

Regional Profile

Midlands, Ireland

Initiative for coal regions in transition

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Energy

Directorate B – Just Transition, Consumers, Energy Security, Efficiency and Innovation

Unit B.1 - Consumers, Local Initiatives, Just Transition

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ISBN: 978-92-68-18262-8 doi: 10.2833/05781 MJ-05-24-521-EN-N

Manuscript completed in January 2024

1st edition

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Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2024

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Midlands, Ireland

GENERAL INFORMATION

Country: Midlands

Region Name: Ireland

Region NUTS2 code¹: IE06 - Eastern and Midlands

Region NUTS3 code: IE063 - Midlands Region

Main urban centres in the region²:

Portlaoise (21,225)

Athlone (21,398)

Mullingar (22,276)

Tullamore (15,470)

Longford (11,347)



1. NUTS: Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics

2. Central Statistical Office of Ireland. Estimated Population (Persons in April). As of 15 November 2023 : <https://data.cso.ie/table/PEA04>

Regional socio-economic profile

General description of the socio-economic profile of the region

The Midlands region consists of four counties, Laois, Offaly, Longford and Westmeath and has a population of 324,600 inhabitants – making up 6.15% of the total Irish population.³ It is located in the centre of Ireland and is mostly rural, with a population density of 46.6 persons/km² as compared to the national average of 71.9 persons/km².⁴ Midlands population is relatively young and the region has seen population growth of 8.4% in recent years (from 2016 to 2022).⁵

Despite several economic crises and major political events, unemployment rates in the Midlands region have decreased

from 22.6% in 2012 to 4.7% at the end of 2022⁶ – in line with the overall trend in Ireland and the EU.⁷ The most important sectors in terms of employment are health and social work activities, wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles and industry. Sectors that are stronger in the Midlands region than overall in Ireland are agriculture, forestry and fishing and transportation.⁸

GDP per capita in the Midlands Region was 26.6% of the national average in 2020 (EUR 19,905 compared to EUR 74,908). With the capital city of Dublin located in the Eastern and Midlands Region (NUTS 2), notable regional differences exist: the average disposable income per person in the Midlands (NUTS 3) is of EUR 23,129, compared to EUR 27,686 in Dublin (in 2020).⁹

Regional coal+ industry profile			
Peat harvesting			
Type of resource	Peat		
Type of peat processing	Milled peat, used in power stations Peat briquettes, used for domestic heating		
Scale of Boglands	80,000 hectares owned by Bord na Móna across Ireland		
Production of peat [Mt annual]	Peat harvesting ceased in 2020 ¹⁰	Year of prod. Data: 2022	
Main (largest) peat extraction enterprises			
Name	Ownership	Number of employees	Year of employee data
Bord na Móna	Public	1,500 direct employees for the whole company ¹¹	2022
Total level of employment in peat industry (in the region)		1,500	2022

3. Central Statistical Office of Ireland. Estimated Population (Persons in April). As of 15 November 2023: <https://data.cso.ie/table/PEA04>

4. Eurostat. Population density by NUTS 3 region 1990-2019. As of 31 December 2022: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/product/page/demo_r_d3dens

5. Central Statistical Office of Ireland. Components of Population Change 2016 to 2022 at NUTS3 level. As of 31 December 2022: <https://data.cso.ie/table/FP005>

6. Central Statistical Office of Ireland. Persons aged 15 years and over 2012-2022. As of 31 December 2022: <https://data.cso.ie/table/QLF08>

7. Eurostat. Eurostat. Unemployment rates by sex, age, educational attainment level and NUTS 2 regions (%). As of 31 December 2022: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfst_r_lfu3rt/default/table?lang=en

8. Central Statistical Office of Ireland. Estimates of Household Income 2000-2020. As of 31 December 2022: <https://data.cso.ie/table/QLF07>

9. Central Statistical Office of Ireland. Gross Value Added 2000-2020. As of 31 December 2022: <https://data.cso.ie/table/RAA05>

10. Bord Na Mona. From carbon source to carbon sink. Available at: <https://www.bordnamona.ie/peatlands/peatlands-and-climate/>

11. Bord Na Mona. Bord na Móna is a climate solutions company. Available at: <https://www.bordnamona.ie/who-we-are/overview/>

Regional peat power plant profile			
Peat power plants			Year of data
Number of peat power plants	1 (Edenderry Biomass Power plant) ¹²		2022
Installed capacity [MW]	38.4MW produced from peat and biomass ¹³		2022
Share of peat in regional power generation mix [%]	1.6% ¹⁴		2021
Main (largest) peat power plant operators			
Name	Ownership	Number of employees	Year of employee data
Edenderry Power (Bord na Móna)	Semi-state-owned	45 ¹⁵	2020
Total level of employment in peat power plants (in the region)		45	2020

Regional and local transition strategies and plans

Status and timeline of peat transition/phase-out

For more than 75 years, peat was a key resource for energy generation in Ireland. Industrial-scale extraction of peat in Ireland has been used both to supply power plants (electricity generation) and the production of peat briquettes for domestic heating. Peat harvesting and burning activities in the Midlands were monopolised by the semi-state-owned Bord na Móna and ESB companies – which remain important employers in the region.

