



**A YEAR OF JUST TRANSITION
3RD PROGRESS REPORT**

**Kieran Mulvey
JUST TRANSITION
COMMISSIONER**

DECEMBER 2020

Contents

PREFACE i

Introduction 1

Programme for Government – ‘Our Shared Future’ 1

Commitment on Jobs 2

Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2020 3

MRTT Steering Committee..... 4

MRTT Working Groups..... 5

MRTT-START Midlands Pathway to Transition 7

Budget 2020 Funding 8

- Just Transition Fund 8
- Midlands Retrofitting Programme 9
- NPWS Peatlands Rehabilitation 10

Implementation Plan 12

EU Territorial Plan 12

Budget 2021 and Funding Decisions 13

Climate Action Fund..... 13

Further Potential Funding Opportunities 14

Greenways 14

Future of ESB Plants..... 15

Bord na Móna Business Progress..... 16

Bord na Móna Enhanced Peatlands Rehabilitation 16

Agreement with Bord na Móna Employees..... 17

Rhode Business Park 18

Midlands Geology (GSI)..... 18

Engagement with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland 19

Presentation to the EEAC 28th Annual Conference..... 19

Engagement with the Climate Change Advisory Council..... 20

Recommendations and Future Actions..... 22

- Introduction 22
- Recommendations 24

Conclusion..... 30

Annex 1 - A Year in Just Transition – Timeline 32

Annex 2 - Press Releases..... 33

Annex 3 - Just Transition Fund Projects – Strand 1 & Strand 2 38

Annex 4 – MRTT Working Group Programmes..... 43

PREFACE



Kieran Mulvey

It is a year since my appointment as Just Transition Commissioner for the Midlands on 8th November 2019. It is, therefore, timely for this Report to refer briefly to the progress to date since my appointment and to the primary developments following both my 1st Progress Report delivered to the then Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Mr Richard Bruton, TD, in Quarter 2 of 2020, and, since the establishment of the new Government in June, my 2nd Report presented to the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Mr Eamon Ryan, TD in Quarter 3.

I made a series of recommendations (25) in my initial Report relating to the structures, funding, engagement and policy options for making the Just Transition in the Midlands a reality and thus ensuring a continuity of action-related activities throughout 2020 and beyond. The Government has given a commitment to publish an Implementation Plan relating to these recommendations and this Plan is currently being progressed.

Effectively, the two major peat-fired power stations in the Midlands owned by ESB – West Offaly Power and Lough Ree Power – will cease generating electricity by the end of this year in response to an earlier An Bord Pleanála decision. This decision had an enormous repercussive effect upon Bord na Móna, its employees, Local Authorities and local communities.

It had been anticipated that the region would have had a further 10 years of peat production for electricity generation in the Midlands. This was later truncated to a period of one year, and, in effect, to end of 2020.

Bord na Móna, once the largest employer in the Midlands Region, has recently declared that the company will no longer be harvesting peat and is now positioning itself as a climate solutions company under its “Brown to Green Strategy”.

These climate action measures bring fundamental and far-reaching changes for employees, the communities, and the economy of the region, including small businesses and local suppliers.

The ESB has undertaken a review of the operations of the West Offaly and Lough Ree power stations, with external overview, regarding the potential future use of these sites/locations as per my previous recommendation.

These developments bring to an end over 70 years of specific State enterprise peat harvesting to fuel electricity generation in the Region that has defined the narrative of the Midlands in Ireland. It marks the end of a great legacy of social and commercial enterprise around peat and energy production in the region that has been the mainstay of families and communities over many generations and which has contributed in no small way to the economic and social history of Ireland.

My earlier Reports and this Report – “A Year of Just Transition” – have endeavoured to reverse the negativity of the impact of what I have described above and alternately to create a positivity about the value of both the human and natural assets of the Midlands. There exists a great potential for building upon the natural amenities within the region for the development of current and future social, cultural, heritage, tourism, peatlands, and private and public enterprises.

The agreement of the Local Authorities, State Enterprises, local development bodies, the private sector, educational, training and third level institutions to work together in a “whole of Midlands approach” is very encouraging.

Already the reconstituted Midlands Regional Transition Team (MRTT), with the involvement of eight Local Authorities, has commenced the roll out of my Recommendations and has established a series of sub committees (4) under key strategic considerations across a number of areas involving critical issues and areas for the development of the region. There is a high-level team involvement of important regional stakeholders and local authority /central Government personnel in the work of these committees.

The 24th of November was a “green letter day” for the Midlands with the announcement of major Government investment in peatlands rehabilitation (€108 million plus €18 million from Bord na Móna), and the announcement of Strand 2 projects under the Just Transition Fund (47 projects totalling €27.8 million) for the successful applicants across the Midlands. The way forward for local communities registered through the MRTT Midlands Engagement Process will be guided by the Working Groups and assisted to develop applications for future funding opportunities arising from the Budget 2021.

It has been truly a significant *Year of Just Transition* in the Midlands and on the basis of what has been achieved and the structures put in place within the region and the increasing alignment with Central Government and particularly the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, I feel reassured that there will be positive and momentous developments throughout the whole of the Midlands in the years ahead.

Consultation, engagement, transparency and collaboration are the key principles at the heart of all we do. I am looking forward to continuing this endeavour and task with the key stakeholders into 2021.

**Kieran Mulvey,
Just Transition Commissioner,
December**

2020

Introduction

My first Progress Report was published by the Government in May this year. It set out the main issues in the Midlands as I saw them after the announcement of the pending closure of the two peat-fired power stations at Shannonbridge and Lanesboro, and following my extensive engagement from November 2019 to March 2020 with a wide range of stakeholders. I also made a series of recommendations in the Report, including in relation to the Midlands Regional Transition Team, the Just Transition Fund, further cooperation in the Region on infrastructure, tourism, climate action, planning, and local authority funding due to loss of rates income. Some of these are already being worked on and more will be the subject of the Implementation Plan being developed by Government as a response to my Report and other papers, such as the NESC Report on Just Transition in March.

My second Progress Report (September 2020) was an update for Minister Ryan as he had just taken up office under the new Government established in June. This second report set out progress since the publication of the initial Report, including MRTT restructuring, the Just Transition Fund and the EU Just Transition Fund, the MRTT-START Programme, commitments to Just Transition in the Programme for Government, developments in relation to peat harvesting, peatlands rehabilitation, geological potential of the Midlands to contribute to the renewable energy sector, potential for education hubs, and, most importantly, potential for new enterprises and job creation. The Minister published the 2nd Progress Report on 24th November.

This third Report charts ongoing developments and where we go from here. It looks again at the Programme for Government in relation to Just Transition, including my discussions with Minister Ryan; the progress of MRTT and its Working Groups; progress on areas such as retrofitting, bog rehabilitation, funding for greenways and other tourism initiatives; and the Just Transition Fund. I also report on engagements, notwithstanding the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These include the Climate Advisory Council, NESC, ESB, Bord na Móna, SEAI and GSI. Budget 2021 contained additional measures in relation to Just Transition, and progress is being made on the Implementation Plan to develop the recommendations I made in my first Report, some of which are already being progressed. I have also included some new recommendations for consideration.

Programme for Government – ‘Our Shared Future’

I had a constructive and informative engagement with Minister Eamon Ryan, his senior officials and advisors on 31st August 2020.

The meeting, which lasted for over two hours, allowed me the opportunity to outline to the Minister my work under the Terms of Reference as Just Transition Commissioner. It facilitated me in highlighting the level of consultation and engagement locally and the extremely high response to the call for applications for project funding from the Just Transition Fund, following registration of projects with the MRTT Engagement Process.

I briefed the Minister on the roles of Bord na Móna and ESB and their current endeavours/enterprises in response to the decisions on the cessation of peat use for electricity generation, the emerging issues on peat harvesting for horticultural and other purposes, the renewable energy potential in the region, and potential private investment on

green enterprises in the Midlands. I also updated the Minister on the structures being put in place to maximise the outcomes of the recommendations I had made in both my first and second Reports in relation to the non-statutory Midlands Regional Transition Team (MRTT).

Other matters, including local authority rates loss, complications around different licensing regimes, and the constant nature of litigation on energy, peat harvesting, windfarms and forestry were discussed.

The Minister outlined the commitments in the Programme for Government under the Mission “A Green New Deal”, which refers to new policies on emissions climate governance, energy, retrofitting, just transition, national heritage, biodiversity and water, and also under the Mission “Better Quality of Life for All”, relating to development of towns centres, a national clean air strategy, better work-life balance and sustainable transport. The Minister also referred to the future role of the Advisory Council on Climate Change and the potential role of a statutory Office of Just Transition Commissioner.

The Minister emphasised that, apart from the funding for the current just transition, other funding mechanisms from a number of possible Government budgetary decisions could be utilised in the Midlands.

In relation to the Just Transition Fund, I indicated to the Minister that, whereas I understood the need for a rigorous financial process around expenditure on the Fund, there were concerns in the region among local and national politicians, and impacted communities, about the time it was taking to allocate funds so that projects could commence.

The restrictions under COVID-19 overall and the increased restrictions in three Midland counties in late Summer had curtailed my ability to visit and engage with various organisations and groups. Nevertheless, ever advancing information technology and the virtual conference systems via the internet provided for a continuous and high-quality involvement with key stakeholders and with the Department.

Commitment on Jobs

In my second Report, I set out the areas of focus under the Programme for Government for Just Transition. These include a commitment to deliver job opportunities and support for vulnerable groups. This is crucial if a just transition is to take place. At the opening of the recent week-long Just Transition Platform and Coal Regions in Transition Initiative Virtual Week hosted by the European Commission, Mr Marc Lemaitre, Director General, DG REGIO, EU Commission, said that the Just Transition Fund is to ensure that no person or no region is left behind, and that the Fund is to ensure the future of the most affected regions – through new jobs. Economic and social transition is at the core of the Just Transition Plan. Mr Luc Triangle, General Secretary of the Trade Union movement, IndustriALL, added to this message, saying that alternative jobs are needed, and not just redundancies. Retraining, upskilling and education are needed as part of a regional industrial policy. As pointed out by another contributor, the real issue is what happens to the next generation. Alternative jobs must be created so that there are jobs for that generation to aspire to in the region.

In this regard, the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan and its Steering Committee is crucial. While the Plan has been progressing well, there is now an increasing focus on transition and the additional economic difficulties resulting from the COVID pandemic. Resilience and employment growth are key to the future of the region. In developing a new REP in 2021, the region *“will explore a framework to realise economic and enterprise opportunities from Transition”*.

In my first Progress Report I made some recommendations around supporting the provision of remote working hubs. This became very topical in the context of the COVID pandemic, but it is also an important strategy in allowing at least some of the 24,000 people who leave the Midlands daily for work or education to stay in their locality. This has both economic and environmental benefits to the region, insofar as emissions from travel are reduced, and health and welfare benefits as it reduces commuting time by up to four hours daily and allows individuals more time to spend with friends and family, or on other activities, enhancing the quality of life for all concerned. This is in line with the Programme for Government to deliver a better life for all.

The appointment of a Regional Business Development Manager with support secured from the Just Transition Fund will advance awareness and the development of a suite of remote working facilities across the region.

Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2020

A draft of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill was published in October this year and I understand that the final text will be published and initiated in the Houses in early 2021. If passed by the Houses of the Oireachtas, it will commit Ireland to move to a climate resilient and climate neutral economy by 2050 in line with Programme for Government commitments. The draft Bill brings in a system of five-year, economy-wide carbon budgets, which will outline a ceiling for total greenhouse gas emissions. These will be prepared by the Climate Change Advisory Council and presented to Government to consider and approve, with input from the Oireachtas.

