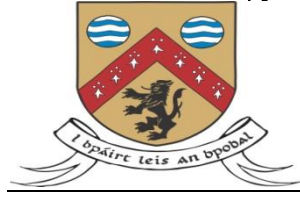


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COMHAIRLE CHONTAE LAOISE
LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL
CORPORATE PLAN 2019 - 2024
ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT, JANUARY 2022



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 both in the Dunamais Theatre and by remote means during 2021. Monthly Management Reports continued 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 2021:-

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

The Annual Report for 2020 was published in line with statutory requirements.

County Promotion:

Tourism

In 2021, the Council continued to promote Laois by supporting a range of initiatives and by working with state agencies and the Board of Laois Tourism. O'Connell Marketing Consultants were contracted by Laois Tourism to market and promote the County. A strong online presence exists through the new Tourism Website and Social Media channels actively promoting the County and what it has to offer.

The Council continued to work with Fáilte Ireland promoting Laois as a destination in Ireland's Ancient East. There was a series of National Print & Media Advertising Campaigns with "Keep Discovering" and "Make a Break for it" just some of the campaigns that were used to encourage the domestic audience to pack their bags and get out to explore all that Laois and Ireland has to offer.

Works, including paint enhancement and the completion of civil and hard landscape works on Bull Lane were part of the Tourism Destination Town Project in Portlaoise. Proposals for the script, planning and design of wayfinding and interpretation signage for Portlaoise with design consultants are being finalised. The Council, in partnership with Fáilte Ireland, will provide weatherproof facilities in 2022 to enable year-round outdoor dining in Portlaoise and Durrow. Under the Town and Village Scheme works have commenced on the conservation and upgrading of the Community-run Heritage Centre in the former Church of Ireland in Timahoe. This will protect the fabric of the historic building and provide facilities and heritage interpretation for tourists and local people.

Coilte, in association with Laois and Offaly County Councils, continued to work on the development of the Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail Project. There are now 11km of blue trails, 2km of Red and 2km of Black trails completed in the County. Work on the Barrow Blueway steadily progressed in 2021. Of the 36,340m of unbound surface on the project, 18,020m are completed and 5,570m are in progress. The Economic Plan for the Blueway was completed and launched in July. This aims to inform, guide and encourage community and business economic development initiatives that will maximise the opportunity the Blueway presents for Laois and Kildare while bringing the experience of the Blueway to life for local people and visitors to the area. The development is expected to be completed by August 2022.

Despite Covid, some events took place including the five-day Rás ná mBan international cycle road race. Friday Sept 10th saw the competitors cycle through Crettyard, Stradbally, Portlaoise, Mountmellick, Rosenallis, Clonaslee, Kinnity and The Cut on the Slieve Bloom Mountains where the presentation of jerseys was made to the winning competitors on the day. The Twin Trees Heywood Art and Culture Festival took place from August 18th to 20th. The Council, also, supported a number of Christmas Markets.

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 education and development through our partnerships with the LOETB, and networking with artists and communities to develop the sector. 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. Socially inclusive activities and events hosted included:

Laois Arthouse, Stradbally –limited by Covid 19, three exhibitions took place during 2021

Summer Series of professional art workshops The annual Adult Summer Art course with artist Mary Burke was held in the Malthouse, Stradbally to allow for safe distancing and safety of participants.

Laois Youth Theatre - workshops were adapted to include a series of online and outdoor workshops. Independent youth theatre programmes, in Mountrath and Portarlinton, continued to be supported.

Laois Culture Night – This event proceeded on Friday 17th of September 2021, including a wide variety of free live and online events.

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 worked collaboratively with the Dunamais Arts Centre on numerous programmes during the year.

The Artists in Schools Scheme

Despite Covid-19 restrictions, 5 schools participated in this scheme in 2021. The scheme allows students to have an in-depth experience with the professional artist and gives them the opportunity to experience different art mediums

Leaves Festival of Literature

The annual festival was curated by **Clíodhna Ní Anluain** and the festival included a fantastic line up of events including readings/discussions, theatre productions, writers in schools and workshops, presented from 2nd -7th Nov, in partnership with the Dunamais Arts Centre. Highly accomplished writers and panels presented at the Dunamais Arts Centre as well as some online events.