From delivering one third of electricity generation in the 1970s/80s and playing a dominant role in the regional local economy, the use of peat fell to 1.5% of energy input in electricity generation in 2021. In 2019, milled peat amounted to 3 Mt/year; briquettes to around 500,000 t/year. At that time, three power plants were operational generating around 370MW. Peat harvesting activities were sustained through government support, with the ESB-owned stations ceasing the generation of electricity in April 2020. The sudden closure of West Offaly and Lough Ree power plants in 2020 prevented 2 million tonnes of peat from being burned, reducing carbon emissions by 51%. However, 68 ESB workers needed to be redeployed

and 380 Bord na Móna workers needed to leave through a voluntary redundancy scheme, with a further 70 retirees/resignations. This also had significant indirect impacts on contractors in the Midlands and other adjoining counties.

By early 2023, the only remaining Midland-based station was Edenderry, currently using both peat and biomass. This power plan is set to be fully converted to biomass by 2024 with further socio-economic consequences for the region and the local communities that have been established alongside the bog areas in the Midlands and other surrounding counties.

These ambitions are aligned with the national targets of phasing out peat by 2030, or at the very latest by 2035, and the overall policy commitments of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (CALCD) Act¹⁶ and Climate Action Plan 2021 (CAP21)¹⁷ to reduce carbon emissions by 51% by 2030 (from 2018) and to achieve a climate resilient, biodiversity-rich, environmentally sustainable and climate neutral economy by 2050. Furthermore, CAP21 sets out ambitions to increase renewable energy generation by 80% while the Act provides for a just transition, within the wider statutory framework of climate action, enabling increased new employment and opportunities, while supporting those most negatively impacted.

12. West Offaly Power and Lough Ree power plants were closed in the end of 2020

13. Power Technology. Power plant profile: Edenderry Biomass Power Plant, Ireland. Available at: <https://www.power-technology.com/marketdata/power-plant-profile-edenderry-biomass-power-plant-ireland/>

14. Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. Energy in Ireland 2022 Report. Available at: <https://www.seai.ie/publications/Energy-in-Ireland-2022.pdf>

15. Midlands Regional Transition Team. Future employment and skills in the Irish Midlands. Available at: https://energy.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-08/future_employment_and_skills_in_the_irish_midlands_0.pdf

16. Government of Ireland. Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021. Available at: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/act/32/enacted/en/print>

17. Government of Ireland. Climate Action Plan 2021. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/6223e-climate-action-plan-2021/>

Current regional strategies and plans for transition (including for economic development, diversification, and decarbonisation)

The Territorial Just Transition Plan for Ireland (TJTP) presents the impacts of the end of peat extraction for energy production on the region and identifies the development needs and priorities for the territory in order to address these impacts.¹⁸ It sets the basis for the JTF programme for Ireland and that will provide investments of EUR 269 million until 2027. The programme will focus on three priorities:

- Generating employment for former peat communities by investing in the diversification of the local economy
- Supporting the restoration and rehabilitation of degraded peatlands and regeneration and repurposing of industrial heritage assets
- Providing former peat communities with smart and sustainable mobility options to enable them to benefit directly from the green transition.

The Regional Economic and Spatial Strategy

2019-2027 (RSES) is a strategic plan which identifies regional assets, opportunities and pressures and provides appropriate policy responses in the form of Regional Policy Objectives.¹⁹ It provides a framework for investment to better manage spatial planning and economic development to sustainably grow the Region to 2031 and beyond, including a spatial strategy, economic strategy, metropolitan plan, investment framework and climate action strategy for the Eastern and Midland region.

The Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024 (MREP)

is an action plan to guide projects and initiatives across the four Midlands counties (Longford, Westmeath, Laois and Offaly).²⁰ Priorities include: the transition to a zero-carbon region; the continued development through smart specialisation in existing areas of regional strength in manufacturing and food; and the positioning the Midlands as a region of choice for people to live and for achieving business success.

The Brown to Green Strategy of Bord na Móna

(2018)²¹ aims to accelerate the development of renewable energy assets, assessing the potential for new business developments such as land-based aquaculture, energy parks, production of high-value herb products.

Principal actors in development and implementation of transition strategies and plans

At national level: Government of Ireland: Department of Communications, Climate Actions & Environment; Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht; Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, and the Just Transition Commissioner.