The provisions of the Bill include:-

- A 2050 emissions target
- A system of 5-year carbon budgets starting in 2021
- A role for the Climate Change Advisory Council in relation to proposing carbon budgets
- Annual revision of the Climate Action Plan
- A National Long Term Climate Action Strategy at least every decade
- A requirement for Local Authorities to prepare individual Climate Action Plans
- Stronger oversight role for the Oireachtas Committee

These are ambitious targets in the draft Bill, which build on the central proposition that climate action is good for the economy, that reaching climate targets does not mean overall job losses, and that sustainable growth means more jobs, just not the same type of jobs. The Midlands region is the first region to feel the impact of climate change in a substantial way. It needs to be seen to be managing this transition through the creation of new businesses and industries in the region – a Just Transition.

MRTT

In my first Report, one of my main recommendations related to the Midlands Regional Transition Team. The work of the MRTT and its Secretariat over recent years has been particularly impressive, bringing together representation from political and local authorities, social partners, educational institutes and training boards, and other key regional stakeholders such as IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland. I recommended the restructuring of the Steering Committee and the establishment of a number of dedicated Working Groups. I am happy to report that this restructuring has been implemented.

The MRTT and its Working Groups are managed and co-ordinated by the Office of the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan, which is funded by the Midlands Local Authorities of Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath.

MRTT Steering Committee

The MRTT Steering Committee now comprises of the Cathaoirleach and Chief Executive of the Local Authorities from the wider Midlands Region, which includes Laois, Longford, Offaly, Westmeath, Roscommon, Kildare, Galway (East), and Tipperary (North).

The Steering Committee also has representation from the office of the Just Transition Commissioner, the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan Steering Committee, Chair and Director of Regional Assemblies, Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, Bord na Móna, ESB, Ibec and ICTU. Members of the Oireachtas from the wider Midlands have the right of attendance and contribution to meetings. This follows my recommendation that a “whole of Midlands approach” be adopted in the Region in response to the cessation of peat harvesting and peat-fired electricity generation. I have referred previously to the essential importance of ensuring local representation and involvement in decisions around the just transition agenda.

The restructured Steering Committee was convened on 7 September. I chaired this meeting and it was agreed that future meetings would be chaired in rotation by the County Council Chairs. Agreement of the establishment of the Working Groups I recommended in my first Report was also reached. There was also an update on the START process, and updates from the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications on the Just Transition Fund, the Implementation Plan and the Territorial Plan. Updates on how the other provisions of the Budget 2020 were progressing – the retrofitting programme and the NPWS bog rehabilitation programme –were also provided.

The Steering Committee met again on 20 October, chaired by Councillor Paul Ross, Chair of Longford Co Council. I provided updates on my reporting to the Minister on Just Transition, on how the Fund was progressing, and on approaches I had received in relation to potential projects in the Midlands. There were updates on START with the presentation of the Midlands Pathway to Transition document, and on convening of the Working Groups. The Department again updated on the Just Transition Fund, the Implementation Plan and the Territorial Plan, and ESB gave a presentation on the study being carried out on the future of the sites at Lanesboro and Shannonbridge. The most recent meeting of the Steering

Committee was 1 December, which was chaired by Councillor Liam McDaniel of Westmeath Co Council.

One intervention at the October meeting referred to the imperative of keeping the Midlands Region in the public eye, particularly in Europe, to ensure all the help available from the EU is secured in order to lessen the impact of this transition. In this regard, the attendance at the MRTT Steering Group meetings of local representatives on the EU Committee of the Regions would be helpful and welcome.

MRTT Working Groups

Working Groups comprising of various organisations and State agencies/central Government services operating in the Region have now been established for the purpose of accessing Just Transition funding/schemes and programmes. The Working Groups will also assist projects on the MRTT Engagement Process Inventory in progressing project concepts, partnerships and / or identification of alternative sources of funding. In addition, the Working Groups will form a forum where issues and responses can be considered by the main organisations involved in the regional response.

I am grateful to John Costello, Michael Nevin, Pádraig Boland, and Brendan O'Loughlin for undertaking to chair and co-ordinate these Working Groups and the commitment, dedication, knowledge, expertise and experience they and their colleagues are bringing to this visionary work and actions as part of the just transition programme.

The Working Groups are as follows:

WG1 – Education/Training/Research

Chaired by:- John Costello, Manager of the Midlands Regional Skills Forum
Organisations represented:- Regional Skills Forum; LEOs; ETBs; AIT; GMIT; Carlow IT; NUIG; Maynooth University; University of Limerick; ESB Apprenticeship/National Construction Training Centre; Bord na Móna ; Skillnets; CIF; MREP

WG2 – Employment Generation Committee

Chaired by:- Michael Nevin, Head of Longford Local Enterprise Office
Organisations represented:- IDA; Enterprise Ireland; Ibec; MREP; LEOs; Bord na Móna; ESB; Regional Skills Forum; Chambers of Commerce; Regional Assemblies

WG3 – Employment Continuity Pathways (Non IR issues)

Chaired by:- Pádraig Boland, Training Manager, Laois-Offaly ETB
Organisations represented:- Bord na Móna; ESB; ICTU; DEASP; Regional Skills Forum; ETBS; MREP

WG4 – Community Assistance Programme/Social Enterprise Interventions

Chaired by:- Brendan O'Loughlin, CEO of Offaly LDC
Organisations represented:- CARO; Local Development Companies; Local Authorities (LCDCs & PPNs); MREP

All four Working Groups were convened in October and met three times by the end of 2020.

MRTT-START Midlands Pathway to Transition

The START team provided technical assistance to the MRTT over the December 2019-October 2020 period through an SLA with Offaly County Council on behalf of the MRTT.

The assistance provided included the development of:

- (i) Regional Profile
- (ii) Midlands Engagement Process
- (iii) Future Employment & Skills Paper



Over the summer months the Midlands Pathway to Transition document was drafted. Comments and observations were sought from the MRTT and constituent Working Groups. The comments and observations received were incorporated, as appropriate, and finalised, and the Midlands Pathway to Transition was presented to the MRTT Steering Committee on 20 October 2020.

The Midlands Pathway to Transition document is a dynamic document, which provides guidance to the Working Groups as they develop their work plans and is informed by the Midlands Engagement Process.

The Midlands Pathway to Transition envisages 3 phases to Transition. The Midlands is currently in Phase 1, the initial transition period covering the early years of change. Measures in this phase relate to the following objectives:

1. Mitigating redundancies and the effects of restructuring in short term
2. Assessing, securing and addressing peat related assets and legacies
3. Developing community resilience and adaptation
4. Enhancing public sector capacity and regional profile
5. Innovation, investment and research to realise new opportunities and sectors.

Objectives and measures of the future phases 2 and 3 of transition are in development and will be informed by Phase 1:

Phase 2 (circa year 3 onwards)

- the scaling-up and acceleration of regional investments relating to energy transition, economic diversification, infrastructure, environmental enhancement and utilisation of assets.

Phase 3 (circa year 5 onwards)

- notable structural change, including productivity and equity gains, predicated on energy transition and growth in emergent sectors, linked to repurposed regional assets.

Budget 2020 Funding

€31 million was allocated to the Midlands in the 2020 Budget from the additional funds collected from the increase in Carbon Tax to support Just Transition. €20 million was provided for energy efficiency renovations to approximately 750 local authority homes; €5 million was allocated to the National Parks and Wildlife for rehabilitation of peatlands, and €6 million was provided for the Just Transition Fund. ESB supplemented the Just Transition Fund with a “once-off” contribution of €5 million following the announcement of the closure of its two plants at Lanesboro and Shannonbridge in 2020.

- **Just Transition Fund**

The Just Transition Fund was launched on 19th June by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications with a call for proposals. The call was open to suitable projects in East Galway, Kildare, Laois, Longford, North Tipperary, Offaly, Roscommon and Westmeath from private, public, and community and voluntary organisations. The call focused on three priority areas for projects:

- Employment and Enterprise Supports
- Training Supports
- Community Transitioning Supports.

A condition of the Fund call was that projects had to be registered under the MRTT inventory of projects compiled in May with the assistance of the EU START programme. Of the 150+ MRTT projects, 101 applied for Just Transition funding. Due to the large number of applications received, projects were split into two separate strands to aid assessment. Strand 1 was a fast-tracked evaluation process for smaller value projects (less than €100,000) so that these projects could be assessed more quickly. Twenty-one projects were assessed under Strand 1 and final offers were made to sixteen organisations. Contracts have been returned and the first round of funding has been distributed.

Several feasibility or research studies were included in the sixteen projects under Strand 1, for example the Green Offaly geopark research study, the Umeras Peatlands Park design study, feasibility studies for Lumcloon Energy, Lanesboro Anaerobic Digestion, and Ballyforan Area Development, and a technology cluster study for Lough Ree. I agree with the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan Steering Committee that a review of the findings of these studies be carried out to see how and when the projects can be progressed, informed by the studies undertaken.

Strand 2 of the project assessment process was for those projects seeking between €100,000 and €1 million, the most that could be allocated to one project. Evaluation teams were formed to assess seventy-seven projects under Strand 2. Evaluation teams consisted of Department staff and staff from other Government Departments, agencies and specialist bodies, and a regional representative on each. Three to four evaluators were on each evaluation team and were selected to bring relevant expertise to ensure an informed evaluation process.

The recommended outcomes from the evaluation teams were presented to an Evaluation Review Group. The Evaluation Review Group was established to provide an additional level

of oversight and assurance to the Minister by reviewing the JTF evaluation process for proposals received. The Evaluation Review Group comprised the DECC Assistant Secretary, the EMRA Director, and myself.

Provisional letters of offer issued to 47 successful Strand 2 applicants and these will now undergo a state aid assessment and verification process. Unsuccessful projects have the opportunity of referral to the MRTT for support in developing to a level where they can reapply for funding under other programmes.

The Just Transition Fund evaluation process was thorough, robust and collaborative, working across Government and specialist expertise, reflecting the very diverse and cross-cutting nature of just transition projects. It balanced a challenging process of evaluating almost 100 detailed applications with managing the new working arrangements brought on by COVID-19 and a sense of urgency in assessing projects and informing groups of the outcomes within a short timeframe so as to be able to provide a credible and effective just transition response.

The expertise of officials in the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and their knowledge of the procedures involved in relation to the management of the Just Transition Fund call for project proposals, subsequent assessment and allocation of funds has been highly effective, despite the requirement to work on over 100 projects submitted under the different headings and the difficulties of liaising remotely with applicants, evaluation teams and Review Group. Their endeavours have been truly remarkable and resulted in a very successful and positive result. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

- **Midlands Retrofitting Programme**

While impacted by the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 regulations, this programme is under way, thanks to the adoption of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) developed by the County and City Managers Association (CCMA) which allowed work to recommence and has enabled the local authorities to continue with the development of the project. The Working Group established to manage the scheme includes representatives from the Retrofit Taskforce (DHLGH and DECC); the counties included in the programme (Offaly, Longford, Westmeath, Laois, Kildare, Roscommon, East Galway and North Tipperary), and Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). Local Authorities have identified the dwellings for retrofit across the eight local authorities. The retrofit works specification provided to the Local Authorities adopts a “fabric first” approach and supports attic and wall insulation, replacement windows where appropriate and the installation of heat pumps. While the cost of these works was initially estimated to be approximately €25,000 per dwelling, now that Local Authorities have gone to the market, early tender prices would suggest that the average cost per dwelling will be higher than originally forecast. With more tender openings due in the coming weeks and months this will give further clarity to the actual cost per dwelling.