Local Live Performance Scheme Phase 1 & 2

Funded by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and administered by the Arts Office the scheme supports the arts and culture sectors through the provision of live performance, by engaging the services of professional artists, musicians, producers, crew and other staff. **Phase 1** saw the production of professionally produced performance films celebrating the rich built heritage, monuments, sites and landscapes in County Laois. 76 performers and artists had the opportunity to participate in Phase 1. A screening of the films took place in the Dunamais Arts Centre in November. The films also attracted a significant online audience. **Phase 2** completed in December 21, included a diverse range of live events in

multiple outdoor and indoor settings across the County, enlivening community events, markets and offering intimate concerts in our Arts Centres. Performing artists were encouraged to develop and perform work which was again recorded, giving the performers an important promotional tool to utilise in developing their work. Music Generation Laois, in a partnership arrangement, produced a fantastic programme of events throughout the county, including a major outdoor event to premier a new commemorative piece by Martin Tourish and the Music Generation Laois, Trad Orchestra.

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

Creative Ireland Laois Programme 2021 – 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 and Biodiversity enhancement of play facilities at Portlaoise, Stradbally and Mountrath
- Assist communities with the development of new playgrounds at Ballinakill and Borris in Ossory – both successfully awarded LEADER funding.
- Successful Grant Application to Department of Children & Youth Affairs - €15,000 for accessibility enhancements to playgrounds
- Assisting with Preparation and delivery of successful Green Flag Award for Páirc an Phobal, Portarlinton
- Delivery of essential repairs and upgrading works to Portlaoise Leisure Centre to prepare for re-opening after COVID 19 restrictions are lifted and funding applications made to source additional funding
- 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, ORIS and CLÁR funding applications and overseeing the delivery of same in partnership with communities.

(2) To foster and promote sustainable environmental initiatives and practices in the County/Region

Continuing on the excellent partnership with elected representatives, local communities, schools and agencies, we arranged the following supports, initiatives and Projects:

- 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.
- Green-schools Online Seminars for teachers involved in the programme;
- Radio and online awareness campaign on BBQ Food Waste featuring celebrity chef Catherine Fulvio which featured in RTE Guide.
- Series of Videos showcasing local Repair and Reuse Businesses for Reuse Month featuring sustainable living experts “The Useless Project”.
- Online Furniture Upcycling courses for adults cocooning during lockdown and toolkits with all materials required for course were delivered to participants homes.
- The Picker Pal Programme supports schools, children and their families through a fun, year -round programme of interactive activities on Picker Pal TV and participating classrooms receive a Picker Pal Pod containing an workbook and reader for each pupil along with a picker pal pack that is given to families to take home and to go on a litter picking adventure with their families. The Laois Federation of Tidy Towns nominated schools to participate in the programme and they will link in and encourage the programme within the schools. Up to 1,200 children and their families will participate in this programme over the academic year. This programme has been funded by Laois County Council and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications.
- TY Climate Literacy Courses for Transition Year students in 5 Secondary Schools in the County which incorporates teacher training element.
- Midland Science delivered four Climate Action Workshop over 8 weeks to 5th classes in Portlaoise Town as part of Portlaoise Low Carbon Town Project.

Applications for funding support were invited from interested bodies, groups, committees and organisations who intended to engage in environmental/amenity works. 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. 103 groups countywide received funding of €32,547 over 2021

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 2021 €31,841 was allocated in grants to 22 groups under this scheme.

CLIMATE CHANGE SECTION

During 2021, 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 second highest SEAI M&R energy efficiency returns completed by a Local Authority and returned to SEAI with an estimated efficiency increase now at 46.8% better than baseline year (2009), up from 43.2% 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 the Low Carbon Implementation Group. This 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 2021 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.
- Portlaoise 2040 SEC have applied for Energy Master Plan for Portlaoise.

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 is supported by the Community Department of Laois County Council and oversees the implementation of:

- Social Inclusion Community Action Programme (SICAP). Laois LCDC continued to oversee implementation of the SICAP Programme 2018-2022 and administered the annual budget of €604,226 for 2021. The contract implementer is Laois Partnership Company.
- Community objectives in the Local Economic & Community Plan.
- Laois Local Development Strategy operated under the LEADER Programme 2014 – 2020 and the Transitional Programme 2021/2022, in partnership between the local authority (financial partner) and local development company (implementing partner).
- LEADER Programme 2014–2020 – this concluded on the 31st March 2021 for which the Laois Local Action Group (LAG) approved 134 projects to the value of €5,557,492.21
- Transitional LEADER programme 2021/2022 commenced on the 1st April 2021 with Laois LAG being awarded the amount of €1,092,976 for projects. As of 31st December 2021, 16 projects were approved by the LAG to the value of €574,675.97
- LEADER EURI funding - In addition, Laois LAG were notified of an allocation under this funding stream during 2021, of €485,767 for eligible projects. Project animation is ongoing.
- Healthy Ireland Programme– A Round 3 Grant in the sum of €246,050 received from the Department of Health in early 2020 to cover a wide variety of local health

focussed projects/initiatives, continued to rolled out in 2021. Due to COVID-19, the completion date for this fund was extended from 30th June 2021 to 31st December 2021.

- Community Resilience Fund -The Sláintecare Unit in the Department of Health, through the Healthy Ireland Fund (HIF) allocated €67,225 under the Community Resilience Fund, for the 'Keep Well Campaign' effective 13th November 2020 to 31st March 2021, and a range of projects under the 'Keep Well' Banner were completed.
- DRCD Community Enhancement Programme -Laois LCDC approved funding for 68 applicants totalling €136,524 in respect of this scheme in 2021.
- Dormant Accounts Social Enterprise Capital Grant Scheme - The LCDC funded a further 4 projects amounting to €23,794 under this newly established scheme which provided funding to social enterprises towards small scale capital projects.
- Community Activities Fund – An amount of €237,048 was allocated to Laois LCDC for distribution to eligible groups and projects and in November 2021 and applications for this fund opened in November 2021.

Laois Community Support Response Forum/Helpline

The **Covid-19 Community Response Forum** was established in County Laois in March 2020 and concluded on the 30th November 2021. During the lifetime of the forum, the group gathered on 20 separate occasions in order to successfully deliver on the core aim of contributing to the community-wide effort to limit the spread of COVID-19, and to assist those who were vulnerable and most in need.

Laois County Councils Community Response Helpline (telephone line/email support) continued to be operated by Community staff during 2021. In light of a reduction in overall COVID-19 cases and the severity of impact of the pandemic, it was decided nationally that all helplines cease operations effective from 29th October 2021. A total of 816 callers to the Laois Helpline were supported during its operation.

Laois Connects 2021 Promoting Positive Mental Health & Wellbeing

The Laois Connects Programme took place from the 1st October to the 31st of October 2021. Previously the programme would have been implemented over a one-week period. However, with the Covid 19 related impacts continuing, the initiative was extended to run over a 4 week timeframe to make the programme as accessible as possible for as many people as possible. There was a mix of online, indoor and outdoor events successfully delivered throughout the month.

Laois Comhairle na nÓg

In 2021 Youth Work Ireland Laois were the successful tenderer to run the Laois Comhairle na nÓg programme. During the year 37 meetings were held by Zoom and some in-person meetings held outdoors. The AGM was held via zoom in November 2021 with 71 young people in attendance from 10 different secondary schools. Additional funding was received from the Department to develop a strategic plan for stakeholder engagement with Laois Comhairle na nÓg in line with the Comhairle na nÓg 5-year development (2021-2025) plan.

Educational Partnership

The Schools Business Partnership "Skills at Work" programme re-branded in 2021 to 'World of Work', and is aimed at 2nd year students. This intervention has been shown to be more

effective in addressing/averting the issue of early school leavers. The programme is run in conjunction with Portlaoise College and involves an introductory session, company overview, a 'Day in the Life' where students meet members of Council staff with varying work and education backgrounds, a site visit and a wrap session. The programme is run by the National Schools Business Partnership and the Dept of Education and Skills.

Youth Supports

Other supports for young people in Laois were continued throughout 2021. 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 Alliance met 5 times and the Older People's Council met 3 times during 2021. The meetings were all online and the impact of the pandemic was very much on the agenda. Together with all stakeholders, including our Libraries, An Garda Siochana and TFI Local Link and many others, we ensured our older and more isolated citizens were catered for. Online workshops were organised to create awareness of the Age Friendly Business Recognition Scheme. New Age Friendly parking spaces were provided in Mountrath. We collaborated with Healthy Ireland to deliver 2000 free face coverings to our communities. Android tablets were supplied to nursing homes, to help residents stay connected with family. An intergenerational knitting project with nursing home residents and their grