

**COMHAIRLE CHONTAE LAOISE**  
**LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL**  
**CORPORATE PLAN 2019 - 2024**  
**ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT, JANUARY 2021**



**Principal Activities and Functions of the Council**

Laois County Council is a service provider, responsible for a multiplicity of services which impact upon the lives of every citizen in the County. These services range across a broad spectrum including Housing, Roads, Water, Waste Management and Planning Control.

**Laois County Council Corporate Plan 2019 - 2024**

This Corporate Plan provides the framework for the implementation of a coherent strategy for the development of our County for the period 2019 – 2024.

The strategies and objectives outlined in the Plan will enable Laois County Council’s Elected Members and Employees to continue to provide leadership in the promotion and development of the social, economic and cultural life of the County.

**Laois County Council’s Corporate Objectives**

**(1) To enhance the social, cultural and economic lives of the people of Laois**

**Corporate Affairs**

Laois County Council continued to meet on a monthly basis during the year. To comply with public health requirements and to facilitate social distancing requirements meetings were held in the Dunamase Theatre from June 2020 – December 2020 . In addition, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage signed a Ministerial Order on the 20<sup>th</sup> October which allowed for the convening of remote meetings. Standing Orders were revised to take account of both changes. Monthly Management Reports continue to be provided to Members of Laois County Council for consideration at their monthly meetings.

The Municipal Districts - Graiguecullen-Portarlinton, Borris In Ossory-Mountmellick and Portlaoise also continued to meet on a monthly basis.

The Strategic Policy Committees, the details of which are as follows continued to meet in 2020:-

- Housing, Regeneration and Planning,
- Climate Action and Community
- Transport, Environment and Emergency Services,
- Enterprise, Economic Development and Tourism

\*The Annual Report for 2019 was published in line with statutory requirements.

## **County Promotion:**

### **Tourism**

Throughout 2019/2020 Laois County Council continued to promote the county, supporting festivals and events and the Board of Laois Tourism and working with Fáilte Ireland and other state agencies to secure funding for the County and region. 2020 was a very difficult year for the Tourism Sector in Ireland because of the Covid-19 Pandemic and the majority of events planned were cancelled.

### **The Tourism Grants Scheme**

A total of €78,500 was allocated to festivals, events and parades in 2019 through the Council's Tourism Grant Scheme. These included the Old Fort Festival in Portlaoise, the Durrow All Ireland Scarecrow Festival, the Gordon Bennett Classic Car Run and the Ras na mBan International Bike Race, which came to the County for the first time with the Slieve Bloom Mountains chosen as one of the four day race circuits.

One of the largest festivals to take place in the County was the Old Fort Festival which ran from 26<sup>th</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup> June 2019. With an estimated audience of 21,000 the event took place in the grounds of Scoil Mhuire which proved to be a great new location for evening music and entertainment. Local businesses, sponsors, residents, An Garda Síochana and Laois Civil Defence all contributed to make the event the success it was. The confidence in the event has grown and the perception of what the site / festival can do for the County in future years was welcomed.

### **Animation Services for the County Tourism Development Strategy 2018 – 2022:**

The County Tourism Strategy and its actions are overseen by the Board of Laois Tourism. Strategy animation for the Board is provided by Big Ideas Consultants. A new Tourism Website and a suite of Marketing Campaigns have been developed to promote the County and what it has to offer.

### **Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail**

The Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trails is a collective project between Laois & Offaly County Council's and Coillte and will provide a great experience for Mountain Bike enthusiasts to come to the Midland Region. Phase 1 will involve the construction of off-road, cross-country cycling trails on Coillte-owned forest lands, with approximately half in Co. Laois at Baunreagh and half in Co. Offaly at Kinnity. 12.5 KM of trail have been completed in Co. Laois and 25.5 KM in Offaly. When completed there will be 100 KM of trails to explore on the Slieve Bloom Mountains,

### **Tourism Destination Town – Grant Capital Investment**

Laois County Council was awarded a grant of (€500,000) under Failte Ireland's Tourism Destination Town Scheme. Match funding of €174,437 from the Council will be added to

give a total of €674,437 to be used for enhancing the laneways in portlaoise, putting in directional signage, Interpretation at the Old Fort Site, stone paving, lighting painting , seating and soft landscape works. It is anticipated that these works will commence in early 2021 and be completed in early 2022.

### **Barrow Blue Way:**

Funding of €5,067,941 in 2019 to progress the Barrow Blueway project from Lowtown in Robertstown (Kildare) to Vicarstown and Athy was awarded to Waterways Ireland under the the Rural Regeneration Fund. The project was supported by Kildare and Laois County Councils. The planned upgrade is to provide a multi-use shared 46km off-road, flat accessible, public space and leisure route of which 16 km of the Blueway will run through Co. Laois. The proposed upgrade will improve access to the beautiful Barrow Way, to include walkers, cyclists, wheelchairs users and families. The works are due to be completed in early 2022 and will offer exciting opportunities for both recreation and ways to experience many of the community's interesting places from new perspectives. A working committee with representatives from Laois & Kildare County Council's, Waterways Ireland and other agencies are overseeing the project and associated works and promotion.

### **ARTS SECTION**

Laois County Council Arts Service is committed to developing sustainable and progressive arts programmes that are supportive of artistic ambition. Key pillars of the arts programme include: - Youth Arts, Visual arts, the Laois Arthouse Stradbally, the Literary Arts, the Dunamais Arts Centre, The Creative Ireland Laois Programme, Public Art and supports for music development through our partnerships with the Laois School of Music and Music Generation Laois, as well as remaining open to ideas that might emerge through partnerships, and networking with artists and communities. The aim is to create an environment which supports the artist and artistic ambition and increase socially inclusive participation in all artistic programmes, and to support and develop artistic infrastructure, including the Laois Arthouse, Dunamais Arts Centre, Laois Music Centre and other artistic facilities in the County. The Arts Office continued to promote socially inclusive activities wherever possible during 2020, under normal arrangements up to March 2020 and within the constraints and in compliance with Covid-19 restrictions thereafter. These included:

**Laois Arthouse, Stradbally** –a limited exhibition programme took place in 2020.

**Concerts** – In February a successful concert took place at St Peters Church Portlaoise by the Alina Bzhezinska Jazz Quartet, and virtual online events thereafter.

**A Summer Series of professional art workshops** entitled *Artistic Strategies and Techniques for Oil Painting*, was delivered online, involving twelve artists, during the months of June and July. Laois arts office worked closely with Dunamais Arts Centre on the event, to ensure that the Summer Series was produced and managed to the highest quality possible.

**Laois Youth Theatre 2020** - Workshops were adapted and delivered online, via Zoom. A number of short videos were devised and created by LYT members. One commissioned film, created by LYT members, was broadcast on the Creative Laois YouTube, for Creative Ireland's national creativity day for children. There was a repeat viewing for Culture Night Laois 2020. Independent youth theatre programmes, in Mountrath and Portarlinton,

continued to be supported. A short series of online workshops re-commenced in November to the end of the year.

**Writer in Residence Programme;** In August 2020 the Arts Office supported the Creative Ireland Laois Programme in collaboration with the Dunamais Arts Centre to select through open call, two midland-based writers: David Butler: writer-in-residence, and Kate Heffernan: in a writer-in-the community project to work with the community.

**Laois Culture Night** – This event proceeded on Friday 18th of September, including a number of free live and online events.

### **Leaves Festival of Literature and Music 2020**

The annual festival was curated by celebrated poet and writer Dermot Bolger. with a series of free podcasts, facilitated by the Dunamais Arts Centre, entitled Leaves on Air, broadcast daily from 4th- 7th November. The legacy of conversations between Dermot Bolger and celebrated writers, interspersed with music, is available to enjoy online on [www.leavesfestival.ie](http://www.leavesfestival.ie).

### **Dunamais Arts Centre**

Laois County Council continues to support the Dunamais Arts Centre as one of the main arts venues in Laois. The Laois Arts Office continues to work collaboratively with the Dunamais Arts Centre on numerous programmes enriching both programmes.

### **The Artists in Schools Scheme**

Funded by the Arts Office 8 schools in the county were selected to participated in this scheme in 2020. The programme gives students the opportunity to work with professional artists and to experience different art mediums.

**Laois Music Centre (LSM) and Music Generation Laois** now under the management of Laois, Offaly Education and Training Board, (LOETB), continue to be supported and promoted in its development by the Arts Office.

### **Per Cent for Art**

While delayed due to Covid 19, implementation is ongoing for two commissions under the Per Cent for Art commissions for Portlaoise, one for a site adjacent to the new roundabout at O'Moore Park and the other for a site outside the new library on Main Street, Portlaoise,

**Creative Ireland Laois Programme 2020** – the rollout continued of a comprehensive programme, adapted where necessary due to Covid 19 restrictions.