At regional level:

- Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly
- Midlands Regional Transition Team
- Bord na Móna and ESB (energy companies)
- Regional Skills Forum
- Eastern and Midland Climate Action Regional Office
- Midlands Industry Forum / Midlands Industry Collaboration Group
- Technological University of Shannon

At local level:

- Local Authorities of Offaly, Laois, Westmeath, Longford, Kildare, Roscommon, Galway
- Local Enterprise Offices
- Education & Training Boards
- Local Community Development Committees
- Local Enterprise offices
- Laoise and Offaly Education and Training Board

Regional and local transition projects and initiatives

Notable ongoing and recent transition-related initiatives and projects

- **The Renewable Electricity Support Scheme** is designed to prompt significant expansion of wind (both onshore and offshore) and solar-power generation, also including citizen energy options

18. Government of Ireland. Territorial Just Transition Plan Ireland. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4d421-eu-just-transition-fund/#:~:text=Ireland's%20first%20Territorial%20Just%20Transition,order%20to%20address%20these%20impacts>

19. Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly. Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region. Available at: <https://emra.ie/final-rses/>

20. Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024. Available at: <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/publications/midlands-regional-enterprise-plan-to-2024.html>

21. Bord na Móna. Bord na Móna reports progress on Brown to Green Strategy and costs of decarbonisation programme. Available at: <https://www.bordnamona.ie/bord-na-mona-reports-progress-on-brown-to-green-strategy-and-costs-of-decarbonisation-programme/>

- **The Rural Regeneration Development Fund²²** provides EUR 1 billion to be invested in rural Ireland over the period 2019 to 2027 for projects including infrastructure; building refurbishment, redevelopment and/or demolition; community or public facilities infrastructure; telecommunications connectivity; projects that support job creation, entrepreneurship and innovation in rural areas; enhancement of heritage and/or other community assets including the provision/enhancement of recreational or leisure facilities.
- **The Green Skills Programmes** run by SOLAS and ETBs²³ are programmes to develop green skills of employees in the areas of Environmental Sustainability in the Workplace; Sustainable Business Practices; Resource Efficiency in the Workplace; Circular Economy; Sustainable Procurement and Greening the Supply Chain.
- **The Midlands Retrofit programme²⁴** is a funding scheme that will support the energy upgrade (retrofit) works to houses owned by local authorities (councils) in the Midlands.
- **The Peatlands & People LIFE project (2020-2027)²⁵** including Accelerate Green²⁶ is a EUR 10 million project funded by the EU LIFE Programme. The project aims to develop a regional Peatlands Knowledge Centre of Excellence, a Just Transition Accelerator, including bioeconomy, Accelerate Green, to support enterprise development in the region, and an immersive People's Discovery Attraction.
- **The National Just Transition Fund²⁷** was made available in 2020 to support communities transitioning to a low carbon economy. The focus of the fund was on retraining workers and generating sustainable employment in green enterprise across the Midlands region. The fund will finance 56 projects across the categories Business Development, Education, Training and Upskilling, Development of Co-Working and Enterprise Hubs, Renewable Energies and Retrofitting, Tourism, Heritage and Restoration, Community Development and Capacity Building, and Greenways and Walking. An example: Connecting Communities with Peatlands – Irish Rural Link²⁸
- **The Midlands Skills Centre** opened in 2019 in Tullamore. It is a facility catering to the specialist training and upskilling of people that wish to seek employment in the biopharma and medical-tech sectors.

- **The Retrofit and NZEB Training Facility** at Mount Lucas were developed for former Bord na Móna employees focussing on deep retrofit measures, offering the trainee an opportunity to gain certification in Thermal Insulation Installation.

Notable planned transition-related initiatives and projects

The **EU Just Transition Fund in Ireland** will invest in economic diversification and job creation in green sectors such as sustainable tourism and bioeconomy, in particular, in around 500 local micro, small and medium-sized businesses. Moreover, the JTF will focus on investments in research and development in the areas of green and circular economy and will also support the development of sustainable and smart mobility in the region by contributing to the decarbonisation of local bus routes and bus operators' fleets, as well as to the installation of fast charging points for electric vehicles. The restoration and repurposing of 12,500 hectares of land to regenerate biodiversity and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from degraded land will also be the focus of the funding²⁹.

Pobal, the Irish government agency that manages EU grants for local development under 41 programmes, schemes and services in the areas of Social Inclusion and Equality, Inclusive Employment and Enterprise, and Early Years and Young People.³⁰ In the context of EU JTF, the following schemes will be funded in the coming years:

- **EU Just Transition Fund: Local and Regional Economic Strategies Support Scheme:** this scheme is set out to support the implementation of bottom-up transition strategies and projects that generate jobs for former peat communities by investing in the diversification of the local economy. Categories for applying are divided into 1) EU JTF Local Economic and Community Plans Projects of EUR 200,000 to 1 million and 2) EU JTF Regional Enterprise Plans/ Strategic Flagship Projects of EUR 1 to 5 million.
- **EU Just Transition Fund Community Facilities EV Charging Scheme:** this scheme provides funding to applicants that want to install electric vehicle charge points at community facilities across the EU JTF territory, e.g. at Community Centres, Public Libraries, Primary Health Care Centres, Public Recreational Amenities and Enterprise Hubs or Centres.

