

Whinell Forest in the Lake District is one of five Center Parcs Villages in the UK.

# LONGFORD PLAYS MAJOR ROLE IN RURAL ACTION PLAN

*The €230m Center Parcs holiday resort, due to open in Newcastle Wood in the south of County Longford later this summer, forms a major part of the overall Action Plan for Rural Ireland. Launched in January 2017 in Ballymahon, Co. Longford, the plan has put the spotlight firmly on the midlands county, placing it on the national stage. Report by Grace Heneghan.*

**D**espite being damaged by the recession and somewhat slow to recover, compared to neighbouring counties in the midlands and along the east coast, Longford is very resilient with a tradition of skill, pride and an excellent workforce, according to Paddy Mahon, Chief Executive of Longford County Council.

“We are very happy to collaborate with our neighbouring counties, in addition to agencies in both the public

and private sectors to achieve our goals, and are well positioned to work with central government, now having a renewed focus on rural Ireland,” he noted.

The launch of the Action Plan for Rural Ireland in January 2017 in Ballymahon, attended by four cabinet ministers, generated great media coverage, putting Longford on the national stage.

“It made us part of a national conversation when we needed to

be there. We are well positioned to deliver on the plan for many years to come,” Mahon told delegates at a recent conference in Longford, hosted by the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG).

## MAXIMISING RURAL TOURISM

One major development in the heart of rural Ireland, certainly set to place Longford on the national and international stage, is the Center Parcs holiday resort, which is due to open



**Pictured in Newcastle Wood in early 2018 to mark the granting of planning permission for Center Parcs Longford Forest were Longford County Council's Cathaoirleach Cllr Mick Cahill and Chief Executive Paddy Mahon with council officials.**

for business this summer. Mahon said it has created a challenge for Longford County Council to put in place good quality tourism products and to enhance and develop features and amenities to attract people to the county.

Center Parcs first started work on the 375-acre site acquired from Coillte in May 2017, and it will be a significant €230m investment in Newcastle Wood, located just 5km from Ballymahon in the south of the county. Once completed the development will create 1,000 permanent jobs under an extensive recruitment programme this summer.

"The design of the main building – called the Sub-Tropical Paradise – is a spectacular swimming pool like no other, and looks somewhat similar to the Aviva Stadium in Dublin. The development consists of 66 holiday homes, 30 apartments with over

100 activities on site, indoor shops and restaurants. With two main Irish contractors on board, plus local sub-contractors, local builders and local suppliers, this has given a huge boost to Longford.

"We're delighted to have Center Parcs in Longford and we have built up a great relationship with them. Their chief executive is regularly in Longford to oversee the development and, with his management team, he regularly hosts community forums in the local hotel in Ballymahon to discuss issues local people may have about the development. There will be one more forum before they open for business this summer."

Although 'Center Parcs' is not instantly recognisable in Ireland, within the UK it is well known as a quality short-break destination leisure provider. Indeed, the five Centre Parcs villages in the UK are open all year

## **FACTFILE – PADDY MAHON**

From Tuam in County Galway, Paddy Mahon graduated from UCG in 1984 with a Bachelor of Engineering – BE in Civil Engineering. He also has a Master in Business Administration (MBA) from DCU.

He worked in the construction industry in London and Sydney in the 1980s, before returning to Ireland to work with Mayo County Council in 1991 and progressed to the position of Director of Services with Mayo County Council. Paddy was appointed Chief Executive of Longford County Council in July 2017.



round and enjoy an occupancy rate of 97% "They're very confident that the same occupancy rates can be achieved in Ireland. It will form a significant part of the tourism element here in Longford," noted Paddy Mahon.

## **ENTERPRISE & EMPLOYMENT**

The Town and Village Scheme was launched in October 2017 by Michael Ring TD, Minister for Rural and

Community Development, in Granard Butter Market. “This was a significant launch because under the Town and Village Scheme, as part of the 2017 Allocation of Grants, Longford received significant funding for very important projects in supporting sustainable communities throughout Longford Town, Edgeworthstown, Drumlish, Ballymahon and Granard.

The Action Plan is bringing some confidence back to the communities, and has enabled our elected representatives on the council to develop other towns and projects in the county.”

The launch of the Center Parcs project in Ballymahon in mid-October 2016 came around the same time as the closure of a significant IDA-backed company in Longford Town.

Led by Longford County Council and with the support of Longford Chamber of Commerce, elected members, the IDA, Enterprise Ireland, Educational Training Board, Regional Skills Forum, Department of Social Protection and Longford’s Local Enterprise Office, an interagency group was established with four key objectives.

These included the provision of support services to the 200 people who had lost their jobs, the retention of the 50 or so ordinary jobs in jeopardy, finding a new client for the former site, and the promotion of Longford for FDI and indigenous investment.

“It was a significant challenge for the economic development of the county. Due to a series of actions and events, the job losses have not had a significant impact on the live register.

This indicated to us through the Department of Social Protection that people were finding work elsewhere, other opportunities and investments were happening, people were retraining and upskilling, so there was no major drop in employment figures.