### **SPORT and LEISURE SECTION**

The Sport & Leisure Section delivered the following programmes and services:

- Ongoing management and Maintenance of Play Facilities, with particular emphasis on compliance with COVID 19 government guidelines
- Accessibility Enhancement of play facilities at Portlaoise, Stradbally and Mountrath
- Successful Grant Application to Department of Children & Youth Affairs - € 23,000 for upgrading of Rathdowney Playground
- Assisting with Preparation and delivery of successful Green Flag Award for Páirc an Phobail and Páirc an Phobail Portarlinton
- Provide support to ensure the delivery of leisure services at Laois County Council's public facilities, which has been particularly challenging during COVID 19 pandemic

- Commencement of essential repairs and upgrading works to Portlaoise Leisure Centre to prepare for re-opening after COVID 19 restrictions are lifted
- Partnerships with National Governing Bodies of sport to deliver sports social inclusion programmes countywide
- Preparation of Community groups, schools and clubs for Grant/Funding Applications which included the delivery of workshops
- Co-ordination and delivery of national programmes and events such as Bike Week Programme & European Mobility Week, National Play Day and National Recreation Week, all of which had to be significantly modified to ensure compliance with COVID 19 guidelines.
- Facilitation and ongoing support of SVT (Stradbally, Vicarstown and Timahoe) and Rathdowney/Errill Active Community Hubs
- Preparation of TVRS and ORIS and Rural Regeneration funding applications and overseeing the delivery of same in partnership with communities
- Delivery of Healthy Ireland programmes, within restrictions imposed by the COVID 19 pandemic
- Delivery of Community Resilience Funding Projects, including Winter Wonderland Experience at Portarlinton Leisure Centre
- Ongoing support and promotion for Laois Sports Partnership and other physical activity providers

<p><b>(2) To foster and promote sustainable environmental initiatives and practices in the County/Region</b></p>
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Continuing on the excellent partnership with elected representatives, local communities, schools and agencies, we arranged the following supports, initiatives and Projects:

- Re-establishment of the Laois Federation of Tidy Towns including the election of new Chairperson and Committee.
- Online workshops on topics of interest have been delivered to the Tidy Towns groups as well as ongoing support and advice by in house experts and staff in a range of disciplines.
- Online workshops for teachers involved in the Green-schools programme;
- Two online tutorial series on Food Waste featuring celebrity chef Catherine Fulvio arranged in the Summer and over Festive Season on social media with over 250k views of first series alone.
- Online Upcycling Course for Reuse Month with sustainable living expert “The Useless Project”.
- Laois Youth Volunteers & Laois Young Creatives Scheme 2020 was initiated in the summer in partnership with Laois Partnership Company and LOETB in response to reduced opportunities for young people to gain work experience during the Covid Pandemic. The Scheme aimed to encourage volunteering by young adults by recognising and awarding these efforts.
- Abbeyleix Climate Action Project with Science Communicator Dr Niamh Shaw, working with Abbeyleix Tidy Towns. – This involved production of a series of videos of “Fast Facts” whereby local climate champions and influencers were interviewed informally by Niamh. A three-part webinar series of panel talks was featured for Science Week in November. This all culminated with a virtual launch of Abbeyleix Sustainable Energy Community MasterPlan by Duncan Stewart.

Applications for funding support were invited from interested bodies, groups, committees and organisations who intended to engage in environmental/amenity works during 2019/2020. These included:

#### **Community Grant Scheme (Environmental)**

Grants were awarded to groups based on amenity works which included landscaping, development of open spaces (planting trees & shrubs, flowerbeds etc) and/or purchase of equipment to maintain/improve/clean up areas/open spaces. 182 groups countywide received funding of €62,700 over 2019 and 2020.

#### **Community Environment Action Fund (LA21)**

This grant scheme was administered by LCC in conjunction with the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Change with both parties funding 50% each. Eligible projects were required to support and complement national environmental policies such as those on Waste, Biodiversity, Climate Change, Air, Water, Sustainable Development etc. The Minister asked that priority be given to Climate and Biodiversity projects in the 2019 - 2020 scheme. 19 groups were awarded grants totalling €21,850 during this period.

#### **Tidy Towns Grant Scheme**

Applications for funding support were invited from Tidy Town groups in line with the following themes:

- Community – Your Planning and Involvement
- Green Spaces and Landscaping
- Sustainability – doing more with less
- Residential Streets and Housing Areas
- Community Climate Action
- Streetscape and Public Places
- Nature and Biodiversity in your locality
- Tidiness and Litter Control
- Approach Roads, Streets and Lanes

During 2019 and 2020, €55,919 was allocated in grants to 45 groups under this scheme.

### **CLIMATE CHANGE SECTION**

The **Laois Climate Change Adaption Strategy** was adopted in 2019. By developing and implementing the initiatives therein, we respond to the effects and challenges of climate change, both present and future. This includes measures that will seek to greatly improve the Council's energy efficiency whilst significantly reducing its greenhouse gas emissions and carbon footprint, and continue to progress conservation and carbon reducing initiatives that will aid progression in making Laois a sustainable, climate-resilient region for future generations.

**2040 and Beyond: A Vision for Portlaoise'** is a strategy to re-examine and re-purposes the Town Centre of Portlaoise to a low carbon town. This continued implementation of this pilot programme will serve as a roadmap for the development and rollout of similar low carbon initiatives in county towns across the region. The 'greening' of the Town Centre

will improve the environment and aid in promoting health and well-being of residents and visitors.

During 2020, a wide variety of projects were undertaken, in pursuance of these objectives. Key initiatives include:

- Laois County Council has long been a forerunner in terms of energy efficiency and decarbonisation. Laois County Council achieved the highest SEAI M&R energy efficiency returns completed by a Local Authority and returned to SEAI with an estimated efficiency increase now at 43.2%, up from 41.1% in the previous year.
- A Climate Action Team with cross sectoral representation to deliver the Climate Adaptation Strategy was established.
- Laois County Council established and now co-ordinate Low Carbon Implementation Group which is comprised of a range of stakeholders including CARO, Bord Gais, IT Carlow, NTA, Laois Partnership, Irish Rail, The Cube, Portlaoise Town Team, Enterprise Ireland, Bord Na Mona and local SEC's who are collectively working towards the common goal of reducing the carbon footprint of Portlaoise Town. A number of meetings were held in 2020 and an interim report produced.
- A Carbon Footprint Study of Portlaoise which include a baseline study and register of opportunities for decarbonisation has been completed.

### **Community Development Section**

**Laois Local Community Development Committee** was established in September 2014 for the purposes of developing, co-ordinating and improving a coherent and strategic approach to Local and Community Development. The LCDC oversees the implementation of:

- Social Inclusion Community Action Programme (SICAP)
- Community objectives in the Local Economic & Community Plan
- Implementation of the Laois Local Development Strategy operated under the LEADER Programme 2014 - 2020 in partnership with the local authority (financial partner) and local development company (implementing partner).
- Healthy Ireland – Round 3 Grant in the sum of €246,050 received from the Department of Health in early 2020 to cover a number of initiatives. Due to COVID-19 project completion date for this fund has been extended from 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2021.
- The Sláintecare Unit in the Department of Health, through the Healthy Ireland Fund (HIF) has allocated €67,225 under the Community Resilience Fund, for the 'Keep Well Campaign' effective 13<sup>th</sup> November 2020 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021.
- Laois LCDC approved funding for 37 applicants totalling €58,297 in respect of the DRCD Community Enhancement Programme in 2020. The LCDC funded a further €128,195 under a separate strand of CEP Community Centre and Buildings to a further 20 applicants. In addition, the amount of €46,811 will be awarded to groups to address the effect of COVID on local volunteer and community groups. Applications for this fund opened Dec 2020.
- LEADER Programme 2014–2020 – Laois Local Action Group (LAG) approved 124 projects up to the end of 2020 under the current programme.

- The final date for allocation of LEADER Programme 2014-2020 budget has been extended from 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021.
- In December 2020 Laois LAG were notified that under Irelands LEADER Transitional Programme, Laois will be awarded €485,767 for projects. The Transitional programme will bridge the gap between the EU programming periods and will commence on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021.

### **Community Development Section**

**Laois LCDC** continued to oversee implementation of the SICAP Programme 2018-2022 and administer the annual budget of €600k. The contract implementer is Laois Partnership Company.

#### **Laois Community Support Response Forum**

A **Covid-19 Community Response Forum** was established in County Laois in March 2020 and is co-ordinated by Laois County Council, with representation from multiple statutory and voluntary agencies. The core aim of the Forum is to contribute to the community-wide effort to limit the spread of COVID-19, and assist those who are vulnerable and most in need. Laois County Council, through this Forum, ensures that the wide variety of groups working across the county, do so in an organised, collaborative and targeted way.

#### **'Keep Well' Campaign**

The 'Keep Well' campaign was launched in November 2020. At the heart of the campaign is helping people - individuals & communities - to keep up their resilience & wellbeing through an especially challenging winter and through to spring. The campaign is focussed on five major themes 1. Keeping Active, 2. Keeping in Contact, 3. Switching Off, 4. Eating Well and 5. Minding Your Mood. A programme of activities has been developed by relevant stakeholders across the various themes, and €67,225 has been allocated to the Council via Healthy Ireland, for approved projects.

#### **Laois Connects 2020 Promoting Positive Mental Health & Wellbeing**

The promotion of positive mental health and wellbeing has always been the focus of Laois CONNECTS Mental Health Week which took place on 10<sup>th</sup> October, marking World Mental Health Day. There were 43 events organized throughout the week, a mix of online Webinars, face to face delivery and both indoor and outdoor venues. The collaborative group that is Laois Connects is growing in membership every year contributing to the initiative's success.

#### **Laois Comhairle na nÓg**

In 2020 Laois Comhairle na nÓg meetings were held by Zoom on a bi-monthly basis and students continued working on specified topics. The AGM was held over Zoom in November 2020 with 35 young people in attendance from 9 different secondary schools. Two projects were chosen for 2021, Individuality and Body Image. Youth Work Ireland Laois have been awarded the Tender to facilitate Comhairle na nÓg for 2021 and 2022

#### **Educational Partnership**

The Schools Business Partnership programme "Skills at Work" is aimed at 5<sup>th</sup> year students in certain secondary schools nationwide and involves partnering the school with a business/employer organisation. Commencing in 2019, 25 Portlaoise College students were introduced to several members of Council staff with varying work and education



backgrounds and this programme facilitated on site visits, CV preparation skills and mock interviews facilitated by Council staff. The programme is run by the National Schools Business Partnership and the Dept of Education and Skills.

For the 2020/2021 programme the focus is changing to 2<sup>nd</sup> years and is now called ‘World of Work’, as this intervention has been shown more effective in addressing/averting the issue of early school leavers.

### **Youth Supports**

Other supports for young people in Laois were continued throughout 2020. The Council is represented on both Garda Youth Diversion Projects in Portlaoise and Portarlington and Laois/Offaly Children & Young Peoples Services Committee.

### **Laois Age Friendly Programme**

The Age Friendly Action Plan 2020/2021 was finalised in 2020 and 5 priority areas have been identified. They are:

- 1) AF Housing
- 2) AF Hospital
- 3) AF Parking Spaces
- 4) AF Crime Prevention Ambassador
- 5) Healthy Ireland

The Age Friendly Alliance met 5 times during 2020 where the impacts of the pandemic on the programme were discussed. The safety and wellbeing of the older people of Laois was the priority, with a focus on highlighting and promoting initiatives such as the Library delivery services, Community Response Helpline, physical activity classes and increasing awareness of government guidelines. Additional Age Friendly Parking spaces were also provided around the county.

