial uses that generate noise and odour can be clearly separated from emission-sensitive residential uses through zoning, this robust system of separating uses does not happen in the same way in rural areas and conflicting uses can occur in close proximity. Just over half of Laois residents live in rural areas and providing sustainable employment opportunities is essential.

Both the NPF and RSES recognise the crucial role rural areas play in driving our economy and diversifying rural economies.

### 9.2 AGRICULTURE

Rural economic sectors remain very important in Laois. According to Census 2016 data, 7.2% of Laois' workforce is engaged in Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing.

In the Agricultural Census 2010, 72% of land in Laois was used for farming purposes, while 14.7% is associated with forestry. The future development of agriculture is underpinned by the State agency Teagasc programmes in relation to Foodwise Agri-Food Strategy 2025 and the Forestry Programme 2014–20 in its Advisory and Education Strategic Plan for the Region 2015–2020.

The Council recognises the importance of agriculture for sustaining, enhancing and maintaining a viable rural economy. The Council will support and facilitate agricultural restructuring and diversification within the framework of the 2020 Strategy (Department of Agriculture 2010), in order to integrate the sector more closely with rural development, in pursuit of environmental and social objectives. This approach accords with national policy as set out in the National Sustainable Development Strategy.

The Council supports the emphasis in the National Development Plan on investment, on measures for improving farm structures, including farm waste management, animal welfare, food quality and environmental protection, complementing the substantial investment in REPS. The optimum and environmentally sensitive use of land no longer required for agriculture will be a key issue over the Plan period. Where appropriate Laois County Council will support the production of energy crops on set aside land throughout the County.

## 9.2.1 SUSTAINABLE FOOD PRODUCTION

Ireland is a world leader in areas such as sustainable auditing and carbon foot-printing under the Origin Green programme. Origin Green is the national sustainability programme for the food and drink industry uniting government, the private sector and food producers. Origin Green is a strategic priority in Food Wise 2025.

Food Wise 2025, sets out a cohesive, strategic plan for the sustainable development of agri-food sector over the next decade. The strategy was informed by a detailed environmental impact analysis, and driven by a strong focus on sustainability.

Laois County Council has supported sustainable food production under previous REDZ programmes and this has further developed into Laois TASTE which is a diverse group of 21 Laois based Food & Drink Producers dedicated to promoting the Laois Food & Drink Sector through the Laois TASTE brand, locally, nationally and internationally. The aim is to promote local provenance, strengthen the Laois food industry and transform Laois into one of Ireland's top food destinations.

<b>Policy Objectives for Agriculture and Food Production</b>	
<b>RL 1</b>	Maintain a vibrant and healthy agricultural sector based on the principles of sustainable development whilst at the same time finding alternative employment in or close to rural areas to sustain rural communities.
<b>RL 2</b>	Facilitate the development of agriculture while ensuring that natural waters, wildlife habitats and conservation areas are protected from pollution.
<b>RL 3</b>	Work with the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly and other relevant stakeholders in identifying areas of high value agricultural land in the County to address the need for sustainable food supplies.
<b>RL 4</b>	Continue to support and work with Laois Food producers to promote local provenance, strengthen the Laois food industry and transform Laois into one of Ireland's top food destinations

### **Agriculture Development Management Standard**

<b>DM RL 1</b>	<p><b>GENERAL CONSIDERATION FOR AGRICULTURAL BUILDINGS</b></p> <p>Agricultural developments have the potential to impact on the environment and the landscape. The traditional form of agricultural buildings is disappearing with the onset of advanced construction methods and wider range of materials. Some new farm buildings have the appearance of industrial buildings and due to their scale and mass can have serious major visual impacts.</p> <p>In dealing with applications for agricultural developments the Planning Authority will have regard to the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Require that buildings be sited as unobtrusively as possible and that the finishes and colour used will blend the development into its surroundings.</li> </ol>
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- 2) The proposed developments shall meet with the requirements of the Department of Agriculture with regard to storage and disposal of waste.
- 3) The Council accepts the need for agricultural buildings and associated works (walls, fences, gates, entrances, yards) to be functional but they will be required to be sympathetic to their surroundings in scale, material and finishes.
- 4) Buildings should relate to the landscape. Traditionally this was achieved through having the roof a darker colour than the walls.
- 5) Appropriate roof colours are dark grey, dark reddish brown or a very dark green. Where cladding is used on the exterior of the farm buildings dark colours should be used.
- 6) Location and impacts on the road network and other associated uses

All agricultural buildings should be located an adequate distance from any watercourse to reduce the risk of contamination.

