

# **Roscommon County Development Plan 2021 – 2027**

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## **Planning and development for rural regeneration in County Roscommon**

As a County Councillor I have an acute awareness of the issues that press on the minds of the people I encounter in the course of my duties. People who are at the heart of rural Roscommon – families, individuals, business people, farmers, young and old, as diverse a range of people as you will meet anywhere. The one thing they all have in common is a desire to live and work in this county and that this county will be able to sustain this want, going forward. So how do we make this county work for them and plan for the future?

### **Tourism – our sleeping giant**

Roscommon as a county has been left out in the cold by regional tourism policies. Hidden far too well in the heartlands we need to make our voice heard because we have a huge untapped tourism potential. We are a county which was in the past synonymous with achievement and brave radical thinking. We were the capital of the Connachta, we provided Ireland with its first president and its last High King but you won't read that on Ireland.ie! As Douglas Hyde said "Every crag and knarled tree and lonely valley has it's own story to tell". Everybody loves a good story so let's start and shout out the story of *our people*.

Roscommon County Council have done great work in this regard but the boat needs to be pushed out further. The message needs to meet distant shores so that our distinct identity as a county stands out and is not hidden in the heartlands.

Funding/grants/exposure/passion – these are all needed to upsell our tourism and bring investment into the county.

### **The Irish Diaspora – an untapped income resource**

We have the amazing distinction of having not one but two unsung heroes in our County who were ground-breaking in terms of their visionary thinking and whose legacies have the potential to capture the attention of the Irish diaspora and attract inward investment to Roscommon.

Fr Michael O' Flanagan,( 1876 – 1942) and Fr Edward J Flanagan (1886 – 1948), two priests with similar names, born decades apart, both from near Castlereah, both acclaimed internationally but never honoured nationally.

**Fr Edward J Flanagan**, so highly thought of by President Truman post world war II that he was chosen by him to tour war torn countries to advise on welfare issues. From very humble beginnings, his first home for disadvantaged boys “Boystown”, in Nebraska, evolved into a purpose built town/charity for disadvantaged youth with its own schools, hospital, specialised services focussing on prevention and intervention to assist vulnerable children and families. Thousands of children have benefitted from the foundation. It had 1 million calls to the centre last year. He has been proposed for canonisation and this process is currently under consideration in Rome.

**Fr Michael O’ Flanagan**, was a republican priest, academic, linguist and innovative fund raiser who was instrumental in the development of rural industry (for example, he secured funding for a local cheese making enterprise in Loughglynn). He was also an inventor (inventor of the first swimming goggles and also a form of cavity wall insulation). He was responsible for raising the profile of the Irish craft industry in America. A nationalist at heart he was involved in politics all his life. He was responsible for the victory of Count Plunkett at the North Roscommon Election of the Snows and rose in rank to President of Sinn Fein in the thirties having previously been vice president alongside Arthur Griffith.

I believe that the promotion of these two heroes should be celebrated on an annual basis, as part of a Global Rossies heroes spotlight.

Both men spent a great part of their life in America, their legacy is well documented. With social media and the modern technology available today, I have no doubt that we will see a very beneficial impact to the local economy in terms of tourist numbers if these two unsung heroes are showcased and links fostered.

#### Global Rossie Day

On Global Rossie day, there was much footage of people saying how great it was to be from Roscommon but there was a lack of definition or exactly what it was that set us apart and made us great? In order for us, as Rossies, to promote our greatness we need to know what our greatness is. We need to know more about our past heroes. They need to be highlighted - I have mentioned above, two of possibly the greatest Roscommon heroes who have almost fallen through the cracks of history. Two of the most inspiring and innovative thinkers Ireland has produced in the last century. Their stories in themselves are tales of positivity and determination, persistence in overcoming extreme obstacles to achieve success. They were motivational speakers. In the current climate motivation and inspiration is something we need to nurture. We can only plan our destination if we know where we are coming from. We need to build a bigger broader image of our identity as a county.

If you ask a young person from Roscommon to name 5 famous Roscommon people they might struggle with the question. Or ask them what is great about Roscommon and they will say the GAA (which is great but should not be the extent of their knowledge). An awareness of the achievements of our past and present heroes creates pride and this pride instils confidence and with confidence anything can be achieved.