“A new client is now on site providing up to 150 jobs, with a significant investment attraction and job creation to Longford in the intervening two years. In terms

of supporting enterprise and employment we have very clear evidence of interagency groups working together with a very clear vision and clear focus to readjust their sights and abilities.

“This will ensure economic recovery and development in a rural county like Longford, working in harmony with the local authority. It was a challenge for the local authority to take the lead on this from day one but the Cathaoirleach Cllr Mick Cahill,” was on hand to make it happen.

**ICONIC TOURISM FACILITIES**

Over the last number of years, the council has done significant work on some key iconic tourism facilities in the county, signalling a new era.

an excellent quality amenity that is now regularly used by the locals and we expect it will attract visitors from outside the county in time, when the Royal Canal is fully up and running, just outside Ballymahon, which links the Shannon with Dublin.”

Between 2013 and 2018 a 45km stretch of greenway was completed in the county, and this year it will form part of the 100km Royal Canal Greenway, linking Dublin along the Royal Canal with the River Shannon.

Mahon said it will be the longest canal greenway anywhere on the island of Ireland. “The council received much support for this initiative from our elected members, our own resources, from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the



**The design of the main building – called ‘Sub-Tropical Paradise’ – looks somewhat similar to the Aviva Stadium in Dublin, according to Mahon.**

For example, it launched the Corlea Trackway (a 5km walkway around a disused Bord na Mona bog and on the perimeter of the Corlea Visitor Centre). There’s also an interpretative centre located a few miles south of Longford Town.

“Supported by the Town and Village Scheme, the project is a partnership between the council, the local community and Bord na Mona, and is linked to the Royal Canal. It’s

Department of Rural & Community Development. This is a fantastic amenity in a beautiful part of the country.”

**‘HIDDEN HEARTLANDS’ BRAND**

And last year Fáilte Ireland also launched the ‘Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands’ brand – the final part of the branding profile being developed over a number of years. “The Hidden Heartlands, which follows



**The Royal Canal Greenway between Ballymahon and Killashee was officially opened by Michael Ring TD, Minister for Rural and Community Development, on 22 February 2018.**

in the footsteps of the successful Wild Atlantic Way, incorporates counties such as Longford, Leitrim, Roscommon, parts of Westmeath, Galway and Offaly, and it's centred round the River Shannon."

When he was first appointed Chief Executive to Longford in July 2017, Paddy Mahon said the one thing that impressed him was the county's inclusion as part of Ireland's Ancient East.

"However, a certain level of uncertainty about an association with the Ancient East brand resulted in significant campaigns by Longford and its neighbouring counties to convince the authorities that a new brand was vital in order to attract the visitors.

"Fáilte Ireland came to the same conclusion that this was the right thing to do, and we were delighted to attend the brand launch of the Hidden Heartlands in Athlone last year by Ministers Shane Ross and Boxer Moran."

For Longford's chief executive, a key element of Fáilte Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand is the Shannon Masterplan. "We're working with agencies such as Waterways Ireland

and Failte Ireland, because the Shannon, the Royal Canal, Center Parcs and other projects underway in the county have the potential to attract a new type of tourist to the county."

He said that the council is a;sp working very hard in developing Longford's Rebel and Literary Trails, and has shown leadership in fostering culture and creativity, particularly during the 1916 commemoration by re-enacting historical events.

"A Creative Longford Plan has also been launched to support and promote local artists at selected venues throughout the county, supported by the county council.

And in particular we were absolutely delighted to support the launch of the Albert Reynolds Memorial Lecture in Longford Town on 10 December 2018, and the first speaker was the former Prime Minister John Major, whose talk in light of Brexit and doing business with the UK was very timely."

#### REGENERATION IN LONGFORD

In terms of the overall regeneration of Longford, the council has set up

a regeneration team to deal primarily deal with unfinished estates. Mahon said that project is effectively being addressed, and only a small number of housing estates now need attention.

Meanwhile, the Longford Innovation and Digital Hub (LIADH) will be developed with the support of the Dept of Rural and Community Development and Enterprise Ireland. Just before Christmas 2018 it was announced that €1m would be made available under the Urban Regeneration Development Fund (URDF) for the Longford Connected Project, to improve the connectivity throughout the towns.

"We're now beginning to see the signs of regeneration in Longford Town; €2.8m for Granard Motte and €1.2m for Edgeworthstown has been made available under the Rural Regeneration Development Fund (RRDF) to enable local communities in both towns to become more sustainable, confident and grow economically.

"We achieved our projects over the last number of years and we have had the capacity to do so. Last September with the advent of new schemes and with a certain element of expectation, we realised that we needed to plan for these new schemes. Following discussions with the Cathaoirleach, the elected members and our regeneration team, we have decided to further strengthen our team and restructure how we do things in order to be well positioned.

"In the meantime we have put those changes in place and funding has been secured. It has always been about a partnership approach between the executive, the elected members, our own staff, local communities and other agencies. By working together we will be able to deliver on these significant challenges."