

Submission to Draft Leitrim County Development Plan 2023 - 2029

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For a fossil free future for Ireland

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This submission is made on behalf of Not Here Not Anywhere (NHNA), a nationwide, grassroots, non-partisan group campaigning to end fossil fuel exploration and the development of new fossil fuel infrastructure in Ireland. We advocate for a just transition to renewable energy systems both here and around the world.

NHNA welcomes the emphasis on emissions reduction, energy efficiency and climate resilience that forms a key strategic vision of the Draft Leitrim CDP. We commend the proposed development of a variety of renewable energy sources, particularly wind and solar energy and hydropower.

To avoid the most severe impacts of climate change, global temperatures must be kept below 1.5C above pre-industrialised levels, and we need rapid and deep action to decarbonise our energy systems. County and city councils play a hugely important role in helping communities to transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy, and planning is a key area of influence. We make the following recommendations in response to your draft Development Plan:

1. Fossil fuels and new fossil fuel infrastructure

Recommendations:

- The Leitrim County Development Plan should ensure a rapid phasing out of all fossil fuels, including gas.
- The Leitrim County Development Plan should not allow the expansion of the gas grid, as is mentioned in ENI POL 6 of the draft plan.
- The Leitrim County Development Plan should ban fracked gas in its energy mix.
- Any new large scale fossil fuel infrastructure projects must be mandated to undertake climate impact assessment to ensure they are consistent with Ireland's fair share net cumulative carbon dioxide (CO2) quota in line with the Paris agreement.

Impacts of Fossil Gas Projects

If we are to keep global temperature rise below 1.5°C and avoid catastrophic climate change, fossil gas must be phased out of the energy mix in Europe by 2035 {i}, discrediting claims that gas is a "transition fuel" in the transition to a decarbonised economy {ii}{iii}. Research states that we can't develop any new fossil fuel infrastructure from 2019 onwards if we are to have a 64% chance of limiting temperature rise to less than 1.5°C {iv}. While NHNA acknowledges the urgent need to transition away from turf and peat (as stated in section 12.6.7 of the draft plan), we urge Leitrim County Council to avoid further expanding Ireland's gas grid.

During the fortnight of negotiations at the Conference of Parties (COP26) in Glasgow, November 21, Ireland became a core member of the international [Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance \(BOGA\)](#). This commitment included aligning our oil and gas production with the objectives of the Paris Agreement. In signing on to this international coalition, the government recognised that oil and natural gas demand need to decline by 75% and 55% respectively between 2020 and 2050 to achieve net zero, with nations of the global North pioneering this transition. In this light, we urge Leitrim County Council to reject the extension of the gas network into Leitrim.

COP26 also saw our government aligning with a global partnership to cut methane emissions by 30% by 2030. Methane is a potent greenhouse gas, with a Global Warming Potential 86 times that of CO₂ over a 20 year period. Natural gas is frequently portrayed as a 'clean alternative' to coal and oil, as burning it emits less CO₂ than oil and coal. However, the significant amount of methane leaked in the production and transport of natural gas inherently contradicts these claims. We cannot justify accompanying the transition to renewable energy with further dependence on fossil gas.

Further, 69% of all gas produced in the US and imported to Europe as Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) is sourced through hydraulic fracturing, or fracking {v}. New LNG exports will super-charge additional fracking, as 80% of the increased exports will come from new, i.e., fracked, wells {vi}. Recent investigation shows that this is 40% more damaging to the climate than coal {vii}. The lifespan of a project like LNG is at least 30 years which would increase our dependence on dirty fossil fuels and discourage the development of renewable energy projects {viii}.

2. Data Centres

CARRICK OBJ 6 states the intention of the land use zoning envelope for the construction of a data centre or a centre of employment. Due to the substantial energy demand and climate implications of data centres (see below), we strongly recommend the council to consider the latter proposal for a centre of employment in Carrick-on-Shannon. However, in the instance that a data centre is chosen for development, we urge Leitrim County Council to incorporate the following recommendations:

Recommendations:

- A national cap on the level of data centre demand that can be accommodated by the grid to 2030, while meeting our renewable energy and climate emissions targets consistent with our obligations under the Paris Agreement, must be set out in national policy.
- A new data centre in Leitrim must be powered entirely by onsite or new off site renewable energy.
- Existing centres should be required to transition rapidly to onsite or new off site renewables.
- Where technically possible, heat generated from a data centre should be utilised for district heating systems.

Eirgrid estimates that data centres could account for up to 27% of Ireland's electricity demand by 2028, and up to 50% of new electricity demand growth {ix}. The Irish Academy of Engineering predicts that data centre development will add at least 1.5 million tonnes to Ireland's carbon emissions by 2030, a 13% increase on current electricity sector emissions, and will require an investment in energy generation and storage of €9 billion by 2027 {x}.