### 9.3 AFFORESTATION

Forests and woodlands are a natural resource which can provide commercial, recreational, environmental, amenity and aesthetic benefits. There is considerable potential to develop this sector in County Laois from its current relatively low base.

The Council recognises the importance of forestry, its value added potential, and the opportunities it offers for on-farm diversification. Emphasis on forestry has increased because of its role in economic development and employment and the potential of forestry to sequester carbon, thereby offsetting the production of green house gases such as methane, nitrous oxide and carbon dioxide.

Nonetheless, the benefits arising from carbon sequestration must be balanced against the need to carefully manage forestry [especially coniferous plantations] so that it does not result in damage to visual amenity, residential amenity, soil and water quality or biodiversity. State ownership accounts for 63% of afforestation in County Laois.

### 9.4 PEATLANDS

The development of the county's peat resources will be promoted and facilitated by the Council also which recognizes the potential of peatland areas for tourism, amenity, educational and research purposes. They could also potentially accommodate large scale alternative energy production in the form of solar and wind.

#### 9.4.1 FUTURE USE OF BORD NA MONA LANDS

In the context of Peatland distribution throughout the County, much of this natural asset is owned by Bord Na Mona. The company's estate is characterised by large tracts of land in dispersed landholdings. This, coupled with proximity to the national electricity infrastructure and relative isolation from residential areas, is particularly suited to the development of renewable

energy such as windfarms and solar farms and other large-scale energy dependant industrial development. As the transition away from peat extraction activities progresses, this cutaway will be stabilised through the implementation of a rehabilitation programme with significant portions of these lands rewilding and supporting biodiversity and other ecosystem services.

#### **9.4.1.1 Renewable Energy**

There are approximately. 3,000ha of Bord na Móna lands within County Laois. These lands have the potential to make a significant contribution to meeting national and regional policy objectives across a range of sectors. The company's existing network of workshops and production facilities also hold opportunities for the re-purposing of these facilities for new sustainable industries. In County Laois, the extensive industrial site, locally known as the Cúil Na Móna works site, has been in use for many years as a horticultural peat processing plant. The scale of this site, extending to c.20 acres, and its current buildings, totalling over 80,000 square feet, represent a significant opportunity for redevelopment and future industrial uses. This site, which is located at Junction 17 off the M7 motorway, is particularly close to the new Togher Business Park located at junction 17 and would enhance the overall viability of the region.

Most recently, Bord na Móna applied to Laois County Council for planning permission to develop a renewable gas facility at Cúil na Móna Bog. The proposed facility is designed to treat 80,000 tonnes per annum of biodegradable and organic waste material through an anaerobic digestion process to produce a renewable gas for injection into the local natural gas network. This proposed development is aligned with and will significantly contribute to achieving the targets and objectives set out in National and Regional policy by contributing to the development of a low carbon economy, achievement of renewable energy targets and the provision of much needed waste treatment capacity for the management of biodegradable waste.

#### **9.4.1.2 Green Infrastructure**

As we transition away from commercial peat production, the rehabilitated cutaway will naturally revert to a rich and diverse natural habitat enhancing biodiversity and supporting other ecosystem services and green infrastructure. Examples of Bord na Móna enabled green infrastructure in the county include the restored Abbeyleix bog, which is now leased to the local community as a conservation project.

The Abbeyleix bog is part of a Natural Walking Loop and is a very popular local walking route located in a natural landscape. Bord na Móna also restored Knockahaw Bog (312 ha raised bog) in 2018 as part of its Biodiversity Action Plan and peatland rehabilitation commitments.

