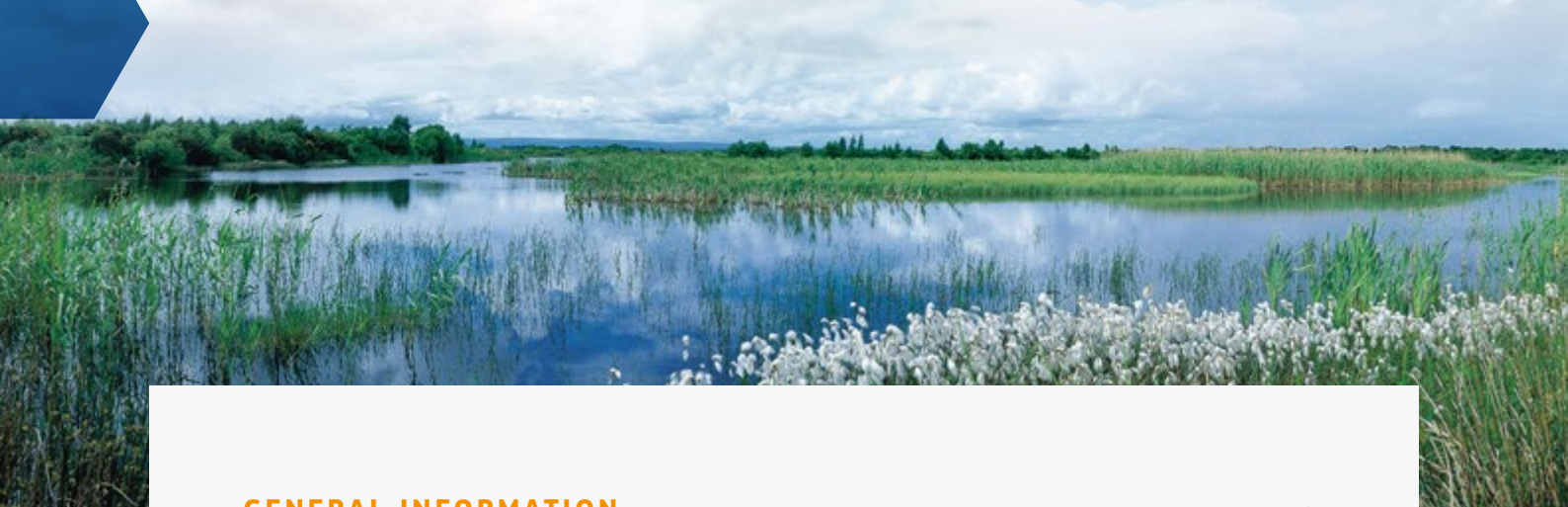


Midlands, Ireland



GENERAL INFORMATION

Country: Ireland

Region Name: Midlands

Region NUTS2 code: IE06 - Eastern and Midlands

Region NUTS3 code: IE063 - Midlands Region

Main urban centres in the region:

Portlaoise (population: 22,050)

Athlone (population: 21,349)

Mullingar (population: 20,928)

Tullamore (population: 14,607)

Longford (population: 10,008)



*NUTS: Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics

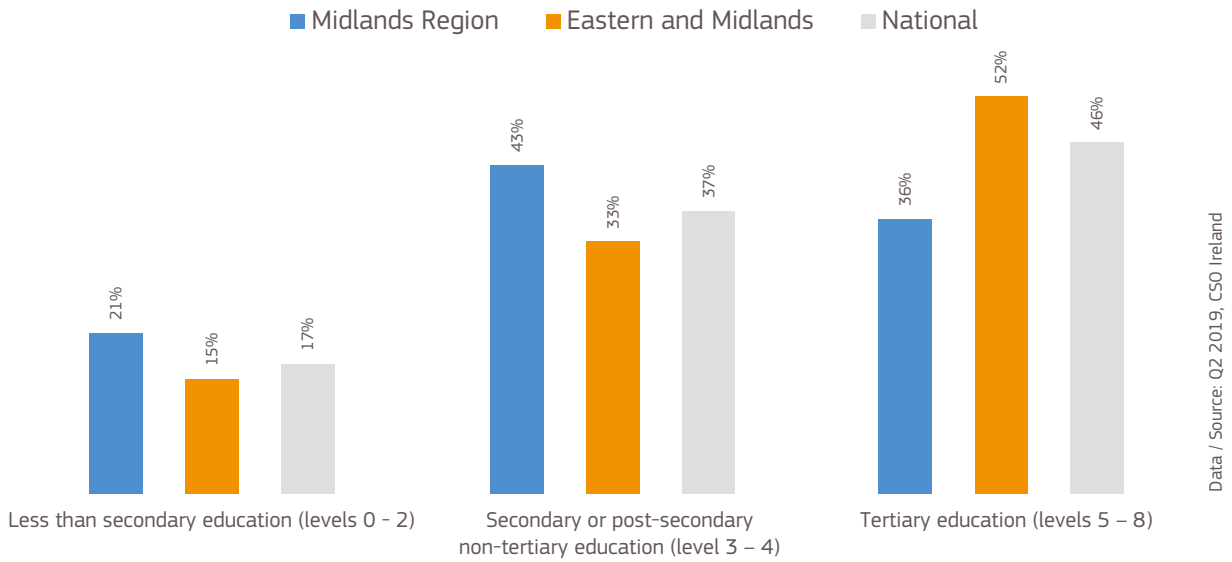
NOTICE ON COVID-19

The content of this regional profile was primarily collated prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Where possible, reference to the consequences of the pandemic on the transition process have been made. However, these are not comprehensive; nor can they be, given the uncertainties surrounding the nature, timing and scale of the pandemic's impact. Rather these references illustrate the changing dynamics and context of the transition process.