**The Suck Valley** weaves its way through those knarled trees and crags that Douglas Hyde spoke of. The river suck is one of our key assets. It is a natural resource that connects so many of our attractions – the castles, the walks, the water sports. This network of attractions needs to be promoted as a bundle. A bundle of fun for tourists - excitement, heritage, sport, exploration, - something for everyone.

### **The magic of our Castles**

We are a county of castles and royalty – the royal O’ Conor clan, last high kings of Ireland and to boot we have living ancestors here in Roscommon. We have a site of royal inaugurations (Rathcroghan) that people can visit. But the crème de la crème has to be the Coronation stone - passed down through the centuries, that magical stone that kings of Ireland placed their foot on to seal their kingship– what other county can boast such a treasure? This is our Blarney stone but it seems to be a secret – thousands of tourists come to kiss the manufactured magical blarney stone but our magical stone doesn’t feature in promotional literature. Why?? Every foot on that Coronation stone is a step towards another euro being spent in a local shop, a service station, a café. We need to up our game to boost our economy.

We need this magical coronation stone story told on Failte Ireland and Ireland.ie and we need to be featured on national tourist documentaries/advertising that are directed towards international markets - lets not let the Suck Valley Way be pushed aside by Wild Atlantic Way marketeers.

### **Castles in Communities**

The Ballintubber Castle in Communities project highlights the importance of our heritage, not alone for our own identity but it sets us apart internationally. American students of archaeology who came to Roscommon for the project were astounded that a small village in Ireland could have a castle as a backdrop and that they could not alone walk right up to this castle but could participate in an archaeological dig. They loved the quaintness of the village, the friendliness of the people, the community spirit. In turn their presence enhanced the area for the local people. It built relationships, it gave local people hope and pride, the anticipation of the visitors coming encouraged a make-over of the village, and overall it had a very positive impact on both communities. We need to actively work with educators/colleges/organisations at home and abroad to establish similar projects in Roscommon as well as give support to the people in our home communities without whom projects like the Castles in Communities couldn’t happen.

### **Tucson, Arizona - the Irish connection**

Hugh O’ Conor of the O’ Conor Don clan was the founder of the city of Tucson, Arizona, which was built on an O’ Conor fort. We need to use this connection as a building block to tap into attracting investment into Roscommon. The diaspora in Arizona is a well we need to dip our toes into.

### **Bog Tourism**

Bog Tourism is underdeveloped at present. Our turf cutting tradition is another unique aspect of our heritage that is undersold. Bogs have their own eco system, biodiversity, fauna, smell and sounds. They should be promoted as such. Rail lines in bogs should be preserved and not allowed to go into decline just because Bord na Mona have ceased harvesting peat. These rail lines are trail lines that connect us to our past. They tell a story and we need this story to be preserved into the future.

The above subsections give a snapshot of some of our tourist assets. The development plan review is an opportunity for the council to identify a prioritised schedule of investment to upgrade and promote our assets.

### **Social and Economic needs of declining towns and villages**

The current Covid 19 pandemic is challenging our perceptions of what it means to safeguard our communities. People no longer feel safe living in close proximity to each other, in built up areas, estates etc. Room to isolate is paramount. The ability to be able to self isolate has become not just a desirable choice but it is now seen as a necessary consideration in terms of choosing a place to live.

People want to move to Roscommon. They don't want to live in expensive closet sized apartments in Dublin with no quality of life. I feel that our high development charges are an obstacle to young people building houses in our county. With improved broadband services many people can work from home but first they need to have a home. This needs to be addressed. We need young skilled people moving here to grow our local economy.

Green spaces, gardens, safe areas are now life-lines for mental health. It is vital to have access to places to cocoon to in the event of becoming a name on a Covid list. There are many unused/vacant houses in rural Roscommon. Houses bought with farms of land – the house superfluous to the farmers requirements. Aging members of our community moving into purpose-built accommodation, their house lying idle – they will never return to it so the house along with its owner is subject to a little bit more deterioration with each passing year. These houses are vital resources currently overlooked but they could play an important role i.e for people who wish to live in the countryside but cannot get planning, for Airbnb to provide country accommodation for visitors, for containment housing for people seeking to self-isolate away from others in the event of future pandemics. These vacant houses left to their inevitable crumbling demise are scars on our landscape at a time when there is housing shortfall, there should be some incentives introduced to generate interest in their renewal.

