

# AN OFFALY LOT DONE... FOR PEAT'S SAKE!

Bord na Móna and Offaly County Council have welcomed the prestigious award for Lough Boora Discovery Parklands, which was recently crowned Ireland's Best Place at this year's Royal Town Planning Institute's annual dinner in Dublin.

**T**he Royal Town Planning Institute, which has 25,000 members worldwide, held a nationwide competition during the summer where over 150 nominations were made for places right around the country.

The nominations were selected to celebrate places protected, planned or improved by town planners for communities were shortlisted down to 10 by a panel of judges and then went to a public vote. Lough Boora Parklands – a thriving nature and outdoor sculpture park – was crowned the overall winner of RTPI Ireland's Best Places competition.

Anna Marie Delaney, Chief Executive with Offaly County Council, said the award is true recognition of the results which can be achieved by state agencies co-operating with each other. "That the project has been developed to today's excellent standard, including the Sculpture Park, many kilometres of paved trails and a lovely visitor centre over 25 years, is testimony to the strength of the vision in the first place and also the determination to keep going and get the job done."

She added that to further complement the Discovery Park, Offaly County Council is currently developing a greenway along the Grand Canal from Tullamore to the parklands. "This is being delivered in conjunction with Waterways Ireland and since 2017 the council has completed the first 10km of high quality cycleway from Tullamore westwards. We hope to complete the 71kms of the Grand Canal Greenway through Offaly under the National Greenway Strategy Fund."

## GREAT PARTNERSHIP

Andrew Murray, Senior Planner with Offaly County Council, said he was privileged to work in partnership with Bord na Móna on the project over the past 10 years. He noted that his predecessors in the council had been to the forefront in supporting Tom Egan and his team in developing the initial vision more than 25 years ago.

"It's heartening to see how Tom and his colleagues never wavered from their vision and developed a truly wonderful after use for these industrial peatlands. The parklands now attract 100,000 visitors per annum.

"This project took vision, grit and determination to make a superb amenity from an industrial peatland site. 'Reimagining' like this, but on an enormous scale will need to take place on the remainder of the industrial peatlands as they cease peat production over the next decade and we must take the lesson



*Situated in what was once an industrial peat bog over a decade ago in County Offaly, Lough Boora Parklands now attracts some 100,000 visitors a year.*

from Lough Boora that nothing is impossible."

With good planning from the outset, Murray said he hopes that the bogs will accommodate a huge variety of uses in the future, "from simply leaving some of them to re-wild themselves right through the vast range of development and amenity after-uses that are possible".

## IRELAND'S BEST PLACE

Almost 12,000 people voted on a shortlist of 10 places. Lough Boora Parklands had an impressive 18% share of the total votes cast. Tully Cross, a scenic village in County Galway, and Cork City Centre, the thriving and historic city centre, won second and third place respectively.

Situated in County Offaly, Lough Boora Parklands attracts some 100,000 visitors a year. Once an industrial peat bog, its transformation includes the creation of a nature reserve maintained by the Irish Wildlife Trust that aims to ensure its natural resources and biodiversity remain for generations to come.

A visitor centre, café and extensive trails encourage cyclists and walkers to explore the beautiful landscape and sculpture park, which showcases sculptures from national and international artists.

John Acres, President of the Royal Town Planning Institute,



Minister Damien English TD, Minister for Housing and Urban Development (centre) pictured with (l-r): Andrew Murray, Offaly County Council Senior Planner; John Acres, RTPI President and Bord na Mona's Tom Egan and Pat Ring, at the recent presentation of the award at the RTPI annual dinner in Dublin.

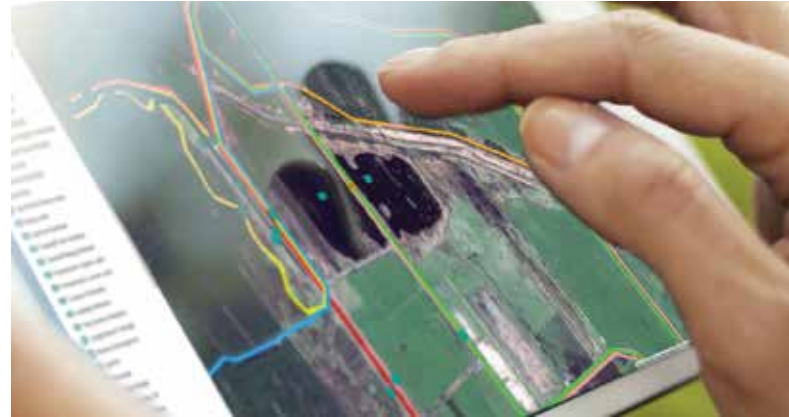
said: "Lough Boora Parklands is an exemplar of partnership working. Several agencies – Offaly County Council, Bord na Mona and the Irish Wildlife Trust – came together to transform a disused site into a remarkable tourist attraction like no other in Ireland. This shows the real value of planners being able to integrate approaches which balance the differing needs, challenges and opportunities for the park."

Referring to the long working association between the council's planners and Bord na Mona, Offaly's Senior Planner Andrew Murray said that almost 25 years ago, representatives of the local community, the Council and Bord na Mona formed the Lough Boora Group. "They completed a feasibility study that formed a blueprint for the subsequent development of the greater Lough Boora area, looking at the use of the site after the end of the peat harvesting.

"With their combined vision, Offaly County Council and Bord Na Mona worked collaboratively on securing funding for the delivery of the network of paved trails and in particular the

spectacular 'Sculpture in the Parklands'.

"To further complement the Discovery Park, Offaly County Council has, over the past year been delivering a cycle track along the Grand Canal from Tullamore to Lough Boora. The council's planning team was particularly pleased to work with Bord na Mona in 2013 to find an optimal position and design for



You can explore the local sculptures, lakes, wetlands and facilities using this interactive map of Lough Boora Discovery Park, which is located between Tullamore, Birr and Clonmacnoise.

the excellent visitor centre and coffee shop. We look forward to continued collaboration."

### A VISIONARY PROJECT

Marion Chalmers, Chair of RTPI Ireland, described the Lough Boora Parkland as "a visionary project" which has secured sustainable natural rural regeneration of a former major industrial peat bog right in the centre of Ireland.

"Of particular importance is the praise and respect Bord Na Mona has for the planners that have worked with them since the inception of the project. Additionally impressive is the continued commitment of the Lough Boora Group to working together to further grow and invest in the asset of the Lough Boora Parklands as a resource and attraction of regional and national importance.

"It certainly merits achieving the Ireland's Best Place Award and RTPI Ireland looks forward to watching the Parklands develop and evolve far into the future," she concluded.



Tom Egan, Bord na Móna's Land Project Manager of Lough Boora (seated holding the award) and John Acres, RTPI President (seated right) pictured with original employees and community representatives who set up the Discovery Park, in addition to Offaly Tourism officials.