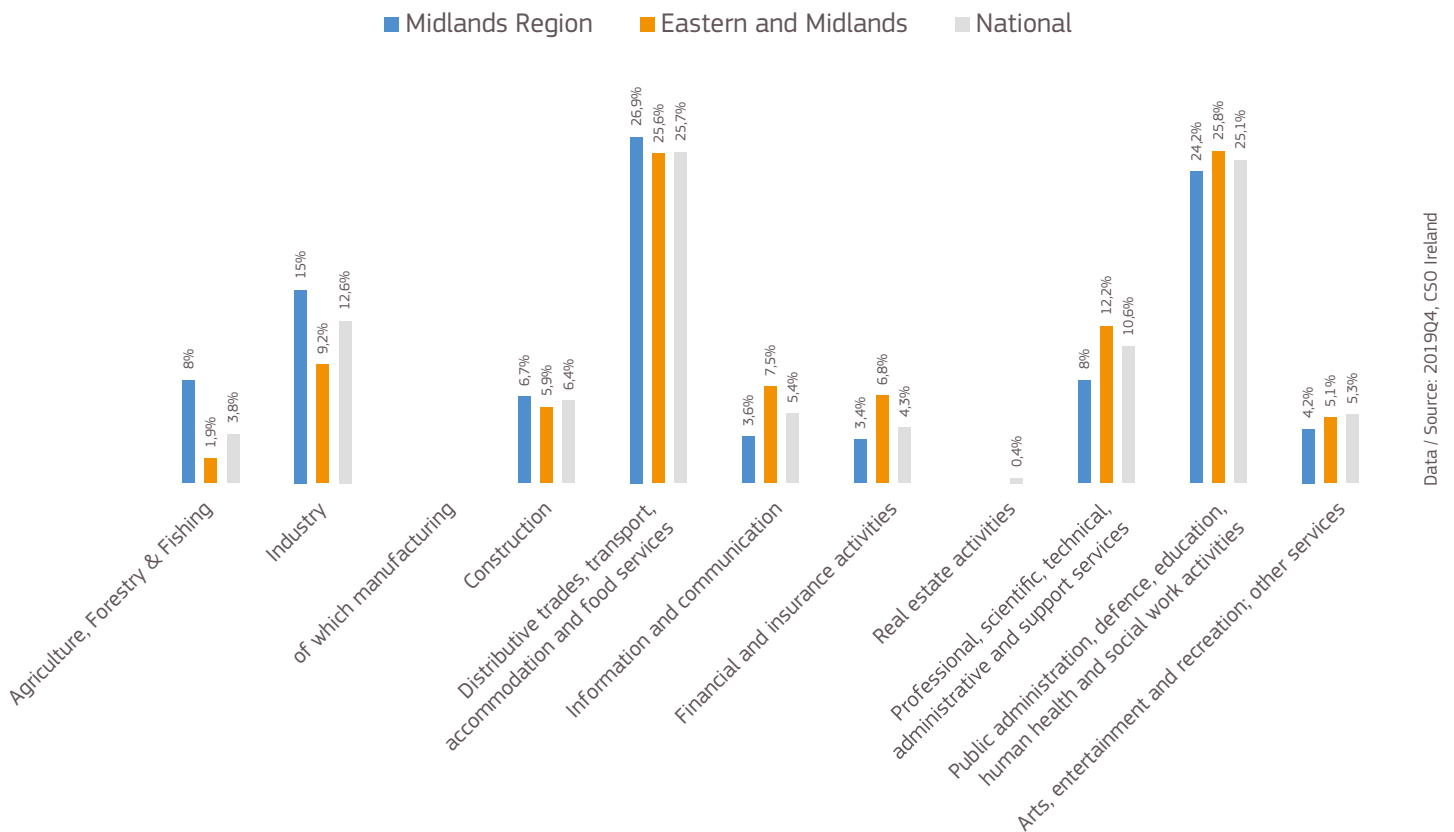
Regional socio-economic profile

	Midlands Region (NUTS 3)	Eastern and Midlands (NUTS 2)	National (NUTS 0)	Date / Source
Population [persons]	292,301	2,369,275	4,830,392	<i>NUTS 3: 2016, CSO Ireland NUTS 2, NUTS 0: 2018, Eurostat</i>
Population density [persons/km ²]	46	165	70.0	<i>2017 Eurostat</i>
Employment [No. persons employed]	109,680	1,118,900	2,180,000	<i>2016 Eurostat</i>
Employment rate [% share of population aged 20-64]	-	75.6%	74.1%	<i>2018 Eurostat</i>
Unemployment rate [% share of labour force aged 15-74]	4.5%	4.4%	4.5%	<i>2019Q4 CSO Ireland</i>
GDP per person [€]	€23,002	€67,142	€61,369	<i>2017 CSO Ireland</i>
Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SME)	39.2%	47.5%	45.7%	<i>2016 Houses of the Oireachtas</i>