All local authorities are continuing to make good progress. By mid-November, almost 300 surveys of dwellings had been completed, with another 300 ongoing, and eight houses were undergoing retrofit works onsite in Offaly. At the time, 47 homes have had tenders assessed and were ready to appoint a contractor to carry out works. Some of these were

expected to be onsite before Christmas. 38 houses were out to tender at the time and expected to be finalised with contractor appointed before year end and onsite early in 2021. And a further 145 houses were due to go to tender before year end with works commencing in Q1, 2021.

An approach has been developed to encourage and facilitate private homeowners, both within and in the vicinity of the social housing developments being targeted, to retrofit their homes. Such private homeowners would benefit from the economies of scale provided by the project and enable a more timely and cost effective retrofit of their properties.

I said in my first Report that retrofitting programmes in the Midlands should include an employment commitment to those employees of both Bord na Móna and ESB who are undertaking the courses currently underway to upskill in this sector of employment. Recent submissions to Local Authorities in the Midlands by the ICTU have raised this issue, i.e. that workers in the Midlands region who have been impacted by the transition process should be beneficiaries of retrofitting programmes, both in terms of employment and training opportunities.

- **NPWS Peatlands Rehabilitation**

The €5 million funding from the Carbon Tax Fund allows for peatland restoration measures to be undertaken on almost 1,900 hectares of raised bogs in the Midlands region in 2020. The programme represents an important component of the Just Transition Plan by providing employment in Midlands communities and aiding biodiversity in the region. Bord Na Móna was appointed by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to undertake and project-manage the implementation of the restoration programme. Significant preparatory works have been undertaken in advance of restoration measures, including ecological and hydrological surveying and mapping, land ownership investigations, putting in place on-site hydrological monitoring equipment, environmental assessments, finalising drainage management and restoration plans and developing construction work packages. While COVID-19 restrictions have severely hampered progress, restoration measures (predominately on State-owned lands) commenced on the first site (Crosswood Bog Special Area of Conservation in Co Westmeath) while works on a second site (Knockacoller Bog SAC in Co. Laois) have commenced recently. A trial of enhanced restoration techniques was also undertaken on a former commercial area in state ownership within an SAC in Co. Kildare. Further work on this site and other designated raised bog sites will be undertaken in 2021.

An Eddy Covariance Flux tower is being installed on a bog in the coming weeks in Co. Offaly to directly measure the carbon, water and heat flows between plant communities and the atmosphere and will provide valuable data in relation to carbon emissions on peatlands.

In tandem with the rehabilitation under this scheme, work is also continuing on a €5.4m project, 'The Living Bog', which is co-funded under the EU LIFE 2014-2020 programme. The Living Bog project aims to restore the favourable conservation condition and increase the area for active raised bog by up to 739 hectares on the 12 raised bog Special Area of Conservation project sites, the majority of which are in the Midlands region.

To date The Living Bog project has completed restoration measures on 10 of the sites with further works recently undertaken on Clara Bog SAC in Co. Offaly and on Sharavogue Bog SAC Co. Offaly/Tipperary. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has sought an extension of the implementation period for this project for another year from the European Commission due mainly to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on the project.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service is also undertaking restoration works on State-owned lands within the protected raised bog network, which directly support the employment of local contractors. Restoration measures on just over 450hectares of State-owned lands have been completed since 2018 on 3 raised bog Special Areas of Conservation and 3 Natural Heritage Areas. 23 other raised bog designated sites have been identified for restoration works over the next number of years under the national protected raised bog restoration programme.

Implementation Plan

The Department of Environment, Climate and Communications is continuing to work on the Implementation Plan, based on the recommendations I made in my first Report, which will be a starting point for the development of the Plan. Key stakeholders will need to be involved in implementing the actions arising from the recommendations in my report. Some of these actions may have already been addressed through existing actions or plans. It is hoped the Implementation Plan will be finalised in the coming months.

EU Territorial Plan

The EU Just Transition Mechanism will ensure that the transition towards a climate-neutral economy happens in a fair way, leaving no one behind. It provides targeted support to help mobilise at least €150 billion over the period 2021-2027 throughout the EU in the most affected regions, to alleviate the socio-economic impact of the transition. A central part of this mechanism is the production of a Territorial Just Transition Plan by each Member State. The Plan must set out the social, economic, and environmental challenges stemming from the phasing out of fossil fuel-related activities, or decarbonising greenhouse gas-intensive processes or products. The plans will also outline the transition process up to 2030, including development, reskilling and environmental rehabilitation needs. The plans will indicate a timeline for key transition steps towards 2030 targets for climate and energy at national level, and description of the expected contribution of the EU Just Transition Fund support to addressing the social, demographic, economic, health and environmental impacts of the transition to a climate-neutral economy by 2050, including the expected contribution in terms of job creation and preservation. The plan must be consistent with Ireland's energy and climate plans. This Territorial Plan will be underpinned by new EU legislation for the EU Just Transition Fund spend in the Member States, including Ireland.

The process of developing the Plan is ongoing. The EU Commission has appointed consultants to help develop the Plan and, I understand, preliminary meetings held. This is positive news, as a clear message from the Commission during the Just Transition Platform Virtual Week in November was for Member States to get moving on the Plans, not least because the clock is ticking on the promises made by Governments in relation to Just Transition. Secondly, there are proposals to increase the ambition of the EU in relation to CO₂ emission cuts by 2030. And finally, some of the funds being made available for Just Transition need to be spent by 2026, not 2027.

It is important, therefore, that progress be made on this Plan. An important point in relation to this is that consultation and engagement with both regional stakeholders and communities must be part of the process. I am happy to hear that the Department has said that there will be ongoing collaboration with the MRTT in this regard. On this point, I support the recommendation of the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan Steering Committee that the MRTT be a key stakeholder for the development of the Territorial Plan for the European Just Transition Fund. Mechanisms to include opportunities for direct consultation with affected communities should also be included, and additional resources made available to assist at regional level (NUTS III). This point was also made recently by the General Secretary of IndustriALL when he said that Social Partners must be involved in the negotiation of EU climate policy and plans – the strong involvement of impacted workers and communities is crucial. Just Transition must benefit all in the region. It is not just a

process of technological and economic change – it affects, people, workers, communities and societies. The phrase, “Nothing for us without us” is regularly used at these events.

Budget 2021 and Funding Decisions

I am pleased that the Government’s commitment to ensuring a Just Transition and protecting the vulnerable as a central part of the actions to fight climate change was reaffirmed in the Budget 2021. The combined €238 million over 2020 and 2021 from the increases in carbon tax rates in those years are to be allocated to a range of programmes, including to DEASP for targeted interventions including just transition, to DAFM for farmers to adopt lower emission forms of agriculture, for existing programmes such as the Just Transition Fund, and to DECC for expanding energy poverty schemes. There is a critical need to continue to support Just Transition – not just in the Midlands, as it is accepted that other areas will be impacted and there is likely to be a widening of the scope of Just Transition in the European Union. But we need to ensure that the most immediately affected areas continue to be supported through the national Just Transition Fund, and through the EU Just Transition Fund which should be available in 2021. The additional €6 million to the Just Transition Fund is welcome - clarity as to how this will be administered would also be welcome. Other focussed funding is needed to ensure investment in the Midlands region to stimulate job creation for this generation and for future generations. The priority must be for well-paid sustainable employment, maintained and created in order to sustain a balanced regional growth in the Midlands. This is dependent on supporting existing enterprises and developing a new profile around green enterprise start-ups and enhancing enterprise supports.

Community initiatives are an essential element in sustaining a vibrant social life in the towns, villages and townlands in each of the counties.

Climate Action Fund

The Climate Action Fund was established on a statutory basis with effect from 1 August 2020. A key objective of the Fund is to provide support for projects and initiatives that contribute to the achievement of Ireland’s climate and energy targets, and for projects and initiatives in regions of the State, and within sectors of the economy, impacted by the transition to a low carbon economy.

The Climate Action Fund is resourced from proceeds from the levy paid to the National Oil Reserves Agency (NORA) in respect of relevant disposals of petroleum products, after the funding requirements of NORA have been met. In the region of €500 million is expected to accrue to the Climate Action Fund to 2027. This will ensure that substantial funding is available to progress a series of funding calls.

The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications is currently developing proposals to provide a second round of support from the Climate Action Fund which will be launched shortly. Further information, including details on the type of projects that may be supported, who may apply for this support and the application process, will be published on the Department’s website when this call is launched.

Further Potential Funding Opportunities

The following funding opportunities are available nationally in 2021 from specific grant programmes in Government Departments. The Consortia established under the various Working Groups of the MRTT should explore the optimal use of these schemes for adaptation in the Midlands and to supplement existing and future project potential.

- Up to €30 million for renewed calls under the Regional Enterprise Development Fund and €5 million for the Enterprise Centres Fund.
- (DETE)
- €3m for network of Digital Hubs to help SMEs modernise and stay connected. (DETE)
- €55m business support scheme for tourism enterprises. (DTCAGSM)
- €5m increased training as well as supports for digitalisation. (DTCAGSM)
- Funding for the RRDF programme area will be €55 million in 2021. (DRCD)
- Town and Village Renewal will be €20 million in 2021. The €5 million increase in Town and Village Renewal will provide for investment in digital hubs and broadband connection points. (DRCD)
- €10m for the IDA to develop advanced factories and industrial estates for companies seeking to invest in Ireland especially outside of Dublin. (DETE)

In relation to support for Digital Hubs, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment has advised that, as part of the planned multi-billion Digital Europe Programme, the European Commission and EU Member States will establish and fund a network of European Digital Innovation Hubs. These will support digital transformation in SMEs and public sector organisations by encouraging the adoption of the latest advances in cybersecurity, Artificial Intelligence and High-Performance Computing. The aim of the pan-European Hub network is to provide businesses and the public sector with advice, funding, expertise and training to benefit from digital opportunities in ‘one-stop-shop’ facilities.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment has also advised that The IDA’s property budget for 2021, which includes an additional €10m over 2020 funding for the Regional Property Programme referred to above, will continue to fund the first and second phases of the IDA Regional Property Programme. This will help ensure that property solutions are in place for overseas companies considering investing or expanding outside of Dublin, thereby helping to attract more overseas firms to all regions outside of Dublin in Ireland.

Greenways

In my previous reports I noted the range of funds and schemes targeted at tourism and heritage, including in the Midlands. These schemes encourage people to visit the Midlands region and, in turn, support local businesses and the local economy. In this regard, I am particularly pleased to note the recent announcement by Minister Ryan and Hildegard Naughton, T.D., Minister of State, on funding to be provided for a range of Greenways, which is one example of the support being provided for tourism and heritage.

€63.5 million is being allocated to Greenways for 2021 across the country. The largest allocation of this announcement, €8.1 million, is to the construction of a Greenway bridge across the River Shannon in Athlone as part of the Galway to Dublin Greenway. This

investment will support even greater numbers enjoying our outdoors by cycling and walking for school, work and leisure.

In County Offaly the Grand Canal Greenway is being extended from Edenderry to Daingean, which will link to Lough Boora Discovery Park. The Longford Canal will be refurbished with improved infrastructure being provided along this cycleway. And the canal from Aylmer Bridge to Sallins in Kildare and on to Clonkeen will also be upgraded.

In addition, the Mid Shannon Greenway project, the Lough Ree Greenway, and the Shannon Monastic Greenway will all receive funding. More than €6 million is being invested in these projects.