New residential town planning must pay more attention to the importance of adequate green areas/garden space. If apartments are to be a way forward in terms of compact living then consider roof top gardens as mandatory for apartment blocks or the inclusion communal gardens as part of an apartment complex so that each apartment unit has access to the natural world.

The threat of a pandemic is something that wasn't projected or planned for when compiling the NPF or the RSES. However it is now a stark fact of life. And it has changed everything and

we must change with it. More people want to work from home, it's a safer option. We must ensure the broadband services are there in rural areas. We must ensure that childcare facilities are supported in rural areas. We must ensure that the local transport links, the community/school buses etc are in place and that our roads are maintained in good order.

The pandemic is strangely an opportunity for Roscommon to reimagine itself as a refuge from danger. Roscommon is now so far behind it is actually ahead in these times. The council should promote our area and three pragmatic ways of doing this would be for it to be a leader in remote working itself to show what can be done, to provide serviced sites in our towns and villages to attract remote workers thus revitalising our towns and villages and to actively support and encourage the replacement of older and obsolete dwellings with new modern houses to accommodate people who wish to and can live and work in rural areas.

### **Towns/Villages**

Mental health is a major issue today. For people living in towns and villages, too often there is a disconnect with nature. I feel that it is important to create opportunities for people to reconnect with nature.

### **Allotments**

The conversion of unused council ground into allotments would be a very wise move in terms of improving mental health, not just by the wellbeing instilled by interacting with nature but the social element – people connecting with people, through nature. Long term unemployed, vulnerable groups, disabled etc, could be enabled to gain a sense of well-being and confidence through participation in maintaining allotments through new schemes.

### **Planning for the elderly**

Roscommon has statistically one of the highest aging populations. Covid 19 has highlighted the need for a fresh look at accommodation for the elderly. Nursing homes have become problematic in terms of safeguarding the vulnerable. Different models of accommodation need to be considered. We need to assess the benefits of having more retirement villages with specially adapted group housing for the elderly as an alternative to the nursing home model. Many older members of the rural community come from rural/farming backgrounds, all their life looking out at fields, livestock, gardens, pets. Entering a nursing home is an alien experience compared to the environment they were used to. Future planning for nursing group homes or retirement villages should include access to an adequate garden area so that each resident can retain that connection to nature in order to make the transition easier. The development plan review should be used to zone lands for 'elderly care' as part of the community

### **Climate change: Our carbon footprint**

Greening should be improved in villages and towns by the planting of more native trees, native wildflower gardens/borders, fruit/nut trees. This would reduce our carbon footprint

as well as satisfying the mental health benefits associated from interaction with nature, especially in times of pandemics etc.

### **Reduction of waste/recycling**

I think it is necessary to lead by example. In terms of corporate waste, there should be a policy across all local authorities to reduce the volume/number of publications/brochures produced in favour of on-line documents/cloud sharing. Unnecessary laminating of documents should be discouraged due to the period of time it takes for this plastic to break down in the environment.

### **Housing and the Environment**

New houses while environmentally more sustainable when built, their construction creates a large carbon dinge compared to renovating an existing house. There should be guildelines for the renovation/extension of older homes to achieve the best environmental outcome possible.

For new rural housing, water harvesting for grey water functions should be encouraged and incorporated into new house designs thus reducing the pressure on our water supplies. In the past in Ireland, water tanks were commonplace and water conservation was seen as a practical response to the challenges of nature. I believe the wisdom of the past should be adapted and be incorporated into our modern approach to conservation.

I believe that landscape plans for new houses should include a design that promotes biodiversity and includes a pollinator friendly area to promote insect/pollinators, to safeguard our environment for future generations.

### **Agriculture**

Agriculture is the backbone of our rural economy. Local produce needs to be supported and protected. Co-ops have a role to play as do social farms, organic farmers and community based farming/horticulture. This type of sustainable living/working needs to be encouraged and developed through education, social employment schemes and funding to enable our rural environment to thrive.