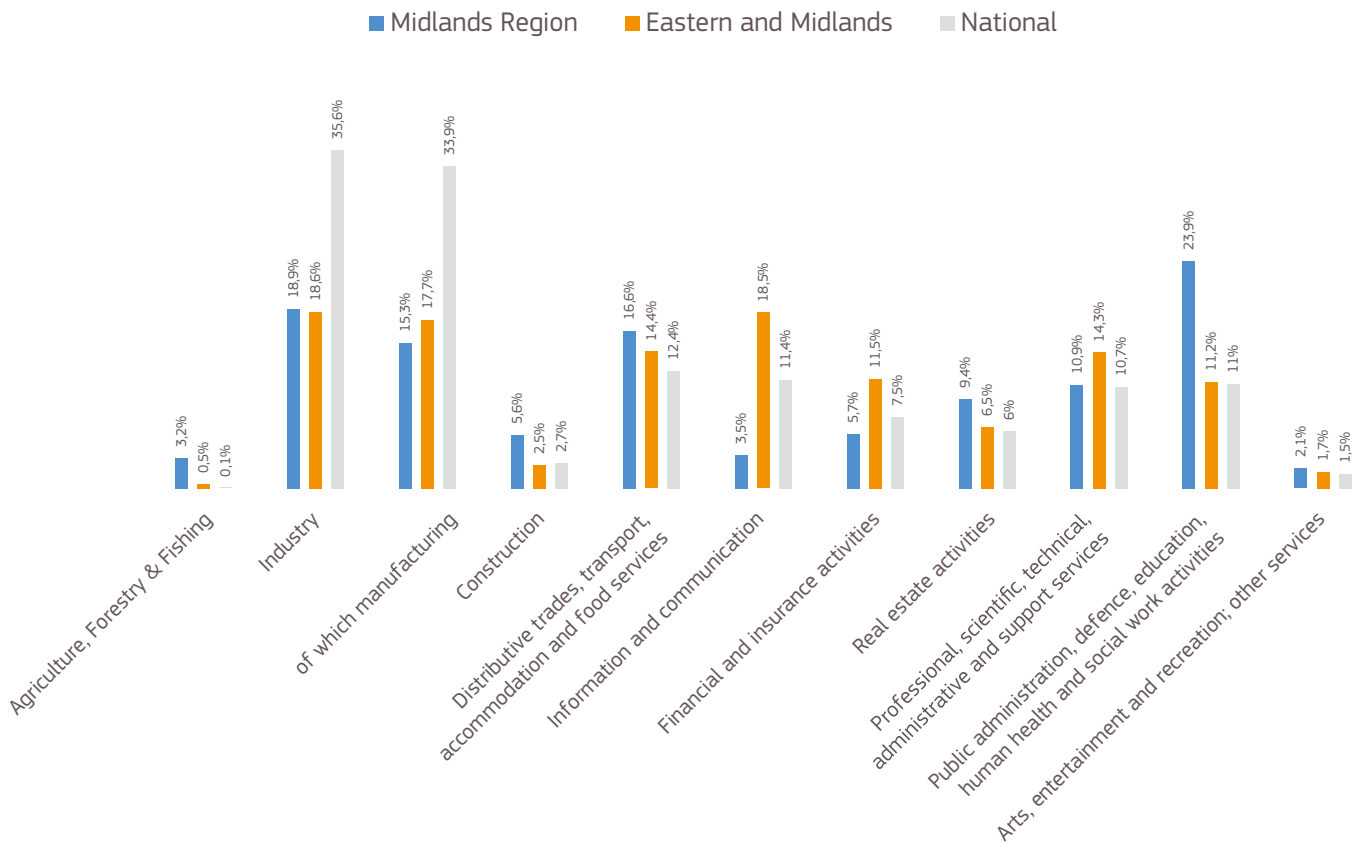
Educational attainment



Employment by sector



GVA per sector



Data / Source: 2017, CSO Ireland

General description of the economic and demographic profile of the region including notable trends and projections

The Midland Region (NUTS 3) is part of the Eastern and Midland Region (NUTS 2), which includes the capital city of Dublin. The Midlands is home to 292,301 people (2016). It is a largely rural region, in which agriculture and the peat industry have traditionally made up an important share of the economy. There is a relatively low population density (46 people/km²), characterised by significant commuting of the working population to Dublin and other towns and cities - approx. 24,000 people leave daily for college / work. Despite these commuter figures, public transport is lacking in the more peripheral communities and some of the existing main road networks suffer from heavy congestion.

In recent years, the Eastern and Midlands Region has benefited from population growth. This trend is particularly prominent in the Eastern Region (+17.4% between 2000 and 2016), followed by the Midlands Region (+16.1% between 2000 and 2016) and Dublin Region (+13.5% between 2000 and 2016¹). The Midlands has a relatively young population,

averaging at 36.7 years, with a young dependency ratio of 37.6% in 2016 (20.2% at national level, 2016)⁴. According to CSO Ireland, the young dependency ratio is projected to decrease, to 34.8% in 2021 and 31.5% in 2031. As for the old dependency ratio, it stood at 20.2% in 2016 (20.7% at national level), set to increase to 23.6% by 2021 and 32.4% by 2031¹.

GDP per capita in the Midlands Region was 37.5% of the national average in 2017 (€23,002 compared to the national average of €61,369). With the capital city of Dublin located in the Eastern and Midlands Region (NUTS 2), notable regional differences occur: the median disposable income per person in the Midlands (NUTS 3) is of €20,303, compared to €27,035 for Dublin (CSO, 2018). Similar differences exist for the deprivation rate (i.e. households that are considered to be marginalised or deprived as they cannot afford goods and services considered to be the norm) which is at 20.3% in the Midlands compared to 13.5% in Dublin; and the population at risk of poverty (i.e. people or households with an income below 60% of the median income), at 15.3% in the Midlands, compared to 9.3% in Dublin (CSO, 2018).

Since the economic downturn of 2007, overall employment in Ireland has been recovering. In 2019, the unemployment rate of the Midland Region was equal to the national average of 4.5%, and below the EU28 average of 6.3% (Eurostat, 2019) – a historical low. The Live Register, which records people receiving Jobseekers Benefit (JB) or Jobseekers Allowance (JA), including part-time, seasonal and casual workers, dropped over recent years¹. The regional labour force participation rate was at 58.6% (2018 Q4) slightly below the national average of 62.2%¹; and a high share of employment in small and medium enterprises is registered in the Midlands (near 40% of total employment)². However, the COVID-19 pandemic has implications for regional employment figures in the Midlands and adjacent counties. In addition to people already receiving support under the Live Register (total of 43,491, 7.2% of the national total in 2020), 115,600 people have been registered under the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) since March 2020 (DEASP, 2020), compared to a national total of 283,037 (CSO 2020).

Table 1: Current number of Live Registers and COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP)

Area	Live Register	COVID-19 PUP
Midlands	15,284	33,100
Galway	10,451	31,600
Roscommon	2,188	7,000
Tipperary	7,145	18,400
Kildare	8,423	25,500
Total	43,491	115,600

Source: DEASP, 23 April 2020

Regional peat industry and power plant profile

Overview and general characteristics of peat-related industry and locations

Ireland has extensive peat resources, developed and managed by the publicly owned company Bord na Móna plc. The land acquired by Bord na Móna extends to about 80,000 hectares, with over 130 individual bogs that are organised and managed as Bog Groups. A majority of those are concentrated in the Midland Region, though they also extend into the counties Kildare, Roscommon, East Galway, and North Tipperary; and therefore, the socio-economic importance of the industry does not solely relate to Midland Region. Alongside the peat extraction, a bespoke industrial rail network of 700km, with 200 railway locomotives and 1700 railway wagons carry the collected peat from nine counties into three power stations, Edenderry, West Offaly and Lough Ree. These power stations are located within the Midland Region. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, both the power stations of West Offaly and Lough Ree are not currently operating due to a reduction of demand since March 2020 (although, it is reasonable to consider that this may mean permanent closure for both stations - see below).

Industrial scale extraction of peat in Ireland has been used both to supply power plants (electricity generation) and the production of peat briquettes for domestic heating. In 2019, milled peat amounted to 3 Mt/year; briquettes to around 500,000 t/year. Activities of peat extraction and power generation thus have a dominant role in the local economy of the region and adjacent counties, sustaining a supply chain of local supporting service providers, notably in small engineering enterprises (machinery, equipment and tools). Many such enterprises have origins linked back to Bord na Móna (e.g. set up by former Bord na Móna employees).