There is also a commitment to continue building on this level of investment over the coming years. This is welcome progress and will complement in a significant way the heritage, staycation and green themed leisure and heritage offerings in the region.

Future of ESB Plants

I met with representatives of ESB in relation to the future of the peat-fired power plants in Lanesboro and Shannonbridge. In my previous reports I noted that, due to requirements under the planning approvals, both plants need to be removed and the sites returned to brownfield sites within two years of cessation. I noted that these plants were in the ownership of the ESB, and I recommended that, before the decommissioning process begins, a study of the future potential of these plants and sites for the establishment of a dedicated "Energy Hub" in the Midlands should be carried out. My recent meeting with ESB revealed a slightly more complicated picture in that while ESB owns both plants, it does not own the entire sites. Parts of both sites are owned by different organisations. But progress is being made on the potential future uses of both sites. For example, EirGrid is developing a substation on the Lough Ree site to reinforce the grid in the area and support renewables on the grid networks. There is also an existing battery storage facility, developed by Lumcloon Energy, on the West Offaly site. ESB has now commissioned a study into the further development of the sites. In addition, a Working Group has been established, with representatives from ESB, the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, the Office of the Just Transition Commissioner, and Longford and Offaly County Councils, to undertake a review of the West Offaly and Lough Ree power station sites and infrastructure and to assess appropriateness for a Renewable Energy Hub.

One issue that perhaps has not been mentioned too often in relation to the plants is the security of supply aspect. The Public Service Obligation supporting the peat-fired plants over the last 15-20 years was for security of supply. The plants offered baseload electricity generated using indigenous solid fuel – the only such plants on the grid for most of that period. With Moneypoint ceasing to generate with coal in 2025, there is a view that security of supply might be affected with a system based primarily on intermittent renewables and backed up by natural gas, mostly imported from the UK once Corrib depletes. I know security of supply is well outside my remit, and I am aware that the Department is carrying out a review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems, including the dependence on natural gas for electricity security of supply, and focussing on the period to 2030 in the context of ensuring a sustainable pathway to 2050. Perhaps as

part of that review the view of the relevant bodies on the benefits, including system services, of having non-intermittent electricity generation in these Midlands locations might be worthwhile.

Bord na Móna Business Progress

In my first Report I outlined steps needed to ensure a just transition for the employees in Bord na Móna affected by the cessation of peat harvesting. These included reskilling and retraining so that employees could be transferred to peatland rehabilitation, which could save up to 350 jobs. I also suggested the possibility of Edenderry being fuelled solely with biomass, which would save a further 160 jobs and also support up to 60 biomass suppliers. In addition, Bord na Móna's 'Brown to Green' strategy had the potential to create additional jobs in renewable energy, aquaculture, herbs, birch water and resource recovery. Furthermore, there was potential in tourism, heritage and education through the development of parks such as Boora for both leisure and education in biodiversity and climate action.

I am glad to see Bord na Móna continuing to develop as a company providing climate solutions. The company is developing up to 1,000MW of renewable electricity generation on top of its existing 660MW; expanding its resource recovery business, which now includes tyre reprocessing, farm plastics recycling, materials recovery, and other innovative end of waste solutions; working on bog rehabilitation through the Enhanced Peatlands Rehabilitation Scheme; and other businesses mentioned above including herbs, birch water and hydroponics.

I also note the recent appointment by Bord na Móna of a Community Liaison Officer for the Bog Rehabilitation Programme, which is very welcome.

The key to Just Transition is the provision of new and sustainable jobs so that not only those immediately affected by the move to a more environmentally sustainable and climate friendly future are catered for in terms of jobs, but the generations to follow also have established local economies where they can live and work. Bord na Móna's move to becoming a provider of climate solutions must also provide good quality jobs to replace those lost. This would fulfil the first principle of Just Transition, and also Bord na Móna's mandate as a major employer in the Midlands – the provision of jobs.

Bord na Móna Enhanced Peatlands Rehabilitation

The Government is supporting enhanced rehabilitation of peatlands, which will help deliver on climate action and biodiversity objectives, with funding from the Climate Action Fund. On 24 November, the Cabinet approved funding of €108 million for Bord na Móna's large-scale peatlands restoration project. as part of Bord na Móna "Brown to Green" strategy. The Scheme being developed will employ up to 350 Bord na Móna employees over the 4-5 year programme. The redeployment of existing staff, from peat extraction to the enhanced decommissioning and rehabilitation, aligns with the principles of a Just Transition.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is the scheme regulator. The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications has an oversight role in relation to the scheme.

Bord na Móna is committed to acting in an environmentally responsible manner in rehabilitating and decommissioning these bogs and will strive to ensure that the decommissioning and rehabilitation works will have minimal impacts on local landowners and communities and there will be full engagement with all stakeholders throughout this process.

The general objective of peatland rehabilitation is to ensure environmental stabilisation of the former industrial peat production areas. Enhanced rehabilitation focuses on optimising suitable hydrological conditions (stable water levels close to the surface) by blocking production field drains, re-profiling peat fields, building bunds, and other wetland measures. This will create optimum peatland conditions that will be naturally colonised by plants and animals and will allow compatible peatland habitats to redevelop. It will also slow water movement across these bogs and trap silt.

These improvements will prioritise the development of peat-forming habitats, where possible. This will optimise climate action benefits (reducing carbon emissions significantly) by re-wetting the residual peat to keep carbon in the ground and accelerate the trajectory towards naturally functioning peatland ecosystems via the re-establishment of embryonic Sphagnum-rich bog, a key species that sequesters carbon. The project will protect the storage of 100 million tonnes of carbon, prevent the emission of another 3.2 million tonnes of carbon out to 2050, and enhance biodiversity while contributing to Ireland's target of being carbon-neutral by 2050.

Stabilising and rehabilitating peatlands creates potential opportunities for new sustainable businesses, both environmentally and commercially, aligned to national climate and energy policy, including renewable energy generation and storage projects. This is in line with Bord na Móna's Brown to Green strategy and its transition to a climate solutions company.

Agreement with Bord na Móna Employees

A Just Transition Agreement has been reached between Bord na Móna and its Group of Unions in relation to the transfer arrangements in terms of conditions for employees transitioning from peat extraction activities to the Enhanced Peatland Rehabilitation Services (EPRS). A framework has been established which clarifies the principle that forms the basis for the assignment of employees to alternative roles, namely seniority, taking into account appropriate skillsets, competencies, certification and qualifications as appropriate to undertake the task in question. Following extensive engagement, the JIRC issued a binding decision in relation to the terms and conditions for employees transitioning to EPRS. This decision provides for the payment of a temporary individual allowance while a new performance related pay system is developed and implemented that will provide employees with an equivalent earnings opportunity based on rehabilitation work completed.

The JIRC also recommended that a 2% pay increase, due under the Just Transition Agreement from April 1st 2020, should apply from November 1st, 2020, with the issue of retrospection to be addressed by the parties in early 2021.

I understand that existing arrangements for annual hours payments, calculation of pension, sick pay, shift premium annual leave are to continue as previously agreed.

Bord na Móna is also closing its redundancy scheme and will also be creating additional technical roles to complement existing expertise in the company.

A large majority of the 350 peatland restoration roles announced this week (24th November) will be filled by workers transferring from peat harvesting and related peatland activities. The Unions involved, while welcoming the recent developments, have indicated that the position of seasonal workers will require further clarification.

The JIRC decisions have provided clarity for employees on their future earnings opportunity while also providing a just transition for those employees as they transition from peat extraction activities to focus on peatland rehabilitation and restoration activities. In conjunction I understand Bord na Móna continues to cooperate with Solas, Skillsnets and the Education & Training Boards (ETBs) in providing training to employees to ensure they have the required skillset to transition from peat extraction activities to EPRS.

Rhode Business Park

A great example of innovation and leadership in the Midlands is the initiative by Offaly County Council in relation to Rhode Business Park. The Council, in association with North Offaly Development Fund, commissioned a high-level study on the benefits of developing a Green Energy Park at the Rhode Business Park. This report has been completed and is ready to launch.

The Park is situated on the site of the old ESB power station and is ideally located to play a pivotal role in locally integrating renewable energy with energy storage and transmission systems. It is an accessible site, close to Dublin, close to the M4/M6 motorway, served by the 110kV Derryiron ESB substation connecting to three 110kV transmission network lines to Maynooth, Kinnegad and Thornberry, and reasonably close to the existing gas network. It is also close to fibre optic networks and surrounded by strategic landbanks. The potential development represents an opportunity for Offaly to remain a regionally strategic source of energy, lead the way in lower carbon and renewable energy generation and demonstrate the effectiveness of co-location of energy users and producers. Potential opportunities include an energy hub, an eco-industrial park and a national centre for learning about energy transition. The synergies between these areas make this an attractive proposition.

It is worth having further engagement on this initiative to see what potential it has, including the possibility or feasibility of strategic partnerships. The Park could have potential for innovation in relation to new green energy technologies and used for demonstration, measuring, monitoring and exploring performance. There are several examples of such parks being successful in Europe.

Midlands Geology (GSI)

In my second Report I referred to Action No.133 in the Climate Action Plan, which is to *“evaluate natural resources concealed by peat cover in the Midland counties, and outline the potential for communities and industry to utilise available sand and gravel deposits, minerals, groundwater and deeper geothermal energy resources as part of a Just Transition for these areas”*. The Geological Survey Ireland (GSI) is progressing this action. Its recent paper on managing this action proposes a multi-stage, multi-annual project. The initial step

is to carry out a full geological evaluation, consisting of both desk study and field work, to develop a comprehensive proposal. The evaluation would include a geothermal assessment; groundwater study, which will contribute to decisions on future use of the peatlands; presence and availability of aggregates (such as sand and gravel for use in construction) and minerals (such as zinc, possibly for use in batteries and energy storage); the development of an Education Hub, including training in heavy machinery and geological drilling; and research. All of these could lead to new business opportunities and jobs in the Region.

I have had a series of Zoom Meetings with the senior management of GSI around the potential of this survey proposal and have been impressed with the opportunities offered.

This project should be progressed as there are clear links to Just Transition in the context of future job potential, in addition to the many climate and environmental benefits from geothermal development and groundwater management. Bord Na Móna has indicated that it would be prepared to cooperate fully with any proposal made by the GSI in relation to geological evaluation.

The project funded under Strand 1 of the Just Transition Fund – A Geopark & Biosphere Research Study by Green Offaly – will research attaining Geopark and Biosphere Reserve status for suitable areas in County Offaly. I understand this project promoters will work with GSI on this project. This would be a good contribution to the overall GSI multi-stage project.

Engagement with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland

I had a very informative meeting with the Chief Executive, William Walsh, on 27th October. The meeting explored various options by which the SEAI could support mutually agreed Just Transition objectives, including the funding available from SEAI for community-based housing retrofitting schemes, and potential funding availability for relevant applied research in the region.

It was agreed to explore the latter option between the SEAI and the MRTT Working Group on Education, Research & Training. This could be achieved/addressed through the SEAI's National Energy Research, Development & Demonstration Funding Programme.

This funding programme will be announced in early 2021. It is important that the 3rd Level Institutions operating under the aegis of the Working Group develop a consortium to apply for relevant funding projects that would be relevant to the material prospects of the Midlands.

Presentation to the EEAC 28th Annual Conference

I was invited also to make a presentation to the EEAC Conference on 28th October, hosted by NESC and titled, *"Delivering a Just Transition for All"*, as part of a wide ranging and extremely informative conference on the research, policies, international decisions and commitments on global climate strategy.