22. Government of Ireland. Rural Regeneration and Development fund. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/05bfe-rural-regeneration-and-development-fund/>

23. SOLAS. New Upskilling Programmes - Green Skills. Available at: <https://www.solas.ie/programmes/skills-to-advance/Training-Programmes/>

24. Government of Ireland. Midlands Retrofit Programme for Local Authority Homes. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/de8c5-midlands-retrofit-programme-for-local-authority-homes-2020/>

25. Peatlands and People Project. Peatlands and People. Available at: <https://peatlandsandpeople.ie/>

26. Peatlands and People Project. Accelerate Green. Available at: <https://accelerategreen.ie/about-accelerate-green/>

27. Government of Ireland. National Just Transition Fund. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ed10d-just-transition-fund/>

28. Irish Rural Link. CONNECTING COMMUNITIES WITH PEATLANDS. Available at: <https://irishrurallink.ie/project/connecting-communities-with-peatlands/>

29. https://ireland.representation.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/eu-cohesion-policy-eu169-million-just-climate-transition-ireland-2022-12-19_en

30. Pobal. Programmes. Available at: <https://www.pobal.ie/programmes/>

Bord na Móna diversification plans include investments in clean energies in the form of further expansion of energy generation through wind, solar, biomass and biogas; waste management investments into every stage of the waste management chain and efforts to further decarbonise and increase the effectiveness of waste collection, sorting and repurposing; and finally peatlands restoration, which includes rehabilitation of 8,125 hectares of bog to peat-forming conditions (7,273 hectares were restored to date).³¹

Regional and local transition challenges and opportunities

Nature and scale of key transition challenges

The Midlands covers a largely rural community where agriculture, peat and the overall energy industry play an important role in the local economy. Milling peat has a long history in Ireland, deeply engrained in generations of families that made their living alongside the peat industry. People are very proud of their heritage that provided a stable income for families for many decades. Both Bord na Móna and the ESB have provided significant levels of employment across different regions of Ireland for over 70 years. Bringing in new industries risks the cohesion and identity of the region.

In 2020, approximately 1,664 people were directly employed across the Bord na Móna sites (excluding seasonal workers), of which a third were engaged in the peat business. Other business areas were resource recovery, relating to waste collection and recycling services, waste to energy generation and renewable energy development. Contraction of the workforce over recent years has contributed to ageing of Bord na Móna's workforce, with an age profile of workers that is largely over 50 with relatively lower levels of educational attainment. Despite Bord na Móna's provision of training for greener jobs, finding alternative work for former peat workers is still proving challenging due to lack of transferability of skills attuned to the workers' role in peat extraction, as shown in a recent study.³²

Despite overall low unemployment figures, the Midlands traditionally has the third highest unemployment rate in Ireland (after Border region and Dublin). The end of the peat industry could potentially lead to pockets of higher unemployment rates in the affected bog communities. Employment opportunities outside of the region can increase the pressures on the rail and road networks with increased commuting towards larger towns and cities. The restructuring can also have wider socio-economic impacts, such as loss of purchasing power within rural communities and businesses (i.e. agricultural, retail and hospitality sector), loss of seasonal employment and reduced local authority rates with consequences for the provision of local services.

Finally, Midlands faces further socio-economic issues such as rural depopulation and the out-migration of the young generation as well as challenges related to the gender perspective of transition – with women being reliant on their partners and becoming more responsible for providing income themselves.

Nature and scale of key transition opportunities

Opportunities within the region particularly relate to the further expansion of renewable energy capacities. With the Midlands traditionally being a net energy producer, the Just Transition agenda provides a pathway for the exit from carbon-based energy to renewable energy sources and to carbon storage solutions via the regenerated bogs. The growth of remote working and service delivery provides the Midlands with the opportunity to regenerate its rural towns and villages. Tourism, heritage, social enterprises, retail, technology, biodiversity and culture are potential drivers of economic activity and employment in rural areas – also among young workers and women.

31. Bord na Móna. Climate solutions for a cleaner, brighter future. Available at: <https://www.bordnamona.ie/climate-solutions/overview/>

32. Banerjee, A. and Schuitema, G. (2022). 'How Just Are Just Transition Plans? Perceptions of Decarbonisation and Low-Carbon Energy Transitions among Peat Workers in Ireland'. Energy Research and Social Science, 88, pp.1-10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2022.102616>.

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