The Electricity Supply Board, (ESB) is a state-owned electricity company, that operates two peat-powered stations in the Midlands at Lanesborough and Shannonbridge, supplied by the peat extraction of Bord na Móna. Power stations in Ferbane and Rhode, both in county Offaly, closed in 2003. In 2019, ESB submitted an application to the Planning Authority seeking planning permissions to transition West Offaly Power Station from peat to biomass starting in 2020, which was rejected in July 2019. A review of options for both West Offaly and Lough Ree Power Stations post-2020 revealed no viable business model beyond 2020. Therefore, both stations are ceasing the generation of electricity at the end of 2020, when current planning permissions expire⁷. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, both West Offaly and Lough Ree Power stations have ceased the generation of electricity (April 2020) due to reduction in electricity demand. The

Peat harvesting			Date
Type of resource	Peat		2019
Processing of peat	Milled-peat, used in power stations. Peat briquettes, used for domestic heating.		
Scale of Boglands	80,000 hectares owned by Bord na Mona across Ireland		
Production [Mt annual]	Milled peat: 3 Mt annual Briquettes: 500.000 tonnes annually		
Main (largest) peat extraction enterprises			
Name	Ownership	Number of employees	
Bord na Mona	Public	1664 direct employees for the whole company.	2020
Peat power plants			
Number of peat power plants	3		2019
Installed capacity [MW]	370		
Share of peat in regional power generation mix [%]	3.9%		2018
Main (largest) peat power plant operators			
Name	Ownership	Number of employees	
Edenderry Power (Bord na Mona)	Semi-state-owned	45	2019
West Offaly Power and Lough Ree (ESB)	Semi-state-owned	Approx. 75 ²	
Regional employment in peat extraction and peat power plants			
Employment	Number	Share of total regional employment [%]	
Peat supply (direct employment)	Approx. 100	0.08% ³	
Peat power plants (direct employment)	Approx. 125	0.09% ³	
Other peat-related activities [e.g. supply chain and services to peat operations]	Approx. 630	0.5% ³	
Employment by age group [% of total employment]	Less than 30 years old	30-54 years old	More than 54 years old
Bord na Mona age profile	13%	39%	48%

remaining plant, Edenderry Power, owned by Bord na Móna, has planning permission until 2023 to co-fire peat with biomass⁸. The closures of power stations and cessation of peat harvesting will have significant impacts on the local communities that are established alongside the bog areas in the Midlands counties of Offaly, Laois, Longford and Westmeath, but also extending into the Mid-East counties (e.g. Kildare) and Western Region (Counties of Roscommon and East Galway), and the Mid-West Region (North Tipperary) where employees of peat industry reside.

Socio-economic characteristics of peat-related industry

The Midlands and surrounding counties such as Roscommon, East Galway, North Tipperary, are largely rural communities where agriculture, peat and energy industry have an important position in the local economy. Milling peat has a long history in Ireland, deeply engrained in generations of families that made their living alongside the peat industry. Both Bord na Móna and the ESB have provided significant levels of employment in across different regions of Ireland for over 70 years, and indeed many of the rural communities and villages emerged in close proximity to their sites.

In 2020, approximately 1,664 people were directly employed across the Bord na Móna sites, excluding seasonal workers. Of these, approximately 500 permanent employees were engaged in the peat business, with approx. 180 in peat harvesting and in briquette factories. Other business areas in which the workforce is located are, for instance, resource recovery, relating to waste collection and recycling services and waste to energy generation (approx. 500 employees); PowerGen, i.e. renewable energy development (approx. 50 employees). Contraction of the workforce over recent years has contributed to an aging of Bord na Móna's workforce, with an age profile of workers that is largely over 50 (48%)

and characterised by relatively lower levels of educational attainment. By December 31st, 2019, 370 employees had been made redundant, though this figure will rise in 2020 as more redundancies are being sought. In addition, the current COVID-19 pandemic has led to the closure of two power stations with the consequence that 130 employees in the supply operations were temporarily laid-off. It is unclear if these power stations will re-open before they are due to close permanently, by the end of 2020.

Despite overall low unemployment figures, the Midlands traditionally has the second highest unemployment rate in Ireland, and it is anticipated that COVID-19 will compound matters in the region and adjacent counties. The closures of the power plants could potentially lead to pockets of higher unemployment rates in the affected bog communities, as there are currently limited alternative local employment opportunities for the Bord na Móna workforce. Employment opportunities outside of the region and adjacent regions can increase the pressures on the rail and road networks with increased commuting towards larger towns and cities. The restructuring of ESB and Bord na Móna activities have further implications for indirect and induced employment in the region and also wider socio-economic impacts, such as loss of purchasing power within rural communities, loss of seasonal employment and reduced local authority rates with consequences for the provision of local services

Characteristics, trends and challenges of peat-related locations and communities

The four counties of the Midlands Region, together with the neighbouring counties of Kildare, Roscommon and East Galway, are predominantly affected by the closure of peat harvesting. As of the end of 2019, 21 known peat bogs have been identified for which industrial peat extraction activities are at risk of closing down. The accelerated closure of

NUTS 2	Eastern and Midland Region				Northern and Western	
NUTS 3	Midlands Region	Number of Bog areas	Mid-East Region	Number of Bog areas	Western Region	Number of Bog areas
Local Government	Longford	1	Kildare	2	Roscommon	2
	Westmeath	4			Galway / Roscommon	5
	Offaly	3				
	Cross-county	4				
Total		12		2		7

peat-burning power plants may further increase the number of affected bogs. The 21 known bog areas are spread across the Eastern and Midland and Northern and Western Regions (see table below). Effects of the phase-out of peat harvesting on the workforce will not be limited to employees in the bog locations, but extend to Bord na Mona works such as power stations and briquette factories, that attracted labour from surrounding communities in the immediate locality, to those providing services as well as the areas in which employees reside both within the Midlands and in adjoining counties of Roscommon, Kildare and East Galway.

The Midlands Region has a traditionally high unemployment rate in Ireland, but with 4.5% in Q4 2019 (equal to the national average in 2019), the region achieved a historically low rate. As peat holds an important role in the local economies of the Midlands and adjoining counties, the impact of redundancies resulting from the closure of the power plants and phasing-out of peat harvesting may lead to pockets of high unemployment in a number of communities, exacerbated by lay-offs during the COVID-19 pandemic. This consequently will lead to a loss of purchasing power within those affected communities and further effects on the commercial rate income of the local authorities. The supply chain of local supporting service providers, notably in small engineering enterprises (machinery, equipment, tools and other services) will be affected.

Contraction of the workforce over recent years has contributed to an aging of Bord na Móna's workforce, with an age profile of workers that is largely over 50 and characterised by relatively low numbers with formal levels of educational attainment beyond secondary school. Nonetheless, there is an extensive skills base in the Midlands catchment area as well as an apparent entrepreneurial spirit in the region. Nine out of ten companies in the Midlands employ 10 or less people.