It provided me the opportunity to present observations on the applied aspects of a Just Transition engagement in a region where two State commercial entities with high levels of

direct employment, not to mention the knock-on effects on suppliers and linked businesses in the area, had to respond to planning decisions that resulted in the almost immediate cessation of a major part of their existing commercial activities in relation to the use of peat for electricity generation.

Of key consideration is the importance of local/regional representative structures upon which key stakeholder engagement could be undertaken, issues addressed, and activities/actions agreed upon that would have regional and central Government support.

Engagement with the Climate Change Advisory Council

At the invitation of Professor John FitzGerald, I had the opportunity to engage with the members of the Climate Change Advisory Council on 17th September. The Climate Change Advisory Council is an independent advisory body tasked with reviewing national climate policy, progress on the achievement of the national transition objective and progress towards international targets in a cost-effective manner. The Council conducts an annual review of progress made over the previous year in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and furthering the transition to a low-carbon, climate-resilient and sustainable economy and society by 2050.

One of the key recommendations made by the Advisory Council in its 2020 Annual Review, submitted to the Minister in September, was on Just Transition. The Council stated that all climate action policies must be consistent with a Just Transition and maximise economic and social opportunities. The Council added that the costs of decarbonisation must be fairly distributed across the population, ensuring that those on lower incomes are not disadvantaged. Continual public participation is essential for developing Just Transition policies. A more coherent and focused approach to public participation is needed. The Advisory Council also recommended, as I have in my Reports, that engagement with stakeholders and appropriate communication are important to build ownership and support for climate action.

At the meeting with the Advisory Council, I outlined my work as the Just Transition Commissioner, my terms of reference and the activation in the Region in relation to these terms. I outlined also my engagement with the key stakeholders, the consultation process and the key outcomes and recommendations in my Reports. Details of the Government funding were queried by members of the Council, specifically around existing and future Government policies and plans for a wider response to Just Transition. I placed special emphasis on the essential and vital necessity of local consultation, the role of key stakeholders and the involvement of local authorities and local and national political representatives, and the role in the MRTT.

A general discussion and question and answer session took place on the European dimension to the Just Transition process, the potential for future funding from the EU under its Climate Change Strategy and the preparation of the Irish Territorial Plan.

The Working Paper, *“Designing and Implementing Policy for a Just Transition”*, by Sabrina Dekker for the Advisory Council, published in June 2020 in advance of the Annual Review, is a very important paper for Just Transition. The Paper refers to the challenge of a just

transition, including the impacts of the transition on workers, communities and individuals dependent on carbon-based industries and land-use intensive sectors, saying that a just transition calls for *“an in-depth understanding of the impacts ... of policy actions and measures”* and *“an implementation process that is inclusive and fair”*. The Paper argues that ongoing public participation, throughout the whole policy making process, is central to developing policies for a just transition. It says that policies should be designed with a systems approach with collaboration between all stakeholders, but most importantly between policy makers, and individuals and communities, to fully understand the implications of policies on livelihoods.

The Paper concludes with the point that *“responding to climate change is not about short-term quick fixes – it is a life-long process. As such, sustaining the goodwill of citizens to actively participate in taking action for our collective future will require that the transformation is just”*.

Recommendations and Future Actions

- **Introduction**

The first year of the Just Transition process and experience has convinced me of the imperative of regional/local and central Government engagement and delivery being closely aligned. Consultation, engagement, collaboration, knowledge and transparency must be the key principles of what we do collectively under the banner of “Just Transition”.

The close co-operation between the Local Authorities and their agencies, the MRTT, National Government Development Authorities, Central Government Departments and the Office of the Just Transition Commissioner have progressed on a seamless basis and towards a common objective...a Just Transition and the actions necessary towards achieving mutual objectives. This requires a multifaceted approach across local, regional and national agencies and representative social partners.

In this regard I have had a very positive working relationship with the key stakeholders at local and at national level. [The MRTT, DECC, the Local Authorities, Dept of An Taoiseach, Inter Departmental Working Group on Climate Change, NESC, EU START Programme, Bord na Móna, ESB, ICTU, Office of the Midland Regional Enterprise Plan, IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, the Regional Assemblies, National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), SEAI, GSI, Ibec, Chambers of Commerce, the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), Regional Skills Forum, Local Development Companies, East & Midlands Climate Action Regional Office, Third Level sector, and Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) in the Midlands Region.]

I have received every support from both Ministers over this period—Mr Richard Bruton, TD, and Mr Eamon Ryan, TD – to whom respectively I have now submitted three separate Progress Reports.

The renewed emphasis on the necessity of taking radical action and solutions towards firm and legally defined policies on climate change measures has now a high degree of public acceptance and is a major step forward in meeting our European and Global commitments.

The draft Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2020 sets the ambitious target of a 7% average yearly reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions over the next decade in order to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. The Bill commits also to a wide range of targets and particularly requires all Local Authorities to prepare individual Climate Action Plans, which will include both mitigation and adaptation measures.

This degree of acknowledgement outlined above must also be tempered alongside the legitimate expressions of those whose livelihoods will be impacted forever by policies, actions, legal decisions and Government budgetary measures on retrofitting, on energy generation, on water usage, climate change measures, waste disposal, transport, our use of wind and solar energy, forestry, farming and horticulture, and wider land use. These competing interests are not always easily reconciled and too often the parties involved, for whatever legitimate reason or motivation, engage in costly and prolonged litigation. The

legacy of this process and their respective outcomes can leave decades of bitterness and shattered community relations.

On a more positive note, additional funding for a number of projects involving greenways, cycleways, walkways and natural river and canal endeavours will increase the tourism and staycation options for Irish visitors, and attract more international visitors as soon as travel gets back to some normality. Our historical heritage projects are now receiving an increase in funding, which will help counter the impact of the austerity years. Rural and urban regeneration, along with town and village programmes, are giving new life to historical towns and communities across the region. The Midlands Network of Co-working Facilities that already exist or are to be funded by the Just Transition Fund will add to the attractiveness of the region as a location for remote working opportunities as well as vibrant community facilities, and/or second site locations, resulting in increased local spend.

Vibrant communities, effective local authorities, an active public and private enterprise sector and high level educational and training institutions are key and fundamental elements in creating and sustaining a successful social and enterprise region. Despite the imminent loss of the Bord na Móna peat harvesting and ESB's peat-fired electricity generation in the Midlands, substantial opportunities exist to replace these losses with more environmental, sustainable employment opportunities, as I have outlined in this and previous reports.

Already our "Whole of Midlands" strategy approach and its extension to areas of additional contiguous counties has shown positive results in terms of Just Transition project funding, new funds for town and rural regeneration, renewable energy technologies, new green enterprises, remote working hubs, community supports, greenways, biodiversity, cycleways and heritage developments. These previously were long stalled development and investment projects.

The restructured MRTT and its four subcommittees, representative of personnel in all of the counties and their agencies, are working assiduously on ambitious work programmes, which will bear fruit in 2021 and beyond.

In fact, being first into the field of a just transition process, the Midlands will have gained valuable experience, knowledge and planning, which will be of invaluable assistance in the preparation of the county Climate Action Plans and the Territorial Plan.

- **Recommendations**

Following on from the recommendations I made in my previous reports, I now propose the following actions:-

1. *Role of the Just Transition Commissioner*

I will consider and continue to assess what effective role and support I can provide as Just Transition Commissioner for big “transformative project” ideas. I am aware that the lead organisations in this area are IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland, supported by the relevant Departments. But I may be able to add value in an advisory or ‘link’ capacity to the promoters of ideas or fledgling projects.

I look forward to continued engagement and interaction with the Department’s Just Transition team over the coming months in order to build on the Just Transition process, and the commitments involved.

I will also continue to consider if there is further potential in the Just Transition process for actions and measures that would support the ongoing implementation of policies under Ireland’s zero-emission strategy, including the move to alternative energy sources and existing and future land usage.

2. *MRTT and Working Groups*

I will continue with regular updates to the reconstituted MRTT, and the Chairs of the Working Groups will also update on progress and proposed actions from each Group for implementation in the Region, including the necessary support from Local Authorities and Central Government for the proposed action plans and projects involved.

In relation to the members of the MRTT Steering Group, an invitation should be extended to the EU Committee of the Regions members from the wider Midlands to attend the Steering Group meetings, in the same way as Oireachtas members and the Regional Assemblies do.

In this context I reiterate my recommendation in my first Report that two dedicated staff be appointed to the MRTT to assist in the coordination and implementation of the recommendations in the Report. These additional staff members would also support the running of the reconstituted MRTT and its Working Groups. This work will include managing the projects that were unsuccessful in the Just Transition Fund call for proposals, and the other projects under the MRTT call that did not go forward to the Just Transition Fund. The staff sought should be sanctioned and a funding mechanism found by agreement between the funding Departments and the Local Authorities.

3. *Liaison with Key Departments*

The engagement with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and the Interdepartmental Group on Just Transition under the aegis of the Department of An Taoiseach has been of major assistance in understanding current Government policy that relates to the Midlands and obtaining information on available funding mechanisms for future national and European funds.

Regular meetings with the Interdepartmental Group on Just Transition will also be welcome within prevailing COVID-19 guidelines.

4. *Just Transition Fund*

While I understand fully that the focus of the Department must be on making sure the funds are appropriately and transparently accounted for, and a process is in place to maintain oversight of the grants awarded in this regard, the focus in the Midlands is to ensure the projects are delivered. The MRTT Working Groups will support the development and delivery of Just Transition Fund projects at regional level. The MRTT and its Working Groups are also supporting projects on the MRTT inventory that did not apply for Just Transition Fund support, and those that did but were unsuccessful.

I referred above to the number of feasibility or research studies that were included in the sixteen projects under Strand 1. A review of the findings of these studies should be carried out and the projects progressed where possible and feasible, as suggested by the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan Steering Committee. Perhaps the MRTT could take the initial role here too – this is something for 2022, when the feasibility studies will be completed and the findings published. I must reiterate, however, that Government Departments need to provide support in whatever way feasible and necessary to the Local Authorities and the MRTT so that it can manage this new workload.

I would also like to discuss the Just Transition Fund structure and process with the Department to see if it can be improved to help ensure delivery of projects supported.

5. *Implementation Plan*

The Department continues to develop the Implementation Plan based on the recommendations of my first Report. This will be made up of a programme of timebound actions from the relevant Departments for implementation by the Departments and their agencies. This Plan is one of a number of issues being progressed by the Department, which includes commitments in the Programme for Government, the Climate Change Bill, management of the Just Transition Fund project process, and development of the national Territorial Plan in the context of the European Union Just Transition Fund.

It is expected that the Implementation Plan will be completed in time to be a considerable part of the plans, actions and activities of the Office of the Just Transition Commissioner and the MRTT in 2021. It will be important that this Implementation Plan aligns with national, regional and local plans and strategies in relation to climate action, as well as other relevant plans including the refreshed Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan, so that resources are utilised for optimum benefit.

It should be noted that a number of the recommendations in my first Report are already progressing very satisfactorily and with funding being devoted for specific regional and county projects, including support from central Exchequer for those counties severely affected by the loss of rates as a result of the cessation of certain Bord na Móna and ESB commercial activities.

I note in particular the confirmation from Mr. Peter Burke, TD, Minister of State with responsibility for Local Government and Planning, on 31 October, that Government funding of €3.3million would be provided to Offaly County Council and €1.4million would be provided to Longford County Council in 2021. This funding is being provided in recognition of the serious impact that the closure of West Offaly (Shannonbridge) and Lough Ree (Lanesboro) power plants will have on the commercial rates income for Offaly and Longford respectively.

