

Draft Leitrim Co. Development Plan 2023 – 2029

Response by North Leitrim Sustainable Energy Community (NLSEC) 27/04/2022

At North Leitrim SEC we aim to counter Climate change by researching, encouraging and implementing a more sustainable way of living in Leitrim. SEC stands for Sustainable Energy Community, and we place equal emphasis on the sustainability both of our energy sources and our communities.

We draw attention to the commitment (Climate Action – Overarching Objectives 1 & 2) in the Draft Development plan to support SECs in the County and to creating a decarbonisation zone at Carrick on Shannon. We would go further and argue that this decarbonisation objective should be extended countywide, particularly where there are communities on the ground willing to embrace this strategy.

We believe that reliance on developing renewable energy will not on its own be sufficient to enable us to reach the climate action targets set out for 2030. This is because of what we might call ‘energy greed’, in which any gains are offset or outstripped by new and increasing demands for energy, sometimes for hitherto unenvisaged purposes.

Our consideration of sustainability takes place within a vision of the reinvigoration of the county by the repopulation of villages and rural areas. We see the opportunity for Leitrim to become a laboratory and model for innovation in sustainable living and reduced energy usage. The county already has a track record in ecotourism with several businesses holding eco, sustainable and green credentials for their operations and this would be an ideal time to build on this - carbon neutral holidays.

A major barrier to the planning of new developments in rural areas and indeed the reoccupation of derelict or abandoned dwellings is the problem of percolation as it pertains to waste water disposal. Rather than adhering solely to a model developed for areas with more favourable geological and soil conditions, and with reference to section 9.7 of the Draft Plan, we would strongly support the adoption of alternative systems such as willow and reed bed treatment or composting toilets. We need to develop an approved set of standards for these systems such that they can be readily approved for situations where they might be more appropriate than the current standard systems.

Likewise with the upgrading of traditional vernacular housing to the standards of energy efficiency expected of today's dwellings. These houses are notoriously difficult to improve on using materials and standards developed for modern post 1980s housing. Furthermore, we would point out that the majority of approved insulation materials such as are certified for Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) grants, are themselves made of products derived from the petrochemical industry and are problematic in that regard. Their use in older dwellings can often create more problems than they solve. We therefore

advocate a return to more traditional and locally sourced materials and methodologies for the improvement of older buildings. We call for a research and development centre in Leitrim, which would develop and produce these systems and have them approved and certified to international standards. In this way we could reduce the carbon footprint of many of our older buildings, ensure the greater comfort of the occupants, create high-level jobs within the County and reduce our dependence on the international petro chemical industry.

To deal directly with the matter of sustainable energy generation, we welcome the inclusion of development of community owned and micro generation opportunities in the strategy to attain 200 MW of renewable energy in the county by 2030, as stated in Renewable Energy Objective 1. We champion these sources of sustainable energy ahead of large scale industrial development, and to this end we urge the Council to set definite targets for the percentage of renewable energy to come from micro generation within the lifetime of the plan. In terms of solar energy, (Section 12.6.3 Solar Energy), NLSEC has had commissioned (with the support of the SEAI) a comprehensive study for a community owned solar farm in north Leitrim, which indicates that a 5 – 15 MW facility would be viable in the area, which could represent up to 7.5% of the 200MW target set out in the Draft Development Plan. Solar generation avoids many of the negative impacts now associated with large-scale wind, including environmental impacts, visual and sound obtrusiveness, and the need for invasive civil works including road widening in order to facilitate installation. In addition this could lead to employment generation in the county.

There is also considerable potential for small-scale hydro in Manorhamilton and particularly Dromahaire. A 2014 study by Hydro NI confirmed the viability of a 55kW plant on the Owenmore in Manorhamilton, while Dromahaire has an even greater potential on the Bonet where a turbine powered the former Jeiters Hotel and much of the village up until the 1960s. Both these schemes would be 'run of the river' type systems which would involve minimal intervention in the existing watercourses.