

Batten down the hatches as Met sites shut

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THE winds of change are blowing through Met Eireann. A combination of urban sprawl and exorbitant land prices is forcing our weather experts to shut down one-fifth of their national stations.

Main depots in Kilkenny, Belmullet in Co Mayo and Clones in Co Monaghan are closing, as the encroachment of housing developments on to their land means the locations are no longer remote enough to accurately monitor the elements.

And the high cost of land means Met Eireann cannot afford to buy new sites in the same areas.

The closures mean the weather reports will never be the same again. Until now, there was always something curiously comforting about tuning in and hearing that in Belmullet it was still wet with strong gales; while in Kilkenny there was either blazing sunshine or the temperatures were in the minuses.

But within the next two years, these familiar stations will be closed indefinitely, and so they will never again trip off the tongues of meteorologists like Evelyn Cusack and Aidan Nulty.

Liam Keegan of Met Eireann explained: "Sites need to be reasonably open in order to get complete exposure to the elements.

"If there are houses close by, then the temperatures will be higher, the wind gets affected and the rain measurements may be incorrect, it is impossible to get it right.

"We assessed the locations of the stations around the country and unfortunately a few of them were not suitable anymore for this reason.

"We have 15 main stations nationwide at the moment, but three of them will close over a period of the next two years."

One of these is the station on Granges Road, Kilkenny, which has been a permanently manned synoptic frontline station (SFS) since the Fifties. It will be moved to the already existing nearby Carlow station, which will in turn be upgraded to an SFS.

Kilkenny is an important location as it is quite often the hottest spot in the country.

Mr Keegan said: "The highest temperature in Ireland is usually recorded in the summer in Kilkenny, and often the lowest in the winter time, because of where it is located.

"So that will be different from now on, certainly. But in recent years, temperatures recorded in Kilkenny were becoming artificially high due to the station's proximity to housing."

Clones station, which is now surrounded by a housing estate, will be moved to the agricultural college in Ballyhaise, Co Monaghan, which will be upgraded from an observation point to a main depot. Met Eireann is still searching for a suitable site to move the Belmullet office to.

The weather body said the closures were necessary, as buying new land in Kilkenny, Clones and Belmullet was not an option because of cost.

"You need a big space for a weather station, there needs to be a protective buffer of land all around. The cost of land now makes this too expensive," said Keegan.

"There is development going on everywhere now. Land owners are happy to lease us the use of the site, but ask them to guarantee there will be no building all around it and then it is a very different story."

The closures will also allow Met Eireann to continue with its ongoing automation of the weather service.

"Twenty years ago, all our stations were operated by people, but now we are working on phase two of our automation project, and these developments will help bring Irish weather stations on to a new level of automation."