6. Working Hubs

My previous two Reports pointed out that providing jobs is critical to a just transition. An element of this is the provision of appropriate facilities in the Midlands for remote working, which was part of my recommendations in my first Report. As indicated above, the recommendations of the MREP Steering Committee in relation to the Midlands Network of Remote Working Facilities (MNCF), including the appointment of a Regional Business Development Manager, who will advance the development of the facilities throughout the region, should be progressed. The latter post is the subject of a provisional offer of funding under the Just Transition Fund Strand 2.

The Business Development Manager will also seek to build strategic partnerships with State bodies to develop facilities using suitable vacant properties within the urban footprints of principal towns throughout the region. This should be supported across Departments.

The Department of Rural & Community Development is undertaking a national audit of remote working facilities, and the MNCF is engaging with the Department on this basis. In addition, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment has developed and published a new strategy on remote working. This Strategy aims to build on the increased interest in remote working since its sudden mass emergency introduction in 2020. The objective is to ensure that remote working is a permanent feature in the Irish workplace in a way that maximises economic, social and environmental benefits. The Remote Work Strategy is built on three fundamental pillars:-

1. Create a conducive environment
2. Develop remote work infrastructure
3. Build a remote work policy.

Progress on developing working hubs is essential. This is reflected in the provisional offers made to eleven projects under Strand 2 of the Just Transition Fund.

The publication of the new strategy on remote working can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/51f84-making-remote-work-national-remote-work-strategy/>

7. Just Transition Funding for 2021 and Beyond

The Budget for 2021 allocates a further €6m for the Just Transition in the Midlands. Other budgetary expenditures have applicability to the Midlands and its social,

economic and leisure infrastructure. Research funds have also been allocated to projects relating to the Region from other Government Departments.

It is important that funding decisions continue to work together to ensure the best outcomes and to ensure there is no duplication of funds for these important analytic research projects.

In relation to Just Transition funding, additional funding should be considered for a second call for proposals, informed by a review of the criteria/process of the first call and an assessment of funding availability gaps, with the design of a potential second call based on lessons learned. Management of the fund by the MRTT should also be considered, as per my recommendation in my first Progress Report. This should include appropriate arrangements or structures for oversight of project delivery. This could be considered in conjunction with the recommendation above relating to additional staff for the MRTT. In relation to a mechanism to fund these additional staff members, it is not unusual, in fact it is quite normal, for funds to have an administration cost taken from the fund. This is the case, I believe, in relation to the Retrofitting scheme. An administration cost from the Just Transition Fund should be considered.

The conversation needs to continue at MRTT Steering Group level, including its constituent Working Groups, to identify and implement priority actions for the ongoing economic and social development of the Midlands. This must be in the context of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies, which provide the strategic framework to anchor development plans at local and regional level. This in turn will inform the development of future iterations of Regional Enterprise Plans, ensuring we have a clear and coherent regional strategy to develop the natural, human and enterprise strengths, to which I have referred in my previous Reports.

8. Further Strategic Partnerships

The State, through Bord na Móna, NPWS of the Department of Housing Local Government and Heritage, ESB and Waterways Ireland, has ownership of, or management responsibility for, an extensive network of interlocking land /water resources. Bord na Móna is engaged in the utilisation of its resources, both in buildings and peatlands, in the rehabilitation of the peatlands, and in current and new and exciting green enterprises. The ESB, as recommended, is conducting a study on the future use of the existing power plants and facilities in Shannonbridge and Lanesboro, the outcome of which will emerge early in 2021. The NPWS and Waterways Ireland are in receipt of considerable grant aid around improving the touristic use of our canals, the River Shannon and bio-diversity / rehabilitation of our wetlands and peatlands.

Other strategic partnerships that would contribute to shared goals of a just transition in the Midlands and the move to a zero emissions environment should be considered. An example of this is the potential development of an Energy Park at Rhode Business Park, a proposal that has received a provisional offer of funding under Strand 2 of the Just Transition Fund. Support for such developments could include the provision of new or upgrading of existing park infrastructure to facilitate such developments by Local Authorities, the IDA and Enterprise Ireland, continuing to improve utilities connectivity,

and supporting appropriate strategic partnerships. There may be potential for other such parks in other locations in the Midlands. Projects such as this can help the Midlands region remain a significant part of the energy sector in Ireland, and also develop as a key player in Ireland's energy transition. This and other such projects have the potential and the capacity to create jobs while significantly contributing to the fight against climate change. Such developments could be considered for inclusion in regional and local development plans.

9. *Geological Survey of the Midlands*

I referred above to the Climate Action Plan and the action relating to evaluation of natural resources concealed by peat cover in the Midlands. The proposed survey of the region should commence as quickly as possible. Not only would this identify mineral resources that could contribute to the climate agenda, but it could also provide jobs to replace those lost through the cessation of peat harvesting. As I mentioned above, there are clear links to Just Transition in the context of future job potential. Engagement between the GSI and Bord na Móna in relation to this should be expanded.

10. *Security of Supply*

As mentioned above, the reason for the PSO supporting the peat-fired plants in the Midlands was security of electricity supply. While I am aware that EirGrid presents a generation adequacy report annually, I think it would be worthwhile understanding what benefits, if any, there are for having electricity generation and other systems services facilities located in the Midlands, particularly in relation to managing the high level of intermittent renewables on the system. The review of security of energy supply being carried out by the Department, including the dependence on natural gas for electricity security of supply, should include this point.

I am aware that Bord na Móna is pursuing the possibility of Edenderry Power converting fully to biomass, which could provide baseload renewable electricity to support intermittent wind and solar. As I mentioned in my earlier Reports, if this were possible, it could also retain jobs in the plant itself, and potentially other jobs in biomass production and transportation. The market that would be created for indigenous biomass could benefit the supply chain for biomass in the heating sector. I am aware, however, that conversion to 100% biomass would probably require continued financial support in the form of an expanded PSO, and the plant would require planning permission and other approvals to continue beyond 2023.

11. *SEAI*

Further discussions should be had between the MRTT and SEAI on how its research budget can support research and development in the Midlands, including, for example, at the Rhode site or similar projects. Consideration should be given to a research project relating to Just Transition and the emerging new energy mix, e.g. batteries, hydrogen, CCS, etc.

12. *Engagement with Stakeholders on Territorial Plan*

It is crucial that stakeholders are consulted on development of the Territorial Plan. As mentioned earlier, I agree with the recommendation of the Midlands Regional

Enterprise Plan Steering Committee that the MRTT be a key stakeholder for the development of the Territorial Plan for the European Just Transition Fund. Communities and other Midlands stakeholders should also be consulted.

Conclusion

By any current or historical standard, 2020 will be recorded as an exceptional and transformative year in human history a world turned upside down.

Despite the lockdowns, travel restrictions, challenges to normal business and life activities, I believe we have made substantive progress on our collective journey on the Just Transition process in the Midlands.

The peat/energy decisions of last November and in recent times regarding the cessation of peat harvesting have led to a reinvigoration of the policies, structures, funding and engagement in the Midlands. This has involved Central Government, Local Authorities, State Enterprises and Agencies, local communities and representative groups, including Unions and Employer Bodies.

The massive investment in peatland rehabilitation (€108m and €18m from Bord na Móna) announced in November by Minister Ryan was an extraordinary vote of confidence in the Midlands. The net effect of this investment will contribute towards securing approximately 350 jobs, and 100 million tonnes of carbon storage across 33,000 hectares of peatlands.

New initiatives through the Just Transition Fund have released the hidden potential in the region around its natural assets and human resource talents. The projects being funded throughout the Midlands provide for a wide array of exciting initiatives that will have both immediate and medium to long term impacts. Other funding programmes around greenways, cycleways, canal usage and heritage trails will add enormously to the international tourist and staycation attractions of the region.

The development of new renewable energy facilities, food and bio-diversity enterprises, the peatland rehabilitation and retrofitting of homes will create new and exciting employment projects. They will also significantly contribute to our climate change commitments and actions with ongoing national savings and avoidance of carbon penalties.

The new structures we have established, and built upon earlier transition planning, will continue to ensure regional representation through the MRTT and its subcommittees, and as outlined already in this Report. The involvement of Local Authorities and their agencies are central to progress and development in the region. The Working Groups are building on earlier tasks/programmes and have brought together key stakeholders in maximising regional resources around practical and ambitious targets. Each of the Groups have already met on three occasions since their establishment in late summer.

The role of the Just Transition Commissioner provides an important conduit for interaction between bodies such as the MRTT and the Minister, his Department and the Interdepartmental Committee on Just Transition. This role facilitates a high-level and sometimes confidential conversation with key stakeholders at a national level whose policies and programmes have an impact in the Midlands.

I believe the establishment of the post of Just Transition Commissioner has been an important decision by the then Minister, Richard Bruton, TD, and the decision of the current

Minister, Eamon Ryan, to continue its role and function has helped considerably in ensuring our ambitions can be realised.

The Commissioner is just one person. I could not have undertaken this task without the assistance, help and guidance of Michael Goodwin, Sarah Morgan and Gerry Finn at national and regional level.

The Department and its officials did trojan work in processing the projects under the Just Transition Fund and keeping us on the straight and narrow path of responsibility for taxpayers' money, so again my thanks for this steady hand when I felt we should move at lightning speed!

2021 beckons and I look forward to continuing our work together and developing further exciting opportunities for the Midlands. I will continue the process of regular reports to the Minister outlining progress and actions taken to date.

END

Annex 1 - A Year in Just Transition – Timeline

November 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appointment of Just transition Commissioner
December 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • START site visit to Midlands Region
January 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just Transition Team meeting with START Team in Brussels • Commissioner meeting with CEO of Offaly Co Council in Tullamore • Commissioner visits Bord na Móna operations in Lough Boora and Mountdillon
February 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dept of An Taoiseach Inter-Departmental Group on Just Transition meeting • Meeting with LEOs, IDA and Enterprise Ireland in Tullamore • Midlands Regional Transition Team meeting • Site visits to West Offaly Power and Lough Ree Power
March 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AILG Conference in Longford • NESC Report on Addressing Employment Vulnerability as Part of a Just Transition in Ireland published • COVID restrictions introduced, curtailing face-to-face stakeholder engagement
April 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teleconference with START Team • Submission of 1st Progress Report to Minister
May 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commencement of MRTT START Engagement Process for project pipeline • Publication of 1st Progress Report
June 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MRTT START engagement process closes (154 projects registered) • Midlands Regional Transition Team meeting • Call for Just Transition Fund opens • EU Platform for Coal Regions in transition virtual meetings
July 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call for Just transition Fund closes (101 proposals submitted) • Visit to Bord na Móna Derrygreenagh and Milltownpass herb growing facilities
August 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dept of An Taoiseach Inter-Departmental Group on Just Transition meeting
September 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2nd Progress Report finalised and submitted to Minister • MRTT Steering Committee Meeting • JTF Strand 1 Announcements (Projects less than €100,000)
October 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MRTT Working Groups convened • MRTT Steering Committee Meeting • Engagement with ESB on future of power plants • EEAC Conference hosted by NESC • Announcement on Rates for Offaly and Longford Co Councils
November 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2nd Progress Report published • MRTT Working Group meetings
December 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MRTT Steering group meetings • MRTT Working Group meetings • 3rd Progress report submitted to Minister

Annex 2 - Press Releases

Funding for Offaly and Longford Co Councils in Recognition of Rates Loss

From [Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage](#)

Published on 31 October 2020

Mr. Peter Burke TD, Minister of State with responsibility for Local Government and Planning, today confirmed that government funding of €3.3 million will be provided to Offaly County Council in 2021 and an amount of €1.4 million will also be provided to Longford County Council in 2021.