For example, if Amazon's eight centre project in Mulhuddart, Dublin 15, is realised, by 2026 it would use c. 4.4% per cent of the State's entire energy capacity, the equivalent of Galway city, but employ only 30 people post-construction, largely in facility maintenance {xi}. The Apple data centre proposed for Athenry, Co. Galway, would have ultimately used "over 8% of the national capacity..., more than the daily entire usage of Dublin, and "would require 144 large diesel generators as back-up" {xii}.

The government has acknowledged that "data centres pose considerable challenges to the future planning and operation of Ireland's power system" {xviii}. These challenges include higher electricity costs for consumers {xiv}. The Danish Council on Climate Change recommended in April 2019 that the Danish government legally binds data centre owners and developers to contribute to the infrastructure required to supply the centres with renewable energy, such as wind and solar farms {xv}.

Currently, many companies claim to operate data centres powered by 100% renewable energy. However, the energy is largely sourced indirectly through Renewable Energy Certificates or Purchase Power Agreements {xvi}, which means that the energy is sourced from the grid, which in Ireland is 69% fossil fuel-powered {xvii}. If we continue to allow companies to virtually purchase clean energy where it is cheapest to create, while actually

using and increasing demand for dirty energy in Ireland, we allow them to profit while our real emissions continue to rise. It is crucial therefore that data centres are powered directly by onsite renewable energy generation such as rooftop solar farms or genuinely new offsite generation such as offshore wind or solar farms. Data Centres also generate large quantities of waste heat which could be utilised in district heating systems {xviii}.

To meet the greenhouse gas emissions targets set out in the Paris Agreement, and in the recently published Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Bill, it is paramount to examine the impact that energy supply of data centres will have on net emissions. Furthermore, it is crucial that every City and county council takes into consideration the cumulative impact of data centres' energy demand on a nationwide basis, as opposed to examining impact solely on a case-by-case basis.

3. Public Participation and People-led Policy

We welcome in particular CA POL 5: to promote and encourage positive community and co-operative led climate action initiatives and projects that seek to reduce emissions, improve energy efficiency, enhance 'Green Infrastructure' and encourage awareness on climate change issues.

To optimise the implementation of this policy, we make the following recommendations:

- Outside the development of this plan, the council should lead annual local climate dialogues which serve to inform communities about the ongoing transition to a low carbon society and seek their opinions, ideas and consent.
- The Climate Action and Environment office, or equivalent, within the council must be adequately resourced, publicised and staffed. These offices should work closely with local communities to improve education and access to information around environmental issues, proactively engage in consultations and participatory processes which allow local people to have a say in the energy transition in their area.
- Wherever practically possible, participatory processes should be designed in a participatory way, with input from representatives of all groups who are expected to take part.
- Special outreach efforts must be made to include disadvantaged or marginalised groups in participatory processes. Those running participatory processes should keep a detailed record of the participation of marginalised groups and of best practices that serve to increase this participation.
- Support and establish community energy projects throughout the lifetime of the county development plan.

Throughout the lifetime of this county development plan, Ireland's transition to a low carbon society is entering its most crucial decade. It's vital that it should be centred around providing people and communities with clean, affordable and reliable energy. The best way to do so is to ensure citizen participation at all levels and stages of the energy transition.

There are many different ways in which people can participate in governance, ranging from informing to consultation to partnership to citizen control, whereby community members control the process {xiv}. While all of these methods of participation are useful and valid at different stages of policymaking, different forms of participation should be incorporated into major decisions (such as energy infrastructure projects) to create a thoroughly participative process; for example, informing and consulting at the stage of technical impact assessments. Ideally, there should be citizen participation in the design of the participatory process itself, for example through focus groups or workshops which feed directly into sub-national and national policymaking.

Community participation and ownership has proved important for public acceptance of the energy transition in countries where the transition is more advanced than in Ireland. For example, in Germany, 70% of the tax paid by wind turbine operators goes directly to the municipality where the turbines are based. In Denmark, taxes on energy go into funds to subsidise local initiatives for environmental improvement and community generation. Denmark also requires that local communities have a 20% share in onshore or near-shore wind turbines. Ownership measures like this are shown to increase community acceptance of energy transition infrastructure, and can take the form of individual shares in an energy project, community ownership of part of the infrastructure, or joint ventures between communities and developers {xv}. There are many renewable energy projects that, with the support of the Council, can be developed. Numerous renewable energy exemplar projects exist around Europe, such as the Edinburgh Community Solar Co-operative, which empowers the public to be part of the transition to a low carbon society {xvi}.

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