Both Abbeyleix Bog and Knockahaw Bog are examples of high value biodiversity sites where Bord na Móna have made the decision to conserve and manage these sites for their biodiversity value and other ecosystem services. Other activities, such as amenity, are compatible with this primary objective. Peatland rehabilitation will also bring additional benefits of improving water quality and flood attenuation to downstream water-courses.

Derryounce Bog was originally purchased by Bord na Móna and developed as part of their greater Clonsast group of bogs in the mid-20th Century. The bog was cut for sod peat by Bord

na Móna over several decades with peat supplying the old power station at Portarlinton. The remaining cutaway bog was planted with a conifer plantation by Coillte when industrial peat production ceased in the 1980s. With the lowering of ground levels during peat production, a basin was created in the central area and this area flooded permanently which is now known as Lough Lurgan. Derrycastle Walks and Lakes are a valuable amenity asset for Portarlinton and the wider hinterland. The area offers opportunity for walkers, anglers, naturalists, photographers and people who want to experience its peace, tranquility and vistas.

The connectivity of Derrycastle with Portarlinton is an opportunity to be explored within this plan period. Policies in relation to this are located in Chapter 10 Infrastructure and Chapter 11 Biodiversity and Natural Heritage.

## 9.5 MINING AND AGGREGATES

The Council recognises that the aggregate and concrete products industry contribute to the development of the national, regional and local economies by the proper use and management of natural resources for the benefit of the community and the creation of employment opportunities. These products are required as essential building materials in the social and economic development process including the provision of housing and infrastructure. Laois County Council will seek to safeguard these valuable resources for future extraction.

The *National Guidelines on Quarries and Ancillary Activities for Planning Authorities (DOEHLG, 2004)* is the guiding document against which applications for quarries and ancillary activities will be considered.

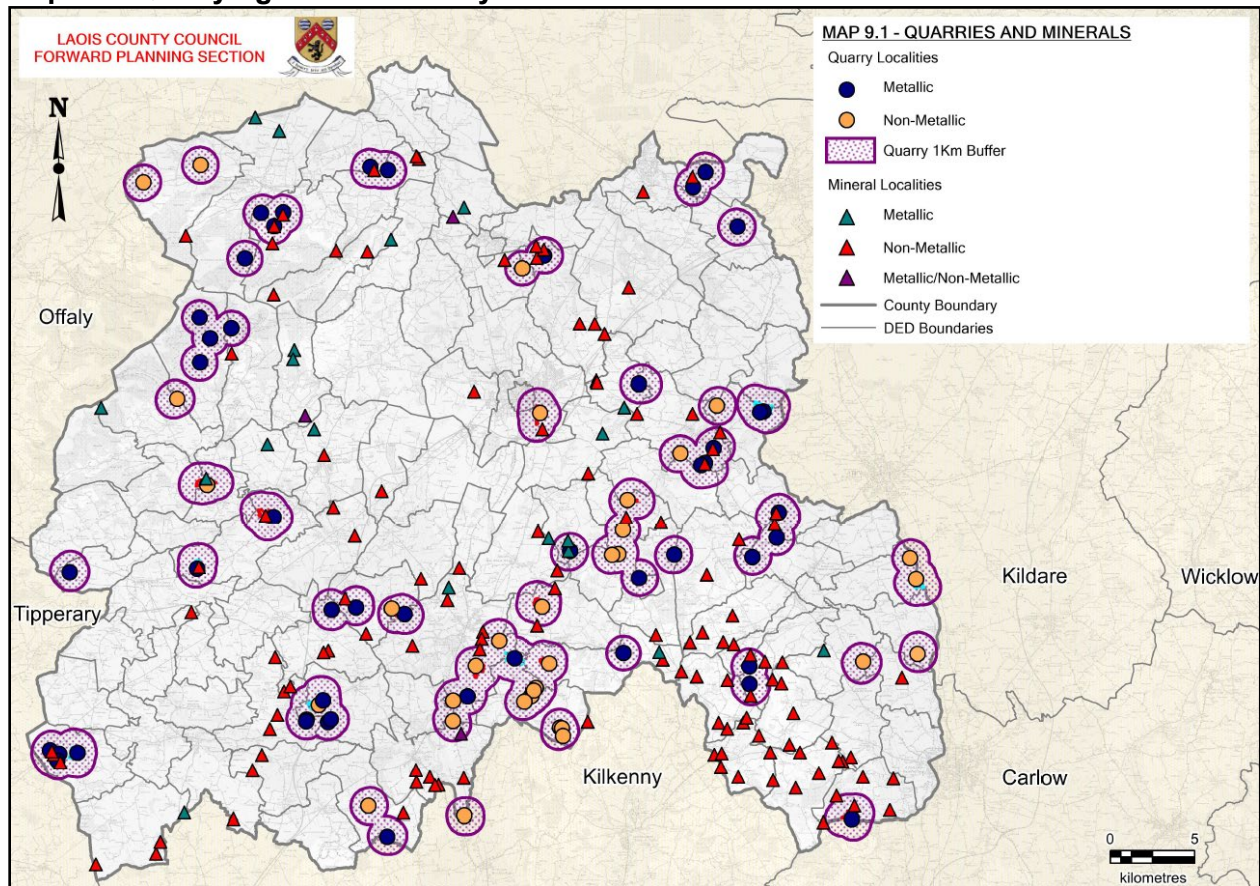
Aggregate extraction can only take place where suitable aggregate resources exist; they are a 'tied' resource. It is considered, therefore, that planning policies should be carefully constructed to avoid adverse effects on aggregate resources and the related extractive industries and added value production that are essential for the built environment, infrastructure and future economic development.