This funding is being provided to the two local authorities in the context of the impending closure of power plants in both counties at the end of 2020. The package of funding recognises the serious impact that these closures will have on the commercial rates income for the authorities in question. Indeed, it should be noted in 2019, Lanesboro accounted for some 15% of Longford County Council rates income, and Shannonbridge accounted for approximately 20% of Offaly County Council's rates income.

In 2020, the government has already made €900 million available to local authorities to enable a full rates waiver. This government support has been critical in terms of supporting local businesses but also in terms of supporting local authorities deliver key services to communities in their local areas.

Minister Burke said:

"As Minister of State with responsibility for Local Government and Planning, I have seen at first hand the great work of our local authorities up and down the country. This has especially been the case during COVID-19, when we have seen our local authorities lead the Community Call initiative and provide vital services to citizens. The great work of local authorities is recognised by this government and the local authority sector can be assured of this."

He added:

"I am delighted today to confirm to both Offaly County Council and Longford County Council that funding of €4.7 million is being provided in 2021 to support the work of these two local authorities, having regard to the closure of power plants in both authority areas. Minister O'Brien and I have been working with Minister McGrath in recent weeks to secure this funding and I have no doubt that the funding in question will make a huge difference and will support the delivery of key services for the communities in both of these counties."

ENDS

Funding for Greenways

From [Department of Transport](#)

Published 9 November 2020

Minister Eamon Ryan, T.D. Minister of Transport, and Hildegarde Naughton, T.D Minister of State, have today confirmed the allocation of funding for a range of Greenways across the country.

Announcing the allocations Minister Ryan T.D. said:

“I am delighted to be able to confirm that the allocation of €63.5m to Greenways for 2021 is the highest single year amount ever allocated to Greenways. Indeed, it nearly equals the total amount originally allocated for the 4 years 2018-2021 (€53m) and shows the commitment of this Government to providing a step-change in the way in which we fund walking and cycling.

I’m pleased to announce that we will contribute a significant amount to the Great Southern Greenway in Limerick to support the work of the County Council in bringing the Greenway up to a modern standard. This will ensure that cyclists will have a quality experience all the way from Rathkeale, Co.Limerick to Listowel, Co.Kerry. This funding will also support the refurbishment of the Longford Canal with improved infrastructure being provided along this cycleway.

In County Offaly we are funding the extension of the Grand Canal Greenway from Daingean to Edenderry, meaning that by the end of next year it will be possible to cycle the Greenway the whole way from Edenderry to Lough Boora, over 50km worth of cycleway. This funding will also be used for refurbishment of the Longford Canal with improved infrastructure being provided along this cycleway.

We will also support the refurbishment of the disused New Ross to Waterford Railway as part of the Greenway connecting New Ross to Waterford City which incorporates the Kilkenny Greenway. This cycleway will ultimately form part of an extensive cycling and walking network across the South East region and provide an environmentally friendly alternative for commuters into Waterford and New Ross.”

Minister of State Hildegarde Naughton said:

“The allocations of €63.5 million being made today will go a long way in delivering a safe and sustainable environment for active travel in our villages, towns and cities. We are funding the construction of a Greenway bridge across the River Shannon in Athlone as part of the Galway to Dublin Greenway. This investment will support even greater numbers enjoying our outdoors by cycling and walking for school, work and leisure.

We are also supporting the roll-out of a new Safe Routes to School Initiative. This programme will seek to accelerate the delivery of improved walking and cycling infrastructure to schools; enhance sustainable access onto school grounds; and expand the amount of cycle parking available at schools. Underpinning this new initiative, we will see almost €1 million per day spent on our walking and cycling infrastructure in the year 2021.

2021 is only the start, we will continue to build on this level of investment over the coming years.”

Greenway Projects and Totals

Cork (Middleton-Youghal)	€10,000,000 [2020 - €8,800,000]
Galway (Clifden-Recess)	€3,350,000
Kildare (Grand Canal Aylmer Bridge to Sallins)	€2,930,000
Kerry (Tralee-Fenit)	€3,440,000
Kerry (South Kerry Greenway)	€1,400,000
Kerry (Listowel to Limerick County Boundary)	€4,540,000
Mayo (Great Western Way expansion)	€5,150,000
Offaly (Grand Canal Daingean to Lough Boora)	€1,660,000
Wexford (New Ross-Waterford)	€9,000,000 [2020 - €6,210,000]
Wicklow (Blessington Loop)	€6,400,000 [2020 - €8,358,000]
TII (Galway-Athlone)	€8,100,000
Galway Moycullen	€1,800,000
Offaly (Daingean to Edenderry)	€3,100,000
Limerick (refurbishment of Gt Southern Greenway)	€2,500,000
Longford (Canal Greenway)	€172,000
Totals for all projects for 2021	€63,542,000 *

* The increased level of funding is representative of the fact that local authorities were originally funded at a rate of 60% pre COVID-19. In recognition of the negative impact COVID-19 has had on local authorities, funding will now be provided at a rate of 100%.

ENDS

Bord na Móna Bog Rehabilitation and Just Transition Fund Projects

From [Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications](#)

Published on 24 November 2020

The Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Mr Eamon Ryan, TD, has announced two major funding allocations for the Just Transition programme in the Midlands, designed to assist communities transitioning out of peat harvesting and into a new, green and sustainable economy.

The Cabinet today approved funding of €108 million for Bord na Móna's large-scale peatlands restoration project. The plan will protect the storage of 100 million tonnes of carbon, sequester 3.2 million tonnes of carbon out to 2050, enhance biodiversity, create 350 jobs in total and will deliver significant benefits and contribute to Ireland's target of being carbon-neutral by 2050. The Government funding, which will come from the Climate Action Fund, will be bolstered by an €18 million investment from Bord na Móna, who are committed to a "Brown to Green" transition.

Many of those employed in this project will be former peat harvesters who have an intimate knowledge and long history of working on our bogs.

In further good news for the region, provisional offers of funding, totalling €27.8 million, have been made today to 47 projects in the midlands under the Just Transition Fund. The projects represent innovative and inspiring plans from businesses, local authorities and communities in the midlands who are committed to creating a green and sustainable economy for the region. This dedication from the community and targeted support will make the region an attractive and sustainable place to live and work. It will fund training and reskilling so local businesses and communities can adjust to a low-carbon transition.

The successful projects, which have been offered funding greater than €100,000 each, include:

- The Empower Eco project which intends to deliver enterprise opportunities through the innovation hub in Lough Boora. The project's ultimate goal is to mobilise the Midland's next generation of green-enterprise innovators and stimulate regional job creation.
- The Bord na Móna Medicinal Herbs Project, where Bord na Móna will become a supplier of certified organic, ethically, and sustainably produced ingredients to herbal, cosmetic, food and beverage companies worldwide. The project has the potential to sustain up to 105 direct jobs and create a prominent industry for Medicinal Herbs in the Midlands region.
- A project to build a Further Education and Training Digital Learning Hub on the LWETB Longford campus. The Hub will encompass an online test centre, classrooms and practical workshop spaces. The Hub will be used by learners in the Wider Midland region to undertake skills programmes which will lead to specialisations in ICT, horticulture, aquaculture, construction and manufacturing in keeping with the ethos of Just Transition.

Minister Ryan, who is visiting Lough Boora in County Offaly, where he will meet representatives of workers and management at Bord na Móna, said:

“The Government decision to commit €108 million in funding to the bog rehabilitation scheme for thousands of hectares of peatlands is a major milestone. The potential of our boglands to capture and store millions of tonnes of carbon over the years is phenomenal. Bog rehabilitation and remediation is a wonderful example of Just Transition in action, where workers who previously harvested peat for power generation will now be the custodians of our bogs. This project will turn carbon sources into sinks, restore biodiversity and help us meet our climate goals. Employing 350 people, it will also be a pilot project for the just transition we need to make as we adapt our society and economy to tackle climate change. I would also like to thank the Minister of State for Heritage Malcolm Noonan and our National Parks and Wildlife Service for their role in this project.”

Minister Ryan is also meeting some of the successful applicants for Just Transition funding:

“I am delighted to visit the Midlands today and see and hear first-hand about the kind of innovative projects that are being generated here. From the applications received to the Just Transition Fund, it is clear that the Midlands region is ready and able to create a new, low-carbon future, developing sustainable employment for generations to come. I am inspired by the commitment from communities, individuals and businesses in the region to this journey and by the entrepreneurial and innovative spirit of the region. I very much look forward to these projects becoming reality and providing the opportunities that the people of the midlands deserve.”

Just Transition Commissioner, Kieran Mulvey commented:

“I welcome today’s announcement that further funding is being offered to these projects in the Midlands. Every funded project will play a key role in the Midlands successfully adapting to a Just Transition while also benefitting communities and individuals most affected by the move away from peat-harvesting. These innovative projects include sustainable retrofitting activities and carbon-neutral growing initiatives. The establishment of regional business hubs, supporting local business development and green enterprises, tourism, heritage and active mobility projects, re-skilling and training initiatives. All these projects have the ability to transform the Midlands region and its communities. They will bring new, innovative, green energy enterprises with the potential to boost the economy of the region and create jobs.”

Bord na Móna Chief Executive Tom Donnellan said:

“This is a major win for Ireland’s progress on Climate Action. Peatlands only cover 3% of the Earth’s surface but hold 30% of all the Carbon stored on land. They have a unique natural power to capture carbon and deliver significant wins for us and for future generations. Bord na Móna’s new Peatlands Restoration Plan will work with nature to make this happen and will demonstrate its leadership role in climate action, delivering on government policy and national decarbonisation objectives.”