### **Collaborative Projects/Social Inclusion**

Laois County Council partnered with stakeholders in respect of projects during 2020, to include:

- Community Coaching Programme
- Laois Sports Partnership Social Inclusion Disability Programme
- Laois Integration Network
- Integration supports for new communities
- CYPSC

### **Migrant Services**

Laois County Council assumed responsibility for a Migrant Support Service in the county during 2020, with RESPOND contracted to deliver the service.

The Refugee Interagency Working Group (RIAWG) continued to advance the resettlement programme in Laois with 21 families accommodated during 2019/2020.

### **Community Development Section**

Laois County Councils Community Response Helpline (telephone line/email support) was set up by Community and IT staff, and went live from Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> March. The Helpline is manned by Community, Arts & Sports Staff during working hours while Library Staff operate the Helpline on Saturdays between the hours of 10am and 1pm, and 2pm to 4pm. This Helpline provides supports to the most vulnerable members of our communities, whether through practical supports such as collection and delivery of shopping and prescriptions, queries related to the Covid 19 Payment and Covid 19 testing,

or directing callers to the appropriate support service eg HSE, ALONE etc. A total of 732 callers to the Helpline were supported during 2020.

**Laois Public Participation Network (PPN)** was established in March 2015 and is the main link through which the Local Authority connects with the, Social Inclusion, Environmental and Community and Voluntary groups within County Laois. The PPN facilitates groups to nominate PPN representatives to decision and policy making bodies in the county such as the LCDC, JPC and SPC. Laois PPN facilitates the sharing of information on funding opportunities, public consultations and policy development in County Laois, and continues to grow its network with 580 groups currently registered.

The PPN played an integral part of the community response to the pandemic during 2020, and is a member of the Community Response Forum established by Laois County Council to coordinate the Covid 19 response in Laois.

Laois PPN created an Interactive Map of its member groups that are offering supports to the vulnerable in Laois. There are 99 active groups on the map with a group available in every locality across the County. The Interactive Map is available on both the Laois PPN websites. The Map was shared with the Community Call Helpline.

Other PPN activities included:

**Training and Capacity Building** - In 2020 Laois PPN organized a variety of training and capacity building events relating to each of our 3 Pillars: Community, Social Inclusion and Environmental. Training events which were fully attended were primarily held online.

**Laois Connects 2020** - Laois PPN held 2 online events for Laois Connects 2020

- “The Power of Choice”. An online talk given by Philly McMahon.
- 5 Ways to Wellbeing hosted by Finola Colgan of Mental Health Ireland.

**Social Inclusion Week 2020-** Laois PPN held the first ever Social Inclusion week in 2020. Social Inclusion week was held in partnership with Laois Partnership Company and Respond.

### **County Laois Joint Policing Committee(JPC)**

The County Laois JPC met 3 times in 2020. The March meeting did not take place due to the impact of COVID19 restrictions at that time.

### **Community & Voluntary Awards**

The 2020 Community & Voluntary Awards took place at a virtual ceremony in December 2020, hosted by Laois County Council in association with Laois PPN and People First Credit Union. Nominees were honoured in six categories for their contribution to community life in Laois, including an individual Unsung Hero Award. The Awards showcase annually the great work that is being carried out locally by the community/voluntary, social inclusion and environmental sectors in County Laois.

### **Pride of Place**

Pride of Place recognises initiatives taken by local communities to create pride in their area and celebrates the vital contribution that community groups make to society.

Laois was represented in the 2020 All Island Pride of Place Competition virtual event by Creatively Mountmellick, a combination of 3 groups from Mountmellick, Mountmellick Community Arts Centre, Mountmellick Yarn Bombing and Mountmellick Development Association.

### **Community Projects (Elected Members) Fund 2020**

Over 53 community groups/projects were assisted by the operation of this fund in 2020 in a total amount of €55,857.

### **Town & Village Renewal Scheme**

In 2019 €437,761 was provided under this funding scheme for 5 Laois projects. Of these, 1 project is fully completed with the remaining 4 due for completion in early 2021. Work on these had been adversely impacted by the pandemic. Two projects awarded under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme 2018 were also completed in full in 2020.

During 2020 the Department of Rural and Community Development introduced a new Accelerated Measures Scheme, focused on immediate interventions that could be delivered in the short term to assist town and villages to adapt to COVID-19. A funding allocation of €369,400 was granted under this scheme for 14 projects across Laois.

A total of €383,375 in funding was awarded under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme 2020 benefitting 5 projects at 9 locations in County Laois.

<p><b>(3) To facilitate and promote sustainable development of the Council including the delivery of key infrastructural projects subject to compliance with good environmental standards and practice</b></p>
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### **Roads & Transportation Department 2020**

The 2020 Roadworks Programme has been approved by elected members in the total sum of €27M. Over the year additional funds have been received over and above what was adopted in the roadworks scheme bringing the figure to €30.8M. The 2020 Roadworks Programme has been progressed across all three Municipal Districts and is complete.

#### **Additional Funding;**

Significant additional funding was received this year from August onwards from the DTTaS under Active Travel and Climate Action funding streams and the DRCD under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme. Works are ongoing on these projects and these schemes will be completed in Q1 of 2021.

#### **Graigecullen-Portarlington Municipal District (Eastern Area)**

In the Eastern Area, there was a total road surfacing length of 9 km completed by Restoration Improvements Works (Strengthening) in 2020.

There was also a total road surfacing length of 15 km completed by Restoration Maintenance Works (Surface Dressing) in 2020.

Bridge rehabilitation works were carried out on several bridges, most notably –

- Fairymount Bridge on R430 (photo below) - Installation of Vehicle Restraint System (crash barrier) over the bridge along the curve in the road:
- Shanragh Bridge on L3855 (photo below) completing drainage works, rubbing strips and Carriageway Surfacing:

Safety Improvement Works were completed at Loughlass on the L3839. These works included the installation of a vehicle restraint system (crash barrier) on the sharp bend:

Under the Local Improvement Scheme (LIS), two lengths of roadway were surfaced;

- one in Ballickmoyler and
- one in Tullamoy.

Significant road drainage works were carried out in Emo/Killimy to resolve historic flooding on the R419 and on the L3154.

Under the 'Towns & Villages Renewal Scheme', the overhead ESB lines were removed in the vicinity of the Market Square-Main Street in Portarlington with the cables being rerouted through new ducts installed under the recently constructed footpath:

Also under the 'Towns & Villages Renewal Scheme', new lights were installed along both sides of the bridge over the Barrow at Frenchchurch Street and became operational:

A 5-year River Maintenance Programme was developed in 2020 for Barrow Drainage District works. Under this Programme, the following river maintenance works were completed:

- Vegetation removal on the Timogue River between Oldmill and Poles Bridge:
- Vegetation Removal on the Stradbally River Upstream of Garrans Bridge
- Significant silt removal works were also completed on the River Figile in Inchacooley,
- embankment re-construction works and sluice valve replacements on land drains to River Barrow near Baylough Bridge,
- embankment re-construction works on the Bauteogue River upstream of Stradbally and
- emergency tree removal works on the River Barrow upstream of Portarlington.

Footpath repair and construction works were completed across the Graiguecullen/Portarlington Municipal District in 2020:

Portarlington:

- Saint Brigids Square (concrete)
- Link Road (macadam)
- Park Lane (macadam)
- Orchard Drive (macadam)

Stradbally

- Church Avenue (concrete)

Ballylinan

- Outside supermarket on N78 (concrete)

Ratheniska

- Outside National School (macadam)

A range of traffic calming measures were also installed across the Municipal District in 2020 including speed ramps, speed radars, road signage and road markings.

### **Portlaoise Municipal District (Central Area)**

In the Central Area, a total road length of 7Km was improved under Restoration Improvement Works (Strengthening) Schemes.

A total road length of 7.5km was resealed and had skid resistance improved under Restoration Maintenance Works (Surface Dressing) Schemes.

### **River Nore - Removal of vegetation, deadwood and debris**

Previous examination of the River Nore channel in South Laois concluded that deadwood/debris within the watercourse and overhanging trees on the river banks are contributing to upstream flooding.

The Council in conjunction with the South Laois Drainage Group, applied for and obtained funding from the Office of Public Works (OPW) in 2017 to carry out works on the River Nore in South Laois.

Further remediation works were carried out in 2020.

### **Footpath Programme**

Over €120,000 of footpath works were carried in the towns of Portlaoise and Abbeyleix in 2019.

### **Portlaoise Town Planting**

This Municipal District maintains containers, beds and hanging baskets at over 300 locations around Portlaoise Town. These locations are planted with winter bedding in November and with summer bedding in May each year.

The Municipal District Office also works closely with Portlaoise Tidy Towns with the planting and maintenance of these hanging baskets in the Main Street and Lyster Square in the town. The hanging baskets are on display from June to October each year.

### **Portlaoise Biodiversity Projects**

The Municipal District Office in conjunction with Portlaoise Tidy Towns delivered a state of the art biodiversity project on the landscaped areas adjacent to the Portlaoise Southern Circular Road.

This scheme utilised a wide range of pollinator friendly and native planting including wildflowers, hedging, wall climbers, and bedding plants. The scheme also included beautiful artistic sculptures on the centre islands of the roundabouts.

Wildflower meadows were also established and maintained at the following locations;

- Ballyfin Link road, adjacent to Scoil Bhríde N.S. Knockmay
- Fairgreen, verge on the Mountmellick Road
- Triogue Linear Park & Pairc an Phobail Park
- Borris Road, town side of entrance to Ashley Gardens
- Dublin Road, verge opposite Higgs Lane

### **Community Involvement Schemes**

Road surfacing, footpaths and drainage works were carried out at

- Cloncullane, Ballyroan
- Marian Avenue, Portlaoise

### **Local Improvement Schemes**

Road surfacing and drainage works were carried out at

- Ballymaddock, Abbeyleix
- Cromogue, Abbeyleix

### **Climate Change Adaptation Schemes**

Drainage works to protect property and lands in severe weather events were carried out at

- Hophall, Portlaoise
- Spink, Graiguenahown
- Keyes Cross, Portlaoise

### **Drainage Programme**

Additional drainage works were delivered at a number of locations around the Municipal District, including the following locations:

- Pallas, Portlaoise
- Lyndon Court, Portlaoise
- Ralish Abbeyleix
- Garrintaggart, Spink
- Ballinlough, Ballyroan
- Raheenabrogue, Ballyroan

### **Road Safety Schemes**

Works to enhance road safety were carried out at Cromogue Junction Abbeyleix and Lauragh Cross (near The Rock, Mountmellick) where the junction layouts were changed to improve driver safety.

### **Bridge Repairs**

Temporary works were carried out to Bridge Street Bridge, Portlaoise and designs were completed for permanent replacement of the structure.

### **Traffic Calming**

Traffic calming works were carried out at various locations in the Portlaoise Municipal District Area. The majority of these works, related to the installation of traffic calming ramps in residential areas including  
Portlaoise - Esker Hills, Maryborough Mews and Glenbarrow  
Ballyroan - Gleann na Glaise and Cross of Newtown

### **Green Flag Award**

The Green Flag Award scheme recognises and rewards well managed parks and green spaces, setting the benchmark standard for the management of recreational outdoor spaces across Europe and around the world.

Pairc an Phobail Portlaoise was awarded a green flag again in 2020.

### **2020 IBAL Anti-Litter League**

Portlaoise achieved 4<sup>th</sup> place out of 40 towns that were assessed as part of the Irish Business Against Litter League (Round 1).

Portlaoise achieved the status of “Cleaner than European Norms”.

### **The Portlaoise Monoplane**

The Portlaoise Municipal District Office agreed to work with the Laois Heritage Society in the restoration and repairs of the Portlaoise Monoplane. The monoplane, built by Frank Aldritt and Sons, Motor Engineers, Portlaoise, was the first plane built and flown in what is now the Republic of Ireland.

It is known that Aldritts were engaged with the plans and patent for the plane in 1907, less than four years after the Wright Brothers made the first flight of a powered aircraft in 1903.

It is also on record that the Portlaoise Plane succeeded in getting airborne and covering a short distance in the autumn of 1909.

Ireland's famous transatlantic aviator, Col. James Fitzmaurice, became involved in the plane's construction as a young boy. He attributes this involvement sparked off his passion for flying and his pioneering spirit.

The airplane remained in storage in their original motor works at Bank Place, Portlaoise until the 1970s when it was purchased by a private collector in England. It remained in a private transport museum until a Laois historian and businessman purchased it from the owner and had it repatriated to Ireland in November 2018.

The plane is now at an advanced stage of restoration by aviation engineering experts and he hopes that a suitable location can be found to put it on permanent static display in Portlaoise when the work has been completed.

Ireland has always been to the fore in the world of aviation and is still such a huge player to this day. The monoplane is a unique part of Irish aviation history and with its close association with Ireland's most famous aviation pioneer, it makes it extra special.

### **Other Works**

Works were also completed to replace boundary fencing adjacent to the green area in the Cross of Newtown Ballyroan.

The Portlaoise Municipal District Road Office also carries out other tasks on an annual basis such as;

- Maintenance and developments of Pairc an Phobail and the Triogue Linear Park
- Street cleaning and litter collection
- Renewal of road markings
- Drainage maintenance, cleaning and repairs
- Verge trimming at junctions on regional roads
- Control of invasive plant species in public areas
- Grass cutting and weed control in Portlaoise town centre
- Tree Surgery works in public areas
- Road surface repairs
- General maintenance of infrastructure such as railings and barriers.
- Service of Hedge cutting notices
- Issuing of Public Notices (including hazards on the road such as debris and soil)

The office also works with groups such as Tidy Towns, Downtown Traders, Farmers Market, Christmas Market and Christmas Lights Committees on an annual basis

### **Borris-in-Ossory / Mountmellick Municipal District ('Western Area')**

#### **Road Maintenance**

In the Western Area, a total road surfacing length of 16km was completed by Restoration Improvements Works (Strengthening). A total road surfacing length of 17km was completed by Restoration Maintenance Works (Surface Dressing).

#### **Bridge Rehabilitation Works**

Lady's Bridge, Ballyfin

Significant bridge rehabilitation works were completed at Lady's Bridge, Ballyfin. The parapet walls were demolished due to extensive vegetation growth over a prolonged period of time. New foundations were laid upon which the new parapets were constructed. Masonry repairs to the abutments and retaining walls were completed and the bridge façade was repointed. The bridge was repaired using traditional techniques with all the works undertaken by Laois County Council direct labour staff.

Triogue Pedestrian Bridge

Triogue Pedestrian Bridge is a five-span steel pedestrian bridge with timber decking. The bridge crosses the Triogue river immediately downstream of Triogue Masonry Arch Bridge, on the R422, 2km east of Mountmellick. There was extensive failure of the corrosion protection to the steel members. The corrosion of the steel had led to a loss of stability and a reduction in the load carrying capacity of the bridge. The abutments and the supporting embankment had collapsed at the east end of the bridge.

The remedial works undertaken included the following:

- Removal of all vegetation from the structure;
- Replacement of the existing timber decking;
- Removal of the existing paint from all the steel members;
- Application of a suitable corrosion protection to all steel members;
- Insertion of additional steel bracing and new secondary support steel;
- Strengthening of the embankments/stone wall supporting the footpath at both ends of the bridge.

In addition to bridges mentioned above, Council staff also repaired several other bridges including Portnahich Bridge, Garrymore Culvert, Tallyho Bridge and Ballycoolid Bridge.

### **Drainage Programme**

Drainage Schemes were delivered at a number of locations around the Municipal District in 2020 including Ballyfin, Auchmacart, Acragar and Davitt Court. The type of works involved replacing undersized drains with new culverts, high quality soakaways and open water courses all with the intention of keeping the road network clear of surface water

### **Climate Change Adaptation Grant**

New drainage and pavement improvement works were undertaken in Ballyfin Village and Manor Lane, Mountmellick funded under the Climate Change Adaptation Grant.

### **Footpath Works**

Footpath improvement works were undertaken in Rathdowney, Borris-in-Ossory and Shanahoe in 2020

### **Road Design**

Laois County Council completed a large number of maintenance and improvement schemes in 2020 which included, the completion of the N80 Maidenhead Realignment Scheme and Rockview Roundabout regeneration, safety improvement works, enhancements to signage, line markings, pavement works together with installation of bollards, public lighting, and junction improvement works. The following outlines the works completed and associated funding.

### **HD28 Mechanical Abrasion Sites – Expenditure €70,000.**

The following works were carried out under scheme this year:

- N77 Attanagh, Durrow
- N77 Thomastown Demesne, Durrow
- N77 Tonduff, Abbeyleix

### **HD28 Pavement Resurfacing Sites – Expenditure €2,250,000.00**



The following works were carried out under this scheme this year:

- N80 Arles Section 1
- N80 Arles Section 2
- N80 Graiguecullen
- N80 Ballickmoyler
- N80 Fairgreen
- N80 Moneyquid
- N80 Laught or Common
- N78 Ruses
- N78 Newtown Cross
- N77 Meelick
- N77 Abbeyleix
- N80 Oughaval
- N80 Tullomoy
- N77 Abbeyleix Town
- N77 Colt
- N77 Coolcorberry
- N78 Ballylinan
- N80 Graigue
- N80 JFL Avenue
- N77 Attanagh, Durrow

#### **Rockview Roundabout, Part 8, TII Funding – Expenditure €200,000**

The Rock view consisted of the upgrade of the temporary roundabout located on the R445 at the Rockview Housing Estate.

The objective of these works was to improve the traffic safety and pedestrian safety while upgrading the junction. This was done by designing a new roundabout in accordance with TII specification while also incorporating new cycle lanes and footpaths with 3 No. B1 type controlled pedestrian crossings. Improved signage and landscaping were also incorporated into the project which was completed by contactors THM.

#### **N80 Maidenhead Realignment Scheme – Expenditure €4.3 Million**

2020 saw the completion of the Maidenhead Realignment Scheme by Clonmel Enterprises Limited. The works which began in 2019 and concluded in 2020 with the completion of the cut fill section with installation of a livestock underpass at the southern end of the scheme and a culvert for the Coolanowle Stream. Surfacing and phasing of the tie in at both ends and the middle crossing point of the scheme were completed in the second quarter of 2020.

#### **Capital Pavement Works 2020 – Expenditure €280,000**

The following works were carried out under this scheme this year:

- N77 Colt

- N77 Abbeyleix Main Street

### **TII Fencing Retrofit Programme – Expenditure €79,000.00 excluding VAT.**

The following works were carried out under this scheme this year:

- N78 Kilcruise
- N78 Popefield
- N77 Granafallow
- N77 Clonad
- N80 Mountmellick/Tullamore Road
- N80 Stradbally Park

### **RSRM Schemes – Expenditure €215,000**

Safety Improvement Schemes were progressed at seven sites across the county: The following works were carried out under this scheme this year:

- Lauragh Cross - R422

Lauragh cross involved works to the junction between the R422 and the L3153. The works included hedge and verge removal to improve sightline visibility at this junction.

- Cromogue - R430

This project consisted of works to the junction between the R430 and the L5658. These works included hedge and verge removal improving sightlines for vehicles turning onto the R430.

- Strand Road - R430

This project consisted of works to the junction between the R430 and the L7894. These works included hedge and tree removal as well as passively safe fence reinstatement.

- Loughlass - L3839

This project consisted of works on a dangerous bend on the L3839 where a house adjacent to the bend was left significantly damaged due to a vehicle losing control and leaving the road. The works involved a new safety barrier and signage to improve the safety and visibility of the bend.

- Middlemount – R433

This project consisted of works to realign and widen the road at a pinch point where a house that is in close proximity to the road had been damaged on numerous occasions due to large vehicles not having sufficient space. The works involved hedge removal and road widening as well as fence & hedge reinstatement. This directed the traffic away from the house and

- Aghaboe – R434

This project consisted of works to the junction between the R434 and L1632. These works included the removal of a wall and hedge as well as passively safe fence and hedge. These works greatly improved the sightline visibility for vehicles turning onto the R434.

- Mountmellick – R422

This project consisted of works to the junction between the R422 and R433. There have previously been accidents involving vehicles entering the junction too fast and crashing into the house adjacent to the junction. The works involved a crash barrier, pedestrian crossing with flashing beacons and improved signage. These works highlighted the junction and

### **Public Lighting**

There are total 9500 lights in Laois. 60% lights are now upgraded to LED in the county producing an energy saving of over 70% in one of the higher energy consumption service areas of Laois County Council.

### **Clar Funding**

Department of Rural and Community Development provided funding for small scale capital projects in rural areas. Works were completed for installation of new street lights, Pedestrian crossings, footpaths and improvement of school parking for Paddock National School.

### **Winter Maintenance**

Call-out operations were carried out on 70 occasions during the 2019/2020 winter season treating 458km of the salted network in Laois. So far there has been 48 call-outs during the 2020/2021 winter season.

### **TVRS Funding Allocations**

The following funding has been confirmed for TVRS Rounds 1, 2 & 3. Works are at varying stages of delivery and are progressing.

- Round 1;
  - o Mountmellick; Modification and enhancement of the Public Realm to help comply with social distancing and encourage increased footfall  
€22,500.00
  - o Mountrath; Modification and enhancement of the Public Realm, to comply with social distancing and encourage increased footfall  
€22,500.00
  - o Portarlinton; Modification and enhancement of the Public Realm to comply with social distancing and encourage increased footfall in the Public Realm €22,500.00
  - o Abbeyleix; Modification and enhancement of the Public Realm to comply with social distancing and encourage increased footfall in the Public Realm  
€40,000.00
  
- Round 2;
  - o Ballylynan; Public Realm works to include street furniture, landscaping and pathway upgrade to improve attractiveness and accessibility of village  
€18,900.00
  - o Shanahoe; Modification and enhancement of public realm outside Scoil Fionntain Naofa to ensure secure and safe access to the school.  
€22,500.00
  - o Stradbally; Repurposing car parking spaces as outdoor spaces (parklets) for public seating and dining and enhancement of other central areas with landscaping and street furniture.  
€22,500.00

- Durrow; Extension of existing an existing footpath and the provision of grass verging / soft landscaping and street furniture.  
€22,500.00
- Donaghmore; Extension of an existing footpath from Donaghmore Bridge to the Mill & Swallows Quarter local community amenity space and the provision of soft planting and formalisation of car parking.  
€22,500.00
- Round 3;
  - Woodenbridge; Car park construction to enhance local amenities  
€22,500.00
  - Durrow; Provision of Smart Cycle Stops at Durrow  
€22,500.00
  - Cullahill: Footpath improvements & extensions  
€22,500.00
  - Laois Tourism Signage; Upgrade of County Laois tourism & amenity signage cohesion  
€36,000.00
  - Slieve Bloom Mountains; Creation of a Smart Cycle Stop along the Slieve Bloom cycle track  
€36,000.00
- Larger Towns;
  - Portlaoise Town; public realm improvements  
€36,000.00

## **Water Services**

### **Irish Water Capital Investment Plan 2019 to 2024.**

Irish Water continues to fund all Water Services Capital Projects. There are no major projects currently in progress.

#### **Networks**

Water network upgrade works were completed in Portlaoise, Portarlington, and Durrow. First Fix, Find and Fix, Lead replacement and DMA validation works are being progressed throughout the county. Netbase continues to be utilised in leakage management. Irish Water funded several projects including mains rehab and back yard services at the end of 2020 via a Stimulus Package. Significant progress was made in Portarlington in the area of leakage management throughout 2020.

#### **Programs**

Portlaoise Water Supply Improvement Scheme involves the provision of 3 no. wells in Coolbanagher. Due to budget constraints, Irish Water propose bringing these wells in on a phased basis. Discussions are ongoing with Irish Water.

Minor civil/CCTV/lining works completed in Portlaoise and Mountmellick. Other works were also completed at:

Kilminchy Water Treatment Plant

Mountmellick Wastewater Treatment Plant.

Ballinakill Wastewater Treatment Plant

Site investigation works were carried out on site at Castletown Wastewater Treatment Plant.

Portlaoise Drainage Area Planning (DAP) – Survey concluded & site works complete.

The project has progressed to Portlaoise Infrastructure Development Plan Workshop phase.

National Certificate Authorisation Programme (NCAP) sites – Data sent to Consulting Engineers. Review of Site Option reports (SOR) with Irish Water to be progressed in 2021.

Water Storage Program – Irish Water consultant appointed. Site at Five Wells to proceed. Screening/invasive species/topographical checks completed. Land acquisition is being progressed.

Disinfection Program – work at The Strand Water Treatment Plant is due to commence in 2021.

New borewell at Fermoy – works substantially complete, bringing of borewell into supply ongoing.

Ballyroan Wastewater Treatment Plant upgrade works are being progressed.

### **Water Services Laboratory**

Laois County Council's Water Services Laboratory is an INAB accredited facility & continues to conduct testing & sampling of drinking water, wastewater & river water within County Laois and for Offaly County Council's Private Drinking Water supplies in accordance with relevant legislation. There was a total of 3,500 samples tested in 2020.

### **Multi Annual Rural Water Programme 2019 to 2021**

Some works were delayed due to the COVID 19 restrictions however the following works were carried out/completed.

#### *Measure 2 -Public Health Compliance*

- Raheenavannagh GWS: Wellhead, Water Treatment and Pump Upgrade – Works complete.
- The Heath GWS: Chlorine Control System & Upgrade - Contract being progressed.
- Derrynaseera GWS: Tenders for pumphouse and water treatment upgrade received. Recommendation for the appointment of the contractor due.

#### *Measure 3 - Enhancement and Water Conservation*

- Ballypickas GWS: Installation of a precast concrete storage tank: This project has been postponed until 2021.
- Mains Upgrade – Tender award recommendation received from consultant and preparation for works to commence in progress.
- Barrowhouse GWS: Upgrade of Water Storage Tanks – Size of storage tank to be confirmed. Consultant & GWS discussions on-going.
- Heath GWS: Network upgrade works advertised & tenders submitted. Recommendation of the Consultant due.

#### *Measure 4 - New Group Water Schemes*

- New GWS at Shanbo, Borris-in-Ossory: Department approval received and tenders submitted. Recommendation of the Consultant due.

#### *Measure 5 - Transition of Existing Group Water Schemes to Irish Water*

- The Rock GWS: contractor appointed to carry out the upgrade works required at the pumphouse to enable takeover of The Rock GWS.

#### *Measure 6 - Community Water and Wastewater Connections*

- Wastewater Community Connection at Goodwin Estate: Grant allocation of €90k or 75% of the cost of the works has been provided. Local contribution is 25%. Site investigation works complete. Tender documentation prepared for procurement process.

€545,663.02 was processed in respect of subsidy payments to Group Water Schemes.

€84,759.67 was paid out to 39 applicants in respect of well grants.

**Monthly Management Reports** continue to be provided to Members of Laois County Council for consideration at their monthly meetings.

#### **Portlaoise Public Convenience**

Refurbishment works were completed on the Portlaoise Public Convenience in 2020. Arrangements for operating and managing the facility are in place and the public convenience re opened on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2020.

#### **Dangerous Structure and Places.**

A Register of Dangerous Places/Structures is maintained by the local authority and there are 14 open files on register in Co. Laois at 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020.

## Environment

Area of Activity	Objectives	2020 Progress Update
<b>Environmental Protection</b>	<p>To improve, protect, enhance and promote the natural and built environment in the interests of present and future generations</p> <p>Improve water status in all water bodies</p> <p>To protect public health and to improve &amp; maintain air quality and to protect against noise pollution</p>	<p>During 2020 additional staff resource provided for Environmental Protection. The Environmental Protection team:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• assisted LAWPRO in identifying Prioritised Areas for Action and preparations for the draft River Basin Management Plan 2022-2027.</li> <li>• Investigated complaints and water quality issues referred by EPA and LAWPRO and complaints from members of the public.</li> <li>• Carried out assessments, inspections and reports on planning applications.</li> <li>• Reviewed, inspected and enforced Discharge licenses and carried out assessment of two new applications.</li> <li>• Investigated elevated Nitrate levels in Fermoy Drinking Water Supply</li> <li>• Carried out inspection and maintenance on the EPA's Ambient Air Quality Monitoring Programme (AAMP) stations in Laois. (Portlaoise and Mountrath).</li> </ul>



Area of Activity	Objectives	2020 Progress Update
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Waste Management &amp; Enforcement</b></p>	<p>To improve, protect, enhance and promote the natural and built environment in the interests of present and future generations</p> <p>The protection of human health and the environment against harmful effects that may be caused by the generation, collection, transport, treatment, storage and disposal of waste</p>	<p>During 2020, the Environment Section</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continued to comply with requirements of the Eastern Midlands Waste Management Plan (EMWMP).</li> <li>• Engaged with the Eastern Midlands Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authority (WERLA). Prioritized the National Waste Enforcement Priorities for 2020 as directed by the Eastern Midlands Region WERLA</li> <li>• Increased the level of effective waste enforcement in the County.</li> </ul> <p>The staff also arranged for the removal of a huge quantity of illegally dumped waste from numerous sites around the county in 2020 – 293.2 tonnes from urban and rural areas.</p> <p>Ongoing communication with householders to ensure that they are in compliance with <b>Laois County Council’s Waste Management (Storage, Presentation &amp; Segregation of Household &amp; Commercial Waste) Bye Laws 2018</b> and <b>EU Food Waste Regulations 2015</b> (Brown Bins). Due to Covid19 restrictions it was not been possible to carry out door to door waste inspections. Instead, staff issued 533 letters to householders requesting proof of their waste removal arrangements.</p> <p>A no. of campaigns through social media and local advertising were carried out on topics such as illegal waste collectors, Recycling, Reuse, Stop Food Waste.</p> <p>A number of projects were completed under the Anti-Dumping Initiative funded by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (DCCAIE):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Household Hazardous Waste Amnesty was hugely successful with the collection of 26 tonnes of paint and waste oil, diverted from landfill.</li> <li>• Clean Up of areas – Vicarstown Canal, St. Brigids Place, Knockmay, Lakeglen, The Heath, Portlaoise, Cloonagh and Forest Lower, Mountmellick, Clonenagh, Mountrath.</li> <li>• Installation of CCTV in a no. of areas.</li> </ul>





Area of Activity	Objectives	2020 Progress Update
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Litter Management</b></p>		<p>Litter Wardens issued 180 Fixed Penalty Notices for offences under the Litter Pollution Act. Three Section 9 Notices issued requested property owners to remove litter from their premises.</p>
	<p>To prevent, control &amp; manage litter</p>	<p>The Env Section continued to provide support to local communities and businesses. Litter picking materials were distributed to community groups including approx. 500 litter pickers, 4006 rolls of bags, 600 pairs of gloves as well as a number of hi-viz jackets and anti-dumping signs.</p>
	<p>To encourage &amp; promote public awareness</p>	<p>The Litter Wardens further assisted the voluntary/community groups by collecting this waste and bringing it to the landfill – over 24 tonnes.</p>
	<p>Provision of Waste Facilities</p>	<p>This support and co-operation between local authority, communities and businesses has seen an improvement in the Irish Business Against Litter (IBAL) league. In 2020 Portlaoise was ranked in fourth position out of 40 towns / cities surveyed. Cleaner than European Norms.</p>
	<p>Partnership with Communities &amp; Business</p>	<p>This was another excellent result for Portlaoise, one of its best ever, with eight out of the ten sites surveyed in the town receiving the top litter grade and no seriously littered sites.</p>
	<p>Enforcement of the Litter Pollution Acts</p>	<p>Staff continued working with Tidy Towns groups to provide Mutt Mitt Dispensers along popular walking routes in many areas. Mutt Mitts Dispensers were provided to Tidy Towns groups in Abbeyleix, Ballybrittas, Ballacolla, Emo, Errill, Portlaoise and Rathdowney in 2020 and more dispensers will be provided to other interested groups in 2021. Anti-dog fouling messages will also be sprayed onto footpaths to remind dog owners that they may be issued with Fixed Penalty Notice and fined €150, if they fail to clean up after their dog.</p> <p>In August, the Council assumed the responsibility for the operation and management of the Civic Amenity Area in</p>

		<p>Portlaoise. Increased supervision and direction by landfill staff has seen a big reduction in the contamination levels of the collected materials. A no. of improvements improving the layout and signage to increase accessibility and awareness for the public using the facility have been carried out at the site, including debit/credit card payments facility and further works are planned for 2021.</p>
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## Social Media Campaign Illegal Waste Collectors



**BEWARE** 

**OF UNLICENSED WASTE COLLECTION**

It is a criminal offence to give waste to a bogus collector.  
Penalties upon conviction can be up to € 5,000 and / or 12 months imprisonment.

Report any information you have on illegal dumping to  
Freephone confidential Litter Hotline 1800 32 32 30

The poster features a yellow and black striped border, a warning sign icon, and three photographs showing illegal dumping in various locations.



**ILLEGAL WASTE COLLECTION** 

Beware of unauthorised waste collectors operating in the Laois area.

Waste collection service companies should have a waste collection permit.

Do not give waste to unpermitted collectors.

If a collector comes to your door or advertises offering to collect your waste—clean out your garage, remove old washing machines, garbage etc, ask to see a copy of their waste collection permit.

The cover of this permit will have the name, address and waste collection permit number of the collector.

Do you know where your rubbish goes with non permit holders?

It is a criminal offence to give waste to a bogus collector.  
Penalties upon conviction can be up to € 5,000 and / or 12 months imprisonment.

Report any information you have on illegal dumping to  
Freephone confidential Litter Hotline 1800 32 32 30

The poster includes a white van with a black bag of rubbish, a yellow speech bubble, and three small photographs of illegal dumping sites. Red arrows point from the van to the photos.

Please be aware of illegal waste collectors who may be advertising on Facebook or offering their services in your area. Anyone who collects waste should have a waste permit number, please ask to see this before you engage their services. If you have any information on illegal collectors you can report it on our freephone confidential litter line no. 1800 323 230.

## Enterprise & Economic Development

In 2020, Laois County Council continued to promote enterprise and economic development in the County through the Business Support Unit in line with the **Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) 2016 – 2021**.

The Business Support Unit incorporates the Local Enterprise Office and the Economic Development team from Laois County Council and forms a central point of contact for existing and prospective businesses. It encourages local enterprise and inward investment by providing a supportive business environment in the County. The promotion of County Laois as a prime investment location in Ireland and Europe continues to be a key objective of the support unit.

2020 had its challenges with the ongoing threat of Brexit and the impact it would have on the local economy along with the devastating impact of Covid 19 on every aspect of business and society. The Business Support Unit responded to the Covid crisis by working closely with the business community and encouraging them to avail of relevant supports for their businesses. These supports were designed to help businesses stabilise and adapt to the evolving situation, in preparation for getting back on the road to recovery. Its ongoing focus was to ensure that Laois businesses were in the strongest position possible in the face of this unprecedented and continuously evolving crisis.

**Key actions** of the Business Support unit in 2020 were:

- The continued promotion of Laois to national and international companies as a place to do business
- The marketing and promotion of the J17 National Enterprise Park
- The implementation of a marketing project with the 'Downtown Portlaoise' Traders Group which saw the introduction of a range of measures designed to promote key features/events to attract visitors to the Town.
- The continued promotion of Portlaoise Farmers Market and the development of the Stradbally Farmers Market
- The successful completion of the pilot Façade Enhancement Scheme which resulted in 39 business/residential units being painted in Portlaoise.
- The continued support and promotion of digital hubs in Portlaoise, Portarlington, Mountrath, Mountmellick and Abbeyleix.
- The continued maintenance and upkeep of the various Business Parks in the County.
- The promotion and support of the Food Sector in Laois particular 'Laois Taste,' the local Food & Drink Producers group.
- The promotion and development of the Business Incentive Scheme and Shop Front Grant Scheme.
- Ongoing collaboration with Laois Chamber
- Collaboration with Portlaoise Innovation Centre DAC on The CUBE Low Carbon Centre of Excellence
- Delivery of ongoing Business Advice/mentoring/training to the business community

**2020 Highlights:**

- €431,990 approved in grant aid to 23 businesses with potential to create 62 new jobs
- 254 Trading online voucher applications submitted of which 175 were approved to the value of €405,935.
- 224 applications received under the Business Continuity Voucher Scheme, of which 183 were approved to the value of €331,841
- 9 Laois businesses applied for funding under the Micro Enterprise Assistance Scheme of which 7 were approved to the value of €7,000
- 27 Laois Business eligible for funding under the Refundable Aid Stimulus Package to the value of €200,229.
- A total of €832,654 paid out to Laois businesses in financial support
- 71 training courses delivered with 1,100 participants

- Over 400 mentoring sessions assigned
- Supported 10 Laois companies in making applications to Micro Finance Ireland
- 7 companies participated in the Lean for Micro Programme
- Over 300 one-to-one business advice sessions delivered
- 8 Laois Schools participated in the Student Enterprise Awards
- 10 Laois Companies took part in Midlands Management Development Programme
- 5 Laois companies participated on the Midlands Food & Drink Programme
- 8 Laois Companies participated in the Midlands Going Green Programme
- 6 Laois Companies participated in the Midlands First Time Exporters Programme
- Over 100 companies availed of Brexit supports
- 23 Shop Front Grants approved to the value of €16,313
- 4 businesses approved under the Business Incentive Scheme
- 39 premises painted under the Façade Enhancement Scheme

#### **(4) To promote and support socially inclusive communities**

### **FORWARD PLANNING**

Forward Planning plays a pivotal role in the physical, economic and social development of County Laois. The Laois County Development Plan 2017-2023 and Local Area Plans for Portlaoise (2018-2024), Portarlinton (2018-2024), Mountmellick (2018-2024) and Graiguecullen (2013-2018) provides the strategic framework and policy context within which the Local Authority makes its planning decisions.

### **Review of the Laois County Development Plan 2017-2023 and preparation of a new plan for the period 2021-2027**

The statutory 8 week consultation process for the review of the Laois County Development Plan 2017 - 2023 began on 6th January 2020 with public notices appearing in the Irish Independent and local newspaper the Laois Nationalist, and ended on 2nd March 2020.

An Issues Paper was prepared which set out the County Development Plan (CDP) process and some key issues affecting County Laois in making the CDP. This set out the context and background for debate. Public consultation was facilitated through a number of media and meetings, including:

- Newspaper adverts advised of the consultation period and invited submissions and advised of the public meetings held during January and February 2020.
- Full details of the process were also advertised on the Council's website and Social Media.
- Meetings with prescribed bodies such as the Eastern and Midlands Regional Authority (EMRA) and the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) to discuss new legislation and requirements for the new Plan.
- Workshops with the elected members to inform them of main issues and their obligations in directing the preparation of the draft CDP.

Five public consultation sessions have been scheduled across the County in order to provide an opportunity for members of the public to learn about the review process, to highlight some of the strategic issues facing the County and to facilitate feedback from the public about issues they felt should be taken into account in the preparation of the draft development plan. 40 people attended the public events across the County.

62 written submissions were received within the statutory timeframe

A Chief Executive Report on the submissions was discussed by the Elected members at the June Council meeting at which their directions were given on issues to be dealt with in the new plan. The Draft plan was presented to Council on the 16<sup>th</sup> November 2020 and adopted as the Draft Plan for public Display at the December Council meeting. It will go on public display from 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021 to 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2021 during which the public will be able to engage with the plan process.

The Plan process will continue and conclude in 2021.

#### *Local AREA PLANNING*

##### *Stradbally Road Lands - Masterplan*

Consultants were engaged to prepare a masterplan for the Tyrrell Landbank at Stradbally Road, Portlaoise to address housing, recreation and amenity and connectivity with surrounding land uses. This commenced in Q4 of 2020.

##### *Portlarlinton Vision / Urban Framework*

The preparation of a Portarlinton Regeneration Strategy commenced in September 2020 to be concluded in 2021.

## **DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT**

The number of planning applications received in 2020 was 722. However, it should be noted that 151 of the total applications received were invalid and required the applicant to submit a new application. The main reasons for invalidation of planning files were public notices being out of date, or not erected on site, previous permissions expired, agents name omitted from maps/drawings, no north point shown on maps and distances not shown on site layouts.

### **2020 PERFORMANCE**

The following table gives a breakdown of valid planning applications received and decisions made during 2020:

Number of valid applications received:	571 <b>(Valid Applications)</b>
Number of decisions made:	530 <b>(Decisions Made)</b>
Number of applications granted:	511 <b>(Decisions to Grant)</b>
Number of applications refused:	19 <b>(Decisions to Refuse)</b>
Invalid applications returned to applicant:	20.91% <b>(Invalid Applications)</b>
Referrals to Area Offices (working days):	within 14 days achieved
No of applications appealed to An Bord Pleanála in 2020 -	15 applications

311 pre planning meetings were held in 2020.

## **Strategic Housing Developments**

ABP Ref	Development	Decision
307420	Foxborrow – For the development of Completions of estate previously permitted under Reg.Ref:05/893 to include 155 no. residential units (115 no. houses 40 no. apartments) and associated site works. Foxborrow, Beladd, Portlaois, Co. Laois. All information available on <a href="http://www.foxburrowshd.ie">www.foxburrowshd.ie</a>	Application Granted subject to conditions

## **LOCAL AUTHORITY DEVELOPMENT (PART 8 PROJECTS)**

Planning reports were prepared for the following Part 8 Local Authority projects and were approved by the Council during 2020:

1. HOUSING DEVELOPMENT - CONVENTS LAND PORTLAOISE (FEBRUARY COUNCIL MEETING 2020)
2. HOUSING DEVELOPMENT - CBS LANDS PORTLAOISE (JULY COUNCIL MEETING 2020)
3. HOUSING DEVELOPMENT - Mooreville Terrace , Rathdowney (SEPTEMBER COUNCIL MEETING 2020)
4. PLAYGROUND – BALLINAKILL (SEPTEMBER COUNCIL MEETING 2020)
5. RURAL HOUSE, COOLROE BALLYBRITTAS ( SEPTEMBER COUNCIL MEETING 2020)
6. OAKPARK HALTING SITE REDEVELOPMENT, PORTLAOISE (DECEMBER 2020)

## **PLANNING ENFORCEMENT**

The Planning Authority, in accordance with the statutory requirements under the Planning and Development Acts 2000-2018 as amended, seeks to ensure compliance with planning permissions and also to prevent unauthorised development.

Work was continued in 2020 by the Enforcement team to ensure that any breaches of planning law were investigated and followed up.

In 2020, Council Staff attended Court 45 times in respect of enforcement prosecutions and while some cases are still ongoing, 5 cases have been successfully resolved during 2020.

The Planning Authority served 63 enforcement notices, 270 warning letters and investigated 94 complaints all of which highlight the active pursuit of planning non-compliance and unauthorised development by our Enforcement Section.

**€ 5,941.93** Enforcement costs recouped

**€59,033.48** fees received through valid retention applications received relating to enforcement action.

## **BUILDING CONTROL**

The Building Control Section deal with all commencement notices received, and carries out inspections on the buildings to ensure they comply with the various Building Control regulations.

In 2020 , a total of 301 **New Buildings** were notified to Building Control. A total of 50 no. buildings were inspected (at varying stages of construction) - an inspection rate of **16.6%**.

## **UNFINISHED HOUSING ESTATES**



Laois County Council is responsible for the taking in charge of estates. In 2020, 1 no. estates was taken in charge which is listed in the table below. Traditionally this occurred when a request was received from the developer of the estate and/or the owners of the houses within the estate. However, in recent years, where the developer has failed to complete the estate, Laois County Council has intervened to complete the estate and this work, where possible, is funded from the bond. This policy of actively pursuing the developer and Bond holder will continue in 2021.

The following estates were taken in charge in 2020 –

1. Graigueaverne Ballybrittas (October Council meeting 2020)

The Planning Department endeavour to liaise with the residents of unfinished estates to keep them fully informed of progress in relation to their estates.

## **DERELICT SITES**

The Council is implementing its powers under the Derelict Sites Act 1990 targeting those properties that are on the Derelict Sites Register. Working with the owners of those properties, the outstanding issues are being dealt with and those properties that are no longer deemed ‘derelict’ are then removed from the Derelict Sites Register.

### **Definition of a Derelict Site**

The Derelict Sites ACT, 1990 defines a Derelict Site as;“Any land which detracts, or is likely to detract, to a material degree from the amenity, character or appearance of land in the neighbourhood of the land in question because of-

- a) the existence on the land in question of structures which are in a ruinous, derelict or dangerous condition, or
- b) the neglected, unsightly or objectionable condition of the land or any structures on the land in question, or
- c) the presence, deposit or collection on the land in question of any litter, rubbish, debris or waste, except where the presence, deposit or collection of such litter, rubbish, debris or waste results from the exercise of a right conferred by statute or by common law

**Total Number of Files opened for 2020: 20**

**Total Number of Files closed as a result of Dereliction being addressed in 2020: 5**

**Total Number of Files: 79**

## **VACANT SITES**

There were 9 sites entered onto the Vacant Sites register at the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2021. These related to sites within Portlaoise, Portarlinton, Mountmellick and Graiguecullen. Valuations have been received in relation to the sites.

<b>Location of Sites</b>	<b>No of sites on the VSL register</b>
<b>Portlaoise</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Portarlinton</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Mountmellick</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Graiguecullen</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>

## **HERITAGE**

The aim of the Heritage Office of Laois County Council is to work in partnership with key stakeholders to deliver a high-quality heritage service for the people of County Laois. To identify, preserve and conserve the built, natural and cultural heritage.

This is achieved through actions to

- Implement the actions of the County Heritage Plan
- Establish and promote the best practice in heritage management and conservation.
- Raise awareness of and promote enjoyment of the heritage of County Laois

### ***Implement the actions of the County Heritage Plan***

Many of the Heritage Plan actions also aim to develop best practice in heritage conservation and promote awareness of Laois heritage. The following information relates to projects from the Laois Heritage Plan undertaken with the support of the Heritage Council during 2020.

#### *Heritage Awareness: Heritage Week and Science Week events (online)*

- Due to the public health guidelines in place, all events for Heritage Week had to be held online. A new approach was taken for Heritage Week nationally, with groups encouraged to register projects to promote for Heritage Week. Laois Heritage Events online went well with good viewing numbers for Virtual Tours of Laois Heritage Sites in particular. Videos on Facebook have received over 43,000 views to date.

#### *Connecting Communities*

- Due to cancellation of the Timahoe Heritage Festival, the planned School of Irish Archaeology event was modified, and a project is now taking place with Laois Home Education Network to construct a Viking Longhouse. The project will continue in early 2021 (subject to public health guidelines)
- Vegetation management at Timahoe Monastic site continued with removal of dead tree trunks and dumped rubble and management of grass and bramble areas. A tree survey was carried out and recommendations will inform 2021 work on site.

#### *Publications*

Publications completed in 2020 included:

- “Gardening for Biodiversity” Booklet was published in April and received an incredible response. It was followed up with a series of six short “how to” video guides looking at specific projects in the book, and a special children’s version with coloring pages. These have been published on the Laois Heritage Forum Youtube Channel. In total including both books and the special insert published by the Irish Examiner for Biodiversity week, almost 100,000 copies have now been distributed for free.
- Rock of Dunamase Book – phase I of this three-year project to publish a book on the Rock has been completed with Wordwell Books.
- A book on the schools of Portarlinton was written by John Stocks Powell and published in partnership with Offaly Historical Society.

***Establish and promote the best practice in heritage management and conservation.***

### *Masonry Conservation Projects*

Conservation projects were successfully carried out at the following sites this year:

- Killabban Medieval Church (Community Monuments Fund)
- Kilmanman Church (Creative Ireland funding)
- Ballylusk Famine Mortuary

The conservation team was led by David Kelly Partnership conservation engineer and included Colm Flynn archaeologist. This team specified works required, obtained consent from the National Monuments Service. A tender process was run to procure contractors for the sites individually and all the works for 2020 have now been successfully completed.

- *Old St Peter's Graveyard*

Conservation work at Old St Peter's Graveyard Portlaoise involved conservation of stonework in the Bell Tower, conservation of stone memorials, conservation of boundary wall, management of rainwater goods on adjacent buildings, installation of seating and bat boxes. When ivy was removed from the north boundary wall, parts of it were found to be in poor condition, and it will be necessary to carry out repairs to this wall before the site can be opened to the public.

### *Just Transition*

An application to the Just Transition Fund jointly with Offaly County Council for a project to conserve medieval churches in both counties, has received preliminary approval. The funding amounts to €748,000 over three years, with match funding for Laois and Offaly County Councils. The project will involve conservation of three medieval churches in each county, with actions for biodiversity and pollinators in the surrounding graveyard.

### ***Raise awareness of and promote enjoyment of the heritage of County Laois***

### ***Climate Change***

#### *Creative Responses to Climate Change – STEAM Commission*

The Heritage Officer is working with Abbeyleix Tidy Towns and Creative Ireland Laois on a project to increase public engagement with the topic of Climate Change. TA Science Communicator in residence has been appointed and series of online events have been held, with very good response so far. Further engagement is planned in 2021.

#### *Balladine Neighbourhood*

The application to the Forest Service was submitted in early 2020 and a decision was received in January 2021. It is hoped that planting of the woodland in partnership with Abbeyleix Tidy Towns will proceed in 2021.

### *National Biodiversity Action Plan*

With funding from the National Biodiversity Action Plan a series of research projects were carried out in partnership with the Abbeyleix Bog Project in 2020. A further €16,000 has also been committed for 2021, to continue the work at Abbeyleix Bog and implement biodiversity awareness raising projects.

## **CONSERVATION**

Two separate architectural heritage conservation grant schemes (for Protected Structures) were run by Laois County Council in 2020, with funding from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

#### **BUILT HERITAGE INVESTMENT SCHEME 2020**

The Built Heritage Investment Scheme is for smaller scale, labour intensive projects to conserve and maintain protected structures.

BHIS 2020/01	St. Paul's Church, Portarlinton	€15,000
BHIS 2020/02	Thatched House, Ballacolla	€8,000
BHIS 2020/03	Thatched House, Clogh	€4,350
BHIS 2020/04	Thatched House, Stradbally	€8,000
BHIS 2020/05	Tinnakill House, Mountrath	€15,000
BHIS 2020/06	Thatched House, Ballybrittas	€8,650
BHIS 2020/08	Thatched House, Emo	€1,000
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>€60,000</b>

#### **HISTORIC STRUCTURES FUND**

The Historic Structures fund is for larger scale projects and buildings of community importance. Funding was successfully sourced for the following projects in 2020

**HSF 20/46** Clarahill House €40,000 (increased to €50,000 following July Jobs Stimulus)

**HSF 20/48** Stradbally Hall €15,000 (increased to €45,000 following July Jobs Stimulus)

**TOTAL** €95,000

#### **COMMUNITY MONUMENTS FUND**

A new funding scheme aimed at archaeological monuments was created in September 2020 with funding from the National Monuments Service. A total of three projects were successfully funded through this scheme in 2020, bringing €57,464 into the county, with all projects successfully completed by November 2020. It is hoped that the scheme will continue and expand in future years.

CMF 20/1/25	Conservation of Killabban Medieval Church	€25,000
CMF 20/2/23	Conservation Plan for Dysart Gallen Church	€29,014
CMF 20/3/14	Memorial Recording at Lea Graveyard	€3,450
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>€57,464</b>

#### **SECTION 57 DECLARATIONS**

A total of 5 no. Section 57 Declarations in relation to works to Protected Structures at various locations throughout County Laois were processed in 2020.

#### **BROADBAND**

The Broadband officer continues to cooperate with Government initiatives to maximise the potential of having broadband connectivity available throughout the county.

#### **Laois Digital Strategy 2020-2024**

Laois County Council prepared and adopted its first Digital Strategy in 2020. This was prepared following public consultation between 20<sup>th</sup> July and 20<sup>th</sup> August 2020 during which we received 7 no submissions relating to a variety of issues – education, tourism, heritage and infrastructure. The Strategy was then considered by the SPC and brought to the October Council meeting for its adoption.

#### **Broadband Connection Points (BCP's)**

As part of the roll out of the National Broadband Plan, Laois County Council launched **Broadband Connection Points (BCPs)** in 3 areas in rural Laois in December 2020:

- Vicarstown Community Centre ,
- Emo “Old School” Community Centre
- Oisín House Rossmore, Killeslin.

An additional one at Donaghmore workhouse and Agricultural Museum will go live in Quarter 1 of 2021. These are currently outdoor facilities at all locations but will have indoor availability once Public Health Guidance allows.

Broadband Connection Points (or BCPs) are public locations which have been selected to receive high-speed connectivity in the first year of the National Broadband Plan. The locations of the BCPs have been selected by the local authorities and include public areas such as community halls, libraries, sports facilities, enterprise hubs, tourist locations and other public spaces. These are part of the Connected Communities initiative.

## **HOUSING**

During 2020, a total of 176 units were delivered under Rebuilding Ireland. Due to the global pandemic we weren't given a specific target for 2020 however, we are now on track to exceed our overall Rebuilding Ireland Programme target of 627.

- A total of 17 housing units were acquired for social housing across the county. 12 further housing units are currently in the conveyancy/sale agreed process.
- Construction completed on 6 new units at The Orchard, Stradbally 2 new units at Hillview, Portlaoise, 6 units at Featherbed Lane, Borris in Ossory and 7 new units at Corbally, Clonaslee.
- 7 capital schemes are currently on site in Portarlinton, Mountrath, Mountmellick, Ballyroan, Ballybrittas, Durrow and Rathdowney.
- 4 capital schemes in Mountmellick, Stradbally, Errill, Rathdowney and 3 in Portlaoise are being progressed through the Department's Capital Stage Approval process.
- Construction completed on 95 units which were delivered by various Approved Housing Bodies
- 8 Approved Housing Body schemes are currently on site in Portlaoise, Ballylinan and Portarlinton
- 2 Approved Housing Body schemes have received Department approval and are due to go on site in 2021.

Under the Return of Voids Programme, in addition to the Council's own funding, the Department, in 2020, provided an additional €682,169 which part funded the refurbishment of 69 vacant units for the return to productive use in 2020. In total, 72 units were refurbished and re-let in 2020 at a cost of €1,051,235.

The Housing Section has secured a total of 203 properties under the Rental Accommodation Scheme and 388 properties under the Social Housing Leasing initiative. 15 new units were taken on in 2020 under the Social Housing Leasing Initiative.

HAP commenced in Laois on 1st December 2016. There were 982 tenancies active by 31st December 2020. All HAP properties must be inspected within 8 months from the time that the first HAP payment is made to the landlord. The current global pandemic has hindered the ability to carry out inspections to our full capacity with the result that a total of 410 inspections were made in 2020.

The new Homeless HAP Place Finder role was created in December 2018 to support homeless households in securing a HAP tenancy. In 2020 51 homeless were accommodated through HAP. Overall since the role was created a total of 101 homeless were accommodated through HAP.

The Housing Section implemented the Traveller Accommodation Programme 2019-2024 during 2020. Targets under the Programme have been met.

Estate management remains a key function for the Housing Section. The Housing Section provided a range of supports to various resident groups including grants where appropriate.

In 2020, the Department provided €985,382 for Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes for Older People and People with a Disability living in their own private homes. Through effective management of the funding available the Housing Section has been able to keep the scheme open for all of 2020. The Department also provided €206,835.71 for Housing Adaptation Works for People with a Disability living in Local Authority owned homes.

A Housing Needs Assessment was carried out during the months of September to November, 2020 and was completed and signed off on the 30<sup>th</sup> November, 2020. A total of 689 households were assessed. 672 households qualified for social housing support on the Housing Needs Assessment date of the 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 2020. 4 Households were determined not to qualify for social housing support.

Laois has been notified that it can proceed with the inspections of 160 homes as part of a pilot initiative under the Midlands Housing Retrofit Programme. Under the programme houses must achieve a minimum BER rating of “B2” (or Cost Optimal Equivalent).

#### **(5) To continue to develop and improve the quality of customer services**

##### **Corporate Affairs**

Laois County Council’s web site, Twitter & Facebook Social Media sites continued to be updated on a regular basis to ensure that the most up to date information was available. The Council continued to implement the policy in relation to Acceptable Customer Behaviour and the Customer Complaints Policy continued to be monitored in 2020. Regarding the National Performance Indicators, Laois County Council has continued to perform favourably by comparison to other similar local authorities. The statistics report in respect of 2019 was published by the National Oversight Advisory Committee in November 2020.

E-mail and text messaging continue to be used, wherever possible, for correspondence, to reduce cost and resource use. Reports and publications are made available electronically via the [www.laois.ie](http://www.laois.ie) websites, which reduces cost as well as being more environmentally sustainable.

With regard to the Register of Electors, the draft Register for 2021 - 2022 was published on 1<sup>st</sup> November, 2020.

**(6) To prudently manage the Council's resources to achieve effectiveness in outcomes for resources expended**

**Human Resources**

A programme of continued investment in the development of the Council's employees was in place during 2020. Laois County Council undertook a substantial training programme with particular emphasis on Health and Safety requirements, despite restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Council continues to maintain a highly committed workforce to deliver on the objectives of the Corporate Plan and recruitment continues in accordance with the requirements of the Workforce Plan.

Laois County Council maintained good industrial relations during 2020 with no major disputes arising. The Council continues to operate in accordance with the Public Service Agreements in consultation with the relevant Unions.

**Property Management Section**

The Property Management Section carried out the day-to-day property management functions of the Council to co-ordinate the purchase, sale, lease or transfer of all properties. Disposals, leases, acquisitions of property /land, the Mortgage to Rent Scheme (Housing) and Land Registry searches were all carried out together with the mapping and recording of historical land and property assets of Laois County Council. Work is ongoing to register all current land and housing interests and maintain the Property Interest Register to ensure it reconciles with the Fixed Asset and Fire Insurance registers.

**Local Government Payroll and Superannuation Shared Services Centre**

- There are currently 85 employees based in the MyPay shared services centre.
- Waves 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 were completed on schedule with Longford, Roscommon, Westmeath, Leitrim, Laois, Offaly, Galway, Carlow, Monaghan, Cavan, Kildare, Meath, Kilkenny, Louth, South Dublin, Tipperary, Kerry, Wicklow, Mayo, Donegal, Sligo, Fingal, Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown Clare County Councils, Limerick and Waterford City & County Councils and Galway and Cork City Councils now live in MyPay.
- The LGMA and the East & Midlands Regional Assembly are also being paid from MyPay.

- The implementation of Wexford County Council is now commencing and is expected to be complete in 2021.
- The following are the statistics on the project up to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020:
 

Value of Payments	<b>€4.203M</b>
Number of Payments	<b>4,949,816</b>
Number of Pay Groups Paid	<b>10,543</b>
Number of Payroll Runs	<b>5,996</b>
- The Superannuation service pilot with Laois, Carlow and the LGMA has been completed. There are currently 20 local authorities live and this will increase to 30 by the end of 2021
- MyPay has been chosen to administer the new single public service pension scheme on behalf of the sector. We are currently providing the service for the 20 sites who are live for the Superannuation service. The remaining sites are scheduled to come on board in 2021
- MyPay have achieved the ISAE 3402 (international standard for service organisations) The Type 2 Report has issued to the Chief Executive of all clients. This will be renewed annually.

### **Finance/Internal Audit**

Revenue and Capital income and expenditure for 2020 was monitored against budget on an ongoing basis, with reports reviewed by Management Team on a weekly basis. The Corporate Policy Group was updated at all its monthly meetings as were the elected members of the Council in the Chief Executive's monthly report. The Audit Committee Charter & Annual Work Programme for 2021 were agreed by the Members at their meeting held on the 16th of December 2020. The Internal Audit Work Programme for 2021 will proceed in accordance with the agreed programme, taking account Management Team inputs as necessary.

**(7) To continue to develop Corporate Management practices within the Council and to execute effective risk management practices**

The annual review of our safety management system (SMS) was conducted in quarter one (Q1). Our training programme was curtailed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Legislative amendments and changes were informed by our legislative database. Our risk register was amended and updated as appropriate throughout the year. Covid-19 controls and arrangements depleted many of our resources. Technology was used extensively to minimise disruption to operations/services.



The Council continued to maximise efficiencies in the conduct of Council business and to provide administrative support to the Elected Members in 2020. The Statutory requirements of the Ethics Framework in Local Government were also implemented in 2020.

The Council continues to operate in accordance with the Public Service Agreements in consultation with the relevant Unions.

### **Summary**

In the context of the current review I am satisfied that solid progress has been made in implementing the 2019-2024 Corporate Plan.

It is evident that the Council, through its policies plans and budgetary process makes every effort within the resources available to it to improve the quality of life for all within our community.

Given the commitment and dedication of both staff and the elected members, together with ongoing collaboration with local and state partners, I am confident that this Council will continue to deliver quality public services for the people of Laois and that the Council can be pivotal in the economic , social and cultural recovery of our County in he period post the global pandemic.

***John Mulholland***  
***Chief Executive***

**24/01/2019**