Like many forms of development, extractive industries have the potential to cause harm to the environment, heritage and the landscape if not appropriately designed and managed. However, aggregates are a necessary resource and are of great importance to the economy and society. In addition, well managed and designed quarry sites minimise environmental effects. There is also the potential for habitat creation through the restoration of quarry sites following the cessation of operations.

The following National Guidelines (as may be superseded and/or updated) should be complied with:

- Environmental Management(EPA 2006);
- Quarries and Ancillary Activities: DOECLG Guidelines 2004);
- Environmental Code(ICF 2006);
- Geological Heritage Guidelines(ICF & GSI 2008);
- Archaeological Code of Practice((ICF & DOECLG 2009);
- Sections 261 & 261A Planning and Development Acts 2000 – 2013.

**Map 9.1: Quarrying Sites in County Laois**



## 9.6 COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENTS IN RURAL AREAS

Rural businesses and enterprises are an important source of local employment in the County. Many examples of fine rural businesses exist throughout the county. This includes agricultural, equine, engineering/manufacturing, recreational, tourism, energy/renewable energy, and rural resource based enterprises. Whilst this Draft Plan supports such enterprises and the diversification of the rural economy, it is also recognised that a balance is required between supporting rural based enterprises and projects and protecting the local environment.

In the first instance, new employment related developments are directed to settlements where services are available and lands have been identified for employment uses.

It is also recognised that there are instances where a development can be more readily accommodated or is more appropriate to a rural area. This can be due to a locational specific, or resourced based development, or a development of regional or national importance.

In relation to the expansion of an existing rural enterprise, consideration will be given to the scale of the existing and proposed development, the capacity of local infrastructure to accommodate the expansion, and the compatibility of the development with the surrounding area.