ENDS

Annex 3 - Just Transition Fund Projects – Strand 1 & Strand 2

JTF Strand 1 Announcements

Strand 1 Lead Applicant	Will operate in/ aimed at	County
Moore Community Council	Provision of Remote Working Hub & Training Facility: Moore Community Hall	Roscommon
Enterprise Ireland	Mide	Kildare, Laois, Offaly, Westmeath
Ballycommon Telework & Training Centre CLG	Training Workshop	Kildare, Laois, Offaly, Westmeath
Green Offaly	Geopark and Biosphere Research Study	Offaly
Umeras Community Development	Umeras Peatlands Park: Design Study	Kildare, Laois, Offaly
Roscommon County Council	Lough Ree Bay Boardwalk	Roscommon
Athlone Co-Working Hub (CWH)	Athlone Co-Working Hub	East Galway, Longford, Offaly, Roscommon, Westmeath
Birr 20:20 Vision Company Limited	Producing and Promoting Green Energy Birr and SW Offaly	East Galway, North Tipperary, Offaly, Roscommon
Peatland Biodiversity Boardwalk Fourth Final Phase - Lullymore	Extension to Peatland Biodiversity Boardwalk 4th Final Phase	Kildare, Offaly
Lumcloon Energy Limited	Alektra: Feasibility Study Stage 2	Offaly
RR Power Projects	PolySafe	Kildare, Laois, Longford, Offaly Westmeath
Longford County Council	Lanesboro Anerobic Digestion Facility: Feasibility Study	Longford, Roscommon
Offaly Local Development Company	West Offaly: Quality of Life, Place & Experience	Offaly
FDT Consulting Engineers and PM Limited	Lough Ree Technology Cluster Study	Longford, Roscommon
Ballyforan Area Transition Team	Ballyforan Area Development Feasibility Study	East Galway, Roscommon
Baylin Development Association	Baylin Bog Trail	Westmeath

Just Transition Fund 2020: Provisionally Successful Strand 2 Projects

	Project Name	Lead Applicant	Counties impacted
1	A Brown to Green Jobs Transition to Eliminate Energy Waste in Midland's Homes	Hub Controls Ltd.	All counties
2	Ballyforan Greenway Loop	Ballyforan Area Transition Team	East Galway, Roscommon
3	BnM Employee Supports - Training and Upskilling Project	Bord na Mona	All counties
4	BnM Medicinal Herbs Project	Bord na Mona	All counties
5	Building Resilience and Adaptability in Primary School Children through	Offaly County Council	Offaly
6	Climate Action Training and Mentoring Programme	Eastern & Midlands Climate Action Regional Office	All counties
7	Clontuskert Bog Heritage Train	Roscommon County Council	Roscommon
8	Clontuskert Visitor Centre and Organic Farm	Roscommon County Council	Roscommon
9	Community Led Just Transition North Tipperary	Energy Communities Tipperary Cooperative CLG	North Tipperary
10	Connecting Communities with Peatlands	Irish Rural Link	All counties
11	Conservation and Pollination - Medieval Churches in Laois and Offaly	Laois County Council	Laois, Offaly
12	Digital Learning Hub - Longford	Longford Westmeath ETB	Longford, Roscommon, Westmeath
13	Edenderry Carbon Challenge: Feasibility Study	Edenderry Tidy Towns	Offaly
14	Employment Development Information Centre Transition Campus	Employment Development Information	Longford, Offaly, Roscommon, Westmeath

		Centre Longford	
15	Empower Eco	Athlone Institute of Technology	All counties
16	Enablers of a Just Transition for Communities in the Midlands Region	University of Limerick - Centre for Environmental Research	All counties
17	Ferbane Food Campus and Innovation Centre	Ferbane Business and Technology Park CLG	Offaly
18	Green HQ for Offaly	Offaly Local Development Company and Green Offaly	Offaly
19	Ballinahown Village Hall Revitalisation Project	Ballinahown Community Development Ltd.	Westmeath
20	Kinnegad Economic Enterprise Space	Westmeath County Council	Westmeath
21	Lanesboro Food Hub	Premier Lakelands Hub	Longford, Roscommon
22	Lanesborough Tourism Hub	Longford County Council	Longford, Roscommon
23	Littleton Labyrinth	Tipperary County Council	East Galway, Laois, Norther Tipperary
24	Lough Boora Discovery Park and Midlands Cycling Destination - Sustainable Connections 2020	Offaly County Council	All counties
25	Lough Boora Enhancement: Cycle Way and Feasibility Study - Industrial Art Space	Bord na Mona	All counties
26	Lough Ree Access for All	Lough Ree Access for All CLG	Longford, Roscommon, Westmeath
27	Lough Ree Distillery - Phase 2	Blacksmith Ventures Limited	Longford, Roscommon, Westmeath
28	Midland Bioenergy Development Project	Irish BioEnergy	All counties

		Association	
29	Midlands Ireland.ie Digital Roadmap	Laois County Council	Laois, Longford, Offaly, Westmeath
30	Midlands Network of Co-working Facilities - Business Development	Laois County Council	Laois, Longford, Offaly, Westmeath
31	Midlands Retrofit Growth	KORE Retrofit Ltd	All counties
32	Mid-Shannon Wilderness Park Greenway	Longford County Council	Longford, Roscommon
33	North Kildare Business and Learning Campus: Site Expansion Works	Allenwood Community Development Association CLG	Kildare
34	Pedestrian and Cycle Link - Killucan to Royal Canal	Westmeath County Council	Westmeath
35	Pulse Hub: Creation of Remote Working Hubs in Ballinasloe Town	Ballinasloe Area Community Development CLG	E.Galway/Offaly/Roscommon/ Westmeath
36	Real Leaf Farm	Galway Herb Farm Limited t/a Real Leaf Farm	Offaly
37	Regenerating Abbeyshrule for Technology, Tourism and Culture	The Yard Hub CLG	Longford
38	Renovation of the Harbour Building Kilbeggan	Kilbeggan Grand Canal Harbour Amenity Co Ltd and Westmeath County Council	Westmeath
39	Rhode Green Energy Park	Offaly County Council	Offaly
40	Rhode Green Energy Park Integration Study	Newleaf	Offaly
41	Social Enterprise Exchange	The Cluster Centre	East Galway, Laois, Longford, Offaly, Roscommon, Westmeath

4 2	St Joseph's Community Centre Development	Kilcormac Developme nt Association	Offaly
4 3	Strategic Area Response Plan Implementation	Shannonbri dge Action Group	East Galway, Offaly, Roscommon, Westmeath
4 4	Superhomes Midlands	Tipperary Energy Agency CLG	All counties
4 5	The Lir Project	Fergal Moran and Brian O'Carroll	Offaly, Roscommon, Westmeath
4 6	Traveller Community Enterprise and Social Farming Project	Offaly Traveller Movement	Offaly
4 7	Tullamore Enterprise Space and Infrastructure	Offaly Innovation and Design Centre CLG	Offaly

Annex 4 – MRTT Working Group Programmes

WG1 - Education/ Training/ Research -Work Programme

Measure	Aim	Proposed Action
Capacity building / Digitisation/ Transition knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renewables & Energy efficiency measures (incl. retrofitting) • Clean Energy Models • Circular Economy • Sectoral clusters • Advanced Manufacturing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop areas of Smart Specialisation / Cluster formation across a range of sectors, positioning the region as a clean energy region • Position and support the Midlands as an Advanced Manufacturing Centre of Excellence.
Reskilling and upskilling	<p>Review reskilling and upskilling provision considering potential future needs, maintain retraining provision as required in conjunction with Springboard providers, Education, Training and Skills agencies, LEOs etc</p> <p>Investment in National Training Centre in Portlaoise, ESB</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Align provision with the current and future skills needs of the region • Evidence based support for upskilling initiatives/funding • ESB will continue to invest heavily in the development of this category, and expect to continue to recruit at least to historical levels, securing and enhancing the future of the NTC as part of ESB’s wider presence in the Midlands.
Irish Just Transition Fund	Support projects that can be delivered in the short term, medium term and longer term and will support economic, social and environmental development and provide positive early momentum to the transition process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support projects which were successful in securing JTF funding such as Empower Eco with AIT as lead • Support projects which registered through the Midlands Engagement Process

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support projects which were unsuccessful in JTF
Territorial Plan	Contribute to the development of the territorial plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Propose regional transformative projects
Funding Opportunities	Identification of potential national and EU funding opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with Education & Training providers across the wider region to identify future funding opportunities and the development of collaborative 'whole of region' projects

WG2 – Employment Generation Work Programme

Measure	Aim	Proposed Actions
<p>Project inventory</p>	<p>Develop and manage the Midlands Engagement Project inventory of transition projects; identify funding opportunities (including EU funding opportunities), synergies/economies of scale, and gaps</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing review of Midlands Engagement Project Inventory • Identification of EU funding opportunities with IREO • Identify projects in the sustainability green energy space that are an early phase of development to develop synergies and funding opportunities • Potential to work with some of the successful transition projects; e.g. promoting awareness of relevant projects; using projects to strengthen the positioning of the region; develop networking opportunities.
<p>Marketing and profile</p>	<p>Build on current brand, value proposition and collective offering to further promote the region as a place to live, visit, learn, work and invest</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progress MidlandsIreland.ie project which received a letter of offer from JTF • Strong placemaking is key to attracting and retaining talent to the region. IDA is aware of the many projects across the Region that have been funded under the REDF, URDF, Just Transition Fund and Town & Village platforms and will refer to these as appropriate to strengthen value proposition.

Measure	Aim	Proposed Actions
Enterprise hubs	Grow the number and usage of digital and sectoral innovation hubs in the region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appoint a Business Development Manager to the Midlands Network of Co-Working Facilities (MNCF) to increase and develop membership and facilities, and explore opportunities through strategic partnerships with state agencies • Seek funding to expand successful co-working facilities where appropriate and progress plans to develop a wider range of hubs in the midlands – JTF provisional letters of support for additional or enhanced facility provision across the wider midlands • Quality and well-connected landing spaces will serve to increase the appeal and positioning of the Region
New and greener enterprises	Grow the number of new enterprises in the region, especially enterprises that support the climate change agenda to include green enterprises, circular economy, renewable technology and relevant social enterprises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with Empower Eco to develop the number of sustainable green companies in their Micro programme and work closely with them to develop the pipeline of scalable start-ups under their BNM accelerate green programme • Support the adoption of environmentally friendly business practices in existing businesses through programmes such as the Going Green Midland LEO Initiative and the new Green for Micro National LEO Initiatives & sectoral focus on Green Industries and Locations

Working Group 3 – Employment Continuity Pathways

Measure	Aim	Proposed Actions
Guidance & Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support employment continuity within BnM including the implementation of training and upskilling • Ensuring individuals affected by redundancy and restructuring have access to tailored information on income supports, return to work, retraining and upskilling options • Activation measures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced Peatland Rehabilitation Scheme (350+jobs) • JTF Projects – Medicinal Herbs, tourism projects etc • JTF - BnM Employee Supports • Provision of Information Sessions/ Clinics • Activation Guidance – Group and 1:1 • Personal Progression plans and reviews • Collaboration with ETB/Training Centre/ RSF • Skills audits • Collaboration with DEASP • Adult Education Guidance
Midlands Engagement Process –Capacity Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessing inter-disciplinary skillsets • Retrofitting opportunities • Bog Rehabilitation Certificates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audit of current course provision across the wider region
Organisational management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilities management • Budget management • Marketing and communications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audit of current course provision across the wider region

Working Group 4 - Community Assistance / Social Enterprise Interventions

Measure	Aim	Proposed Actions
Project inventory	Develop and manage the Midlands Engagement Project inventory of transition projects; identify funding opportunities (including EU funding opportunities), synergies/economies of scale, and gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commencing with projects that registered with Midlands Engagement Process • Seek agreement of project promoter • Projects assigned for action on county basis • WG member to contact asap
Community Engagement	Ensure that community groups are engaged in the transition process & planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progressed through JTF Strand 1 and Strand 2 successful projects e.g OLDC and CARO Climate Action & Mentoring Programme
Community Capacity	Develop capacity in affected communities in order that communities and their residents can be active, engaged agents of transition. Areas for consideration: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board development • Governance and decision making skills • Social enterprise models 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessing current course provision for community sector and liaising with course provision being collated under WG3 – efficiencies and effectiveness – whilst identifying gaps which maybe addressed through a ‘whole of midlands approach’
Retrofitting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upgrade social housing stock • Explore retrofitting opportunities for communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current training provision and locations of same being reviewed



Comhairle Chontae na Gaillimhe
Galway County Council



Kildare County Council
Comhairle Contae Chill Dara



Laois County Council
Áras an Chontae, Portlaoise, Co. Laois



Comhairle Chontae An Longfoirt
Longford County Council

CONNECTED
People - Place - Opportunity



Comhairle Chontae Uíbh Fhailí
Offaly County Council



Comhairle Contae
Ros Comáin
Roscommon
County Council



Comhairle Contae Thiobraid Árann
Tipperary County Council



WESTMEATH COUNTY COUNCIL
Comhairle Chontae na hIarmhí