Peat transition strategies and plans

Current status and timeline of peat transition

In 2018 (Q4) Bord na Móna announced the closure of 17 active bogs, with the remaining 45 set to close within seven years. In 2019, 21 known bog areas in the Midland Region ceased peat harvesting. Of its workforce, by April 2020 370 employees had left the company under the voluntary redundancy scheme. A further 190 to 230 employees were temporarily made redundant in April 2020 due to a reduced demand in electricity and both West Offaly and Lough Ree Power stations ceasing to operate. In 2019, the ESB failed to gain planning permission to transition West Offaly Power Station from peat to biomass, in part due to an insufficient

domestic supply of biomass. A subsequent review of options for both West Offaly and Lough Ree Power Stations post-2020 revealed no viable business model beyond 2020. Current planning permissions expire at the end of 2020 for both stations. The remaining plant Edenderry Power, owned by Bord na Móna, has planning permission until 2023 to co-fire peat with biomass.

Current strategies and plans for economic diversification / development and decarbonisation

At national level:

- **The National Planning Framework:** is a national document to guide at a high-level strategic planning and development for Ireland over the next 20+ years for sustainable growth in economic, social and environmental terms, and sets the context for each of Ireland's three regional assemblies to develop their Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies. Its ultimate objectives are, amongst others, to guide future development, taking into account a projected 1 million increase of the population, the need to create 660,000 additional employment opportunities and 550,000 more homes by 2040; with 50% of population growth to occur in key regional centres, towns, villages and rural areas; enable people to live closer to their work place; regenerate the rural spaces by promoting environmentally sustainable growth patterns, planning for and implementing a better distribution of regional growth, in terms of jobs and prosperity.
- **Project Ireland 2040:** identifies 10 strategic investment areas, emphasising the diversification of rural economies, by e.g. improving regional accessibility through national road projects and more efficient public transport networks, supporting rural economies and communities through e.g. development of community hubs, heritage and tourism sites, funded by the **Rural Regeneration and Development Fund** of €1 billion; providing farmers grant support for improvements in facilities and equipment.
- **Future Jobs Ireland 2019:** national enterprise policy for job creation and labour force participation, talent development, enterprise growth, innovation and competitiveness and transition to a low carbon economy, through e.g.:
 1. The **Future Growth Loan Scheme:** available to eligible Irish businesses and the primary agriculture and seafood sectors to support investments in assets to increase productivity and efficiency, diversification into new produces / change in production processes, process or organisational innovation, marketing of agricultural products.
 2. Pilot **Initiative for a Regional Innovation**

and Technology Clustering Programme:

linking SMEs and Institutes of Technology. The €4.6M million competitive Regional Technology Clustering Fund was officially launched on 1st July 2019.

- **Enterprise 2025 Renewed:** supports the development of Irish owned enterprises, enhancing productivity and delivering quality jobs, exploiting the potential of collaboration and innovation and talent development, e.g.
 1. Supporting capacity building within firms, innovation, implementation of CSR Strategies.
 2. Supports SMEs through tax regimes and a competitive funding environment to promote entrepreneurship.
 3. Deepen the embeddedness of foreign owned multinationals through collaboration in RD&I, research & technology centres.
 4. Promote clustering, collaboration and connections, through the Regional Enterprise Development Fund, to harness regional strengths.

At regional level:

- The **Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES)**: informed by the Governments Project Ireland 2040, is a strategic plan identifying regional assets, opportunities and pressures providing policy responses. It supports the implementation of the National Spatial Strategy and puts in place policies and recommendations that will better manage regional planning and economic development throughout the region.
- The **Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan (REP)**: aligned with the Enterprise 2025 Renewed, Future Jobs Ireland Agenda, and Project Ireland 2040. It supports the actions of the Regional Transition Team to address challenges and opportunities and focuses on a set of priorities, such as:
 1. Supporting the action of the Regional Transition Team to address the challenges and opportunities of the accelerated decarbonisation by Bord na Móna (identification of projects / training programmes for funding proposals)
 2. Support the development and designation of Portlaoise as a “Low Carbon Town”.
 3. Develop and implement County Climate Change Adaptation Strategies incl. identification of regional actions.
 4. Complete a feasibility study into the development of an energy park at a Bord na Móna peatland site (by Q4 2020).
 5. Complete feasibility study for aquaculture on Bord na Móna peatlands (by Q3 2020).

6. Complete a study into the potential to produce herb products on Bord na Móna peatlands (by Q4 2020).

- **Brown to Green Strategy** of Bord na Móna: to accelerate the development of renewable energy assets; assessing the potential for new business developments such as land-based aquaculture, energy parks, production of high-value herb products.

At county level:

- **County Development Plans:** guide the future growth and development of a county. Local authorities develop these County Development Plans based on the long-term national and regional development strategies such as the National Planning Framework and the Regional Social and Economic Strategies.
- **The Climate Action Plan, 2019** to tackle Climate Breakdown, published in June 2019 charts an ambitious course towards national decarbonisation. Pursuant to Action 147 of the Climate Action Plan the Local Authority Climate Action Charter has been signed by the Minister for Communications, Climate Action & Environment & the CCMA on the 29th October 2019. The charter sets out the leadership role of local authorities in advancing decarbonisation objectives and building resilience to the negative impacts of climate change. The charter sets out 23 guiding objectives providing a focus on mitigation and adaptation efforts to deliver effective climate action across the extensive range of functions performed at local level. A process of monitoring, evaluating and reporting is required annually on the implementation of activities under the charter.
- **€5 million Bog Rehabilitation Programme From the Carbon Tax Fund** is to be used to restore over 1,800 hectares within the bog Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Natural Heritage Area (NHA) network on several raised bogs across the counties in the Midlands region. The restoration programme could provide for up to 70 jobs including machine operators, engineers, hydrologists, ecologists, environmental scientists, site supervisors, community liaison personnel, and includes evaluating amenity development potential across the area. An eddy-covariance flux tower, an atmospheric measurement technique to observe exchanges of (greenhouse) gases, will be installed to measure fluxes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and methane (CH₄).

Principal KPIs of strategies and plans

The Irish Climate Action Plan sets out the national ambitions to tackle climate change. By 2030, Ireland aims to have 70% of its electricity generated from renewable sources and will phase out coal and peat electricity generation.

Government is making the changes necessary, including providing support schemes, addressing technical barriers, supporting community participation, installing smart meters, and changing market rules to enable people Homeowners shall be enabled to generate their own electricity and sell back to the grid. In terms of transport, 1 million electric vehicles are foreseen for 2030, and an expansion of cycle paths and Park and Ride facilities to ease congestion. Diesel-only purchases for public buses have ceased in July 2019. Further commitments are made in the areas of waste management, community engagement, (e.g. through sustainable energy communities), as well as in the public sector (e.g. reducing emissions by 30% by 2030)⁹.