<b>Policy Objectives for Rural Development</b>	
<b>RL 4</b>	Support the expansion, diversification and intensification of <b>agriculture</b> and the agri-food sector by facilitating appropriate related development subject to environmental and planning considerations;
<b>RL 5</b>	Support and facilitate <b>agri-tourism</b> and the work of farming / local bodies within the county in the promotion of the rural economy, including agriculture development, tourism adaptation, rural diversification and in the development of new initiatives to support farming.
<b>RL 6</b>	support In principle the appropriate expansion of the <b>forestry sector</b> and related manufacturing activities subject to environmental, traffic and planning considerations; support an increase in the broadleaf component of any planting programme to a minimum of 33%;
<b>RL 7</b>	Encourage, subject to compliance with the Habitats and Birds Directives, access to forestry including private forestry for amenity and educational purposes including the provision of walking routes, cycling routes, mountain biking routes, mountain trails, nature trails and orienteering;
<b>RL 8</b>	Seek to have planting and felling conducted in a manner which takes into account best practice in forestry planting and felling in the context of landscape design so that it integrates into the landscape
<b>RL 9</b>	Plan and prepare for the future use of large industrial <b>peatland</b> sites when peat harvesting finishes in conjunction with NPWS, Coillte and ESB/Bord na Mona and other stakeholders.
<b>RL 10</b>	Support the longer-term strategic planning for industrial peatland areas, which should include a comprehensive after-use framework plan for the industrial peatlands and associated infrastructure which addresses environmental, economic and social issues including employment and replacement enterprise reflecting the current transition from employment based around peat extraction;
<b>RL 11</b>	Support the Midlands Regional Transition Team in developing a 'Holistic Plan for Just Transition in the Midland Region' including an inventory of project proposals and actions to support Just Transition in the Midlands and to assist the region in identifying potential investment needs for inclusion in a programme of support under the new EU Just Transition Fund;
<b>RL 12</b>	Reconcile the need for resource-based economic activities to conduct a reasonable operation and the needs of residents in rural areas to access a good quality of life and access to rural areas;
<b>RL 13</b>	Have regard to Laois' Landscape Character Assessment, as well as more general Planning considerations, such as transport, environmental sensitivities, habitat considerations, the need for buffer zones around water bodies in its determination of planning applications related to land-based economic activities;

<b>RL 14</b>	Support in principle the expansion of the <b>aggregates</b> and concrete products industry which offers opportunity for employment and economic development generally subject to environmental , traffic and planning considerations and ensure that any plan or project associated with extractive industry is subject to Appropriate assessment screening in compliance with the Habitats Direction and subsequent assessment as required , applicants for planning permission shall have regard to the GSI-ICF Quarrying Guidelines;
<b>RL 15</b>	To secure the long-term supply of value-added products (such as concrete products and asphalt, which are often, but not always, produced in conjunction with aggregate extraction);
<b>RL 16</b>	To support the necessary role of the extractive industries in the delivery of building materials for infrastructural and other development and to recognize the need to develop extractive industries for the benefit of society and the economy;
<b>RL 17</b>	Support in principle the processing of minerals to produce cement, bitumen or other products in the vicinity of the source of the aggregate, where the transport network is suitable to reduce trip generation;
<b>RL 18</b>	Protect rural amenities, natural archaeological and natural heritage, visual amenities, eco-systems, conservation areas, landscape and scenic views from adverse impacts of agricultural practices and development particularly in high amenity areas and ensure that it is appropriate in nature and scale, and ensure it does not have an undue negative impact on the visual/scenic amenity of the countryside and identify mitigating measures where required. Integrate into the landscape, including the minimal use of signage;
<b>RL 19</b>	Facilitate land-based or resource-based economic activities in rural areas that support a sustainable environment and resilient communities

### Enterprise Development Management Standard

<b>DM RL 2</b>	<p><b>COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS</b></p> <p>Development proposals in the open countryside should satisfy a high standard of siting and design, while being properly located to ensure their assimilation into their rural setting. The following considerations should be taken into account:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Buildings should be kept simple and should be finished with materials appropriate to a rural setting such as nap plaster, stone and slate;</li> <li>2) Buildings should reflect the scale and pattern of the rural development in the vicinity;</li> <li>3) Building height should be restricted to that required for the normal operation of the premises, buildings of excessive height will not be permitted;</li> <li>4) Buildings should be sited to make use of existing hedgerows and topography to provide natural screening, buildings in open landscapes should be avoided;</li> </ol>
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- 5) Access roads and driveways should respect existing site contours;
- 6) Car parking should be located to the rear of the building and in compliance with the car parking standards in Table 18;
- 7) Advertising signs should be kept to a minimum;
- 8) Large advertising signs at the road frontage will be resisted;
- 9) Hedgerows or stone walls should be used for boundary treatments;
- 10) A justification as to why the proposed development is to be located in a rural area over a settlement where adequate zoning is in place shall be submitted.

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