Principal actors in development and implementation of transition strategies and plans

At national level:

- **Government of Ireland:**
 - Department of Communications, Climate Actions & Environment.
 - Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.
 - Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.
 - The **Just Transition Commissioner:** appointed by Government in November 2019 to help ensure a co-ordinated and effective approach to Just Transition following the accelerated exit from peat for electricity generation. The Commissioner has a remit to engage with all relevant stakeholders, including the Midland Regional Transition Team (see below), and to review just transition experiences and provide recommendations. The Commissioner will report to Government through the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

At regional level:

- **Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA):** established in January 2015, is part of the regional tier of governance in Ireland. It is primarily focused on the preparation and implementation of Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSEs), integration of Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs), management of EU Operational Programmes, EU project participation, implementation of national economic policy, and working with the National Oversight and Audit Commission.
- **Regional Transition Team:** comprising local and regional stakeholders, from relevant counties, companies, development agencies, research

institutes, government departments, along with union representation. The objective of the grouping is to pursue funding opportunities and actions to mitigate the impact of the job losses on individuals and local communities affected by the acceleration of the decarbonisation programme, as well as support the area in developing alternative forms of employment, and attracting investment.

- **Bord na Móna and ESB:** deeply rooted in the socio-economic life of Ireland. Bord na Móna published its Brown to Green Strategy which foresees an orderly phase-out of peat and is supported by the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan. ESB is faced with the closure of its two peat-fired generating plants.
- **Regional Skills Forum:** The Regional Skills Forum for the Midlands is comprised of Athlone Institute of Technology, Laois and Offaly Education and Training Boards, Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Boards and First Polymer Skillnet. They work in partnership with Industry Representative Groups including Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, Local Enterprise Offices, Local County Councils, and the MREP office, Department of Employment Affairs & Social Protection and the Construction Industry Federation to build the skills needs of the region.
- **Eastern and Midland Climate Action Regional Office (CARO):** working closely with the 17 local authorities in its region on the preparation of Local Authority Climate Change Adaptation Strategies. The regional office is mandated to co-ordinate the engagement across the varying levels of government and help build on experience and expertise, capacity building and community engagement and assistance in the application of the Just Transition Fund.

At local level:

- **Local Authorities:** (Offaly, Laois, Westmeath, Longford, Kildare, Roscommon, Galway)
- **Local Enterprise Offices (LEO):** established to encourage entrepreneurship at local level and are part of local government. They serve as a first-stop-shop, supporting small businesses on financial aspects, providing advice on starting and growing a business and training services to develop enterprise in the respective counties (Offaly, Laois, Westmeath, Longford, Kildare, Roscommon, Galway).
- **Education & Training Boards (ETBs):** statutory education authorities which have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. ETBs manage and operate second-level schools, further education colleges, pilot community national schools and a range of adult and further education centres delivering education and training programmes. (Laois/Offaly, Longford/Westmeath, Roscommon/Galway)

- **Local Development Companies:** for local development and social inclusion including LEADER implementation.
- **Local Community Development Committees:** are groups established in each local authority area, made up of members and staff of the local authorities, public bodies who provide funding to the area, local community interest groups, publicly funded/supported local development groups. They coordinate, plan and oversee local and community development funding and aim for a common approach of the implementation thereof; pursue an integrated approach for local community services and promote local development through citizen engagement.

Role of civil society

At community level, there was a clear desire to engage in the transition process (e.g. Fербane, Shannonbridge and Lanesborough/Ballyleague).

Principal legislative drivers of transition

Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015: provides for the approval of plans by the Government in relation to climate change for the purpose of pursuing the transition to a low carbon, climate resilient and environmentally sustainable economy; to establish a body to be known as the Climate Change Advisory Council tasked with assessing and advising Ireland's transition to a low

carbon, climate resilient and environmentally sustainable economy by 2050; and to provide for matters connected therewith.

Transition challenges

Nature and scale of transition challenges

Bord na Mona and ESB are deeply ingrained in a region of limited alternative economic activities. Both companies have had a strong economic and social role for the local families and regional economy for several decades through the provision of an important number of well-paid employment opportunities, providing housing for their employees and promoting infrastructural development within the region. They both enjoy strong community support.

However, these communities are faced with an accelerated phase-out of the peat harvesting activities. Initially aiming to slow down peat harvesting by 2023, Bord na Mona has accelerated its decarbonisation programme through the closure of peat harvesting works in 2019, in part due to the closure of two peat-based power stations in the region. The accelerated phasing out of peat necessitates accelerated strategies to identify and implement alternative employment opportunities. Also programmes to re- and up-skill the affected workforce are needed, with the aim to retain and create jobs within the Midland region and adjoining counties

Current or expected transition challenges	High (priority) importance	Moderate importance	Minimal importance	Not important
Air quality				
Environmental degradation of land				
Demographic change (e.g. population ageing, outward migration)	X			
Narrow / concentrated industrial structure				
Modernisation of industry / re-industrialisation	X			
Employment creation	X			
Reskilling	X			
Transport infrastructure and mobility				
Social cohesion	X			
Limited partnerships and consensus				
Other challenges				
Lack of Foreign Direct Investments				

of Roscommon, Kildare and East Galway, to avoid relocation or an increase in commuting to growth regions (e.g. main cities such as Dublin). The accelerated transition processes have important implications for the workforce, as many have not had the time to plan and prepare for alternative employment and new skill sets. This is potentially further exacerbated by the current COVID-19 pandemic and its mid- to long-term consequences.

Skills weaknesses

While formal education attainment levels may be lower than average among more senior Bord na Móna workers, a good skills base is available and in particular a good base of mechanical skills, both in Bord na Móna and in the wider regional catchment area. The regional population has showcased entrepreneurial spirit. In 2019, pre-COVID-19, skills shortages were noted in areas such as ICT, renewable energy technologies, construction.

Infrastructure weaknesses

The region suffers from a lack of public transport system, to the disadvantage in particular of more remote areas, leading to heavy congestion on the main road networks. The rural areas also lack broadband connectivity, not reaching the EU Digital Agenda objective to extend its Coverage of Next Generation Networks (NGN) of 30 Mbps or more for all citizens by 2020. The National Broadband Plan is working toward the provision of 30Mbps for all premises.

Weakness in other industries and economic activities

The new Common Agricultural Policy supports environmentally sustainable farming and habitat protection, by focusing on technology, digitalisation and the bioeconomy. These areas offer opportunities to increase competitiveness and growth whilst fostering sustainable development and efficient management of natural resources. However, changes in regulation and the subsidy environment are challenging for the agricultural industry.

Whilst tourism is often stated as an opportunity for diversification, rural areas surrounding Dublin are faced with the fragility of demand of both domestic and overseas tourism and challenges related to infrastructure (such as the provision of accommodation). Some 5.9 million tourists of a total of 9 million travelled to the capital spending approx. €2 billion in 2017, yet, a general decrease in overseas tourists is noted across the rural counties surrounding Dublin¹. As for domestic trips, a combined figure for Laois or Offaly states 228,000 trips in 2017, generating income of €30 million (CSO publishes a combined figure as the sample size is otherwise insufficient)¹. Developing the peatlands story and the electricity generation heritage can offer opportunities to increase local tourism, both domestic and international

Transition opportunities

Existing and identified transition opportunities	High (priority) interest	Moderate interest	Minimal interest	No interest
Reconversion of coal-related sites / locations for renewable / alternate energy				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Biomass 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Energy storage 	x			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gas 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Geothermal 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hydro power and pumped hydro-storage 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hydrogen 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Solar 	x			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wind 	x			
Other energy related opportunities				
Reconversion of peat-related sites for new economic and social activities	x			
Repurposing of peat-related industrial infrastructure	x			
Heritage, culture and tourism	x			
Low carbon mobility and transport				
Diversification of peat-related supply chain and service activities	x			
Other opportunities:				
Agribusiness, farming (e.g. organic farming / food production), remote working infrastructure and opportunities, technology back office, film / animation industry, social enterprises, energy retrofitting, domestic heating and energy programmes, homecare / eldercare;				

Transition Actions

Current partnerships, initiatives and investments supporting economic diversification / development and decarbonisation

Partnerships (as described under section Principal actors in development and implementation of transition strategies and plans):

- The Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan Steering Committee
- The Midlands **Regional Transition Team**.
- The **Regional Skills Forum**.
- The **Local Authorities**
- The Department of Employment and Social Protections
- The Education and Training Boards
- **Local Community Development Committees**.
- The **Climate Action Regional Office**.

Initiatives:

- **Jobs, Skills and Education Fair** focussed on the construction, engineering and manufacturing sectors as almost 250 employees of impacted by the Bord na Mona decarbonisation programme, have skills sets which are most suitable to these sectors. The Regional Transition Team partnered with the Construction Industry Federation and the LEO Ingenuity Cluster network to secure the attendance of companies seeking to fill current vacancies.
- **Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP)** in conjunction with Laois Offaly Education & Training Board provided 13 information sessions for affected employees outlining income supports and all other supports available to assist with return to work, upskilling and retraining. DEASP also conducted individual 1 to 1 sessions with affected employees dealing with enquiries across the broad range of DEASP services & supports.
- Ongoing contacts between Bord na Mona transition staff, ETB staff and DEASP staff to ensure affected employee requests are actioned promptly.
- **Education and Training Boards:** coordinating events across the impacted counties to:
 - connect impacted employees with the Education and Training Boards, the NFQ system to benefit through apprenticeships, traineeships,

- provide comprehensive information on funded upskilling and training opportunities in the region,
- provide contacts for career guidance counsellors to help an employee navigate the process,
- provide the linkage with DEASP entitlements while upskilling and retraining the workforce.

- **Citizens Information Boards:** 6 events in total across the impacted counties, to:
 - provide information, advice / assistance and advocacy,
 - provide local contacts.
- **Athlone Institute of Technology:** in association with the Regional Skills Forum have made a number of applications for Springboard + programmes to support the impacted employees of Bord na Móna, should they seek to be re-trained or consolidate their existing skills and competencies.
- **Idea Generation Bootcamp:** coincided with the above referenced Jobs, Skills & Education Fair, where successful entrepreneurs and businesses from the region share their stories as to how they developed their businesses from a Midland location.
- **National Conference - Creating Business Opportunities from Climate Change:** held in October 2019, it examined international trends, and demonstrated how responses to climate change, by both business and business within communities, can effectively drive innovation, adoption of disruptive technologies, and embrace more flexible work practices. The Conference was a collaboration between the office of the MREP, CARO and Offaly Local Authority.
- **Digital Training Hub Athlone:** The Digital Training Hub provides courses in a range of areas, namely basic computer skills, advanced IT skills (European Computer Driving License), Windows Operating Systems and Networking Fundamentals, and Microsoft Office Specialist (MOS), for employed and unemployed people. The training is fully funded by the Longford Westmeath Education and Training Board and Cenit College, as well as the European Social Fund.
- **The Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS):** designed to prompt significant expansion of wind (both onshore and offshore) and solar-power generation, also including citizen energy options. It is deemed critical for Ireland's goal to achieve 70% electricity from renewable sources by 2030, a key element of the Climate Action Plan. Subject to State aid approval by the EU, the first auction of the proposed scheme is set to take place in 2020. Under the proposed scheme, energy providers bid for contracts and communities

will be allowed to bid and be paid for power they generate locally. It includes schools, sport clubs, small businesses and individual farmers to participate. The RESS scheme, open to a range of technologies, invites renewable electricity projects to bid for capacity and receive a guaranteed price for electricity they generate. A microgeneration scheme, yet to be announced, will support small-scale investments in roof top solar. Through the RESS scheme, the wind capacity, grown by 50% since 2015, could grow a further 30% in the coming years. The scheme will broaden the renewable energy mix and enhance security of supply.

Investments:

- **Midlands Network for Co-working Facilities (MNCF):** remote working & co-working hubs, incubation facilities and enterprise centres, with over 20 facilities as members. A strategic development objective of the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan to 2020. The Audit provided insights into existing gaps and lead to the establishment of a network of these facilities, to group as a collective offering to potential clients looking to relocate outside of the main urban areas and large cities and offer their employees the possibility to work closer to their homes. There is good potential as an estimated 24,000 people commute outside of the region every day for work and educational reasons.
- The **Midlands Skills Centre**, opened in 2019 in Tullamore, is a facility catering to the specialist training and upskilling of people that wish to seek employment in the biopharma and medical-tech sectors. It provides training solutions in a GMP simulated manufacturing environment, with adjacent IT and meeting facilities, such as a state-of-the-art cleanroom, laboratories and classrooms. It provides training solutions for midlands-based clients, ranging from operator training through to senior management training, and as such plays a vital role in supporting a continued growth of biopharma and med-tech in Tullamore and the wider region. The facility also provides training for electrical apprenticeships.
- **The Retrofit and NZEB Training Facility at Mount Lucas**, through the Laois-Offaly Education and Training Board (LOETB), here a Retrofit programme has been developed for former Bord na Mona employees focussing on deep retrofit measures, offering the trainee an opportunity to gain QQI Level V Certification in Thermal Insulation Installation as well as the associated technical skills gained in the Mount Lucas simulated work environment. 32 Bord Na Mona employees are currently engaged on the programme with 32 more ready to start once the Covid-19 restrictions have been lifted. This is the first of an extensive range of skills development in retrofit LOETB will be delivering in 2020/21 – with additional certified modules in Ventilation and Air Tightness to follow

presently. Collectively these modules can be offered as A Midlands Retrofit Traineeship. LOETB will also be offering the upskilling NZEB provision that focusses on ensuring that craftspeople and site managers as well as general operatives are fully au fait with the Nearly Zero Energy Building Standard that has been introduced to the Building Regulations.

Recent and ongoing regional and local transition actions

Bord na Mona diversification:

- Into renewable energy: developed and operates 283MW over five windfarms, a further 340MW in the consenting process for 2025; and 70MW of solar PV planned for 2025, with an additional 400MW in the pipeline for 2027.
- Into resource recovery: Littleton Phase 1 employing 25 and set to increase to 40; phase 2 of the project expanding into plastics and creating a further 22 jobs.
- Decommissioning and rehabilitation of peatland sites: habitat restoration for tourism and leisure and special areas of conservation (approximately 10% of Irish bogs).
- Lough Boora Discovery Park – cutaway peatland, walking and cycling trails, bike hire, coffee shop and Sculpture Park (Award winning, annual visitor numbers in excess of 100,000 people, partnership with community & Local Authority).
- Aquaculture medicinal herb trials are ongoing in Mount Lucas, County Offaly
- Birchwater trails ongoing in County Longford

ESB diversification:

- Renewable energy and fisheries sites.
- **Battery Storage power plant** in Offaly on a decommissioned ESB site. South Korean energy company, Hanwha Energy Corporation (HEC) and their Irish partners, Offaly-based Lumcloon Energy Limited developing two new 100MW Energy Storage plants near Ferbane and Shannonbridge. The facility is a backup source of power and will be capable of being called upon almost instantly to provide the system services necessary to bolster a renewables-based electricity grid.

Community Responses:

- **Rhode Business Park and Ferbane Community Centre Business Park:** establishment of the North & West Offaly Development Funds 2003-2013 (€6m contribution from ESB on the closure of Ferbane and Rhode ESB Power stations). Bord na Mona and the

ESB rationalised in the 90's, significantly reducing local employment. In response, Ferbane Town Development Committee was established and drew up an initial 5 year plan, an outcome of which was the development of the Ferbane Business and Technology Park and the establishment of a Community owned not for profit company, Ferbane Business & Technology Park Ltd. with the principal aim of generating employment opportunities in the area.

- **Ferbane Food Campus:** in 2012, the Ferbane Food Campus was established in the Ferbane Community Centre Business Park. A time-share kitchen and training facility for people trying to develop new food related products with market potential was developed, now used by a range of local entrepreneurs. It aims to secure premises for food incubation businesses, as a step up facility for those using the kitchen, and focuses on attracting established food producers to the campus to increase local employment.

Planned regional and local transition actions

Bord na Mona diversification plans:

- NPWS Bog Rehabilitation Programme, Bord na Mona has been appointed to undertake a programme of bog rehabilitation across the Midlands on behalf of the NPWS.
- into renewable energy (wind energy a further 340MW in the consenting process for 2025; and 70MW of solar PV planned for 2025, with an additional 400MW in the pipeline for 2027.
- Into resource recovery: Littleton Phase 2 of the project expanding into plastics and creating a further 22 jobs.
- Aquaculture sites
- Herbs and Plants for natural medicinal use
- Hemp/CBD

ESB:

- Partnership with Vodafone to provide high-quality broadband accessibility to 15,000 homes.
- **Athlone E3 Institute:** Trinity College Dublin E3 Institute (Engineering, Environment and Emerging Technologies) that is considering building an outreach into the Midlands with an E3 Centre.

Transition Assets

Notable research capabilities and facilities

- **Athlone Institute for Technology** plays a central role in the Midland's economic development through its education, research, innovation and enterprise programme. AIT delivers a range of academic/training programmes in advanced manufacturing while its research and development strengths include its Enterprise Ireland funded APT Applied Polymer and COMAND Connected Media Technology Gateways and partnerships in the SFI funded CONFIRM Smart Manufacturing, AMBER Advanced Materials, SSPC Pharmaceutical and CÚRAM Medical Device Centres.
- **Irish Manufacturing Research (IMR) in Mullingar** (awarded funding by Regional Enterprise Development Fund in 2017), to develop core competences in collaborative robotics and virtual reality. It enhances the region's position at the forefront of next generation manufacturing technologies which will drive industry innovation, competitiveness and enhance regional capability in Industry 4.0.
- **E3 Institute** (Engineering, Environment and Emerging Technologies) outreach of the Trinity College Dublin (currently planned).

Notable labour force skills and knowledge

- A good skills base in the larger Midlands catchment area.
- Notable engineering skills, notably in small engineering enterprises (e.g. machinery, equipment and tools), to a large number originating from the Bord na Mona workforce.
- Strong entrepreneurial spirit in the region.

Notable infrastructure e.g. transport, investment sites, ICT, utilities

- Notable infrastructures are, for example, the Midlands Network for Co-working facilities (MNCF) provides space for start-up businesses. The Mullingar Enterprise Technology & Innovation Centre, open since 2009, promotes, assists and encourages new industries, generates employment and provides education and training for Mullingar residents.
- In terms of transport, larger towns such as Longford, Tullamore, Athlone, Portlaoise or Mullingar enjoy a good transport connectivity, also with Dublin. These larger towns have strong fibre broadband speeds.

- However, remote rural areas lack access to ultrafast broadband as well as good public transport networks.
- There is a lack of clear clarity around the future use of Bord na Mona's landbank and building assets
- Connection to the national electricity grid – opportunity for renewables

Notable non-peat economic activities, industries and inward investments

- Advanced manufacturing, promotion of remote working opportunities (e.g. through MNCF), high quality food products, farming and organics.
- Future regional economic development objectives are noted in the Regional Enterprise Plan 2020, including renewable energy, food products and beverages, tourism, actions towards big data and analytics. The Steering Committee of the Midland Regional Enterprise Plan are responsible for implementing same.
- Under the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan a suite of profiles have been published for the Region and the principal towns of Longford, Athlone, Mullingar, Tullamore and Portlaoise.

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Platform for coal regions in transition

The Platform for coal regions in transition is an initiative by the European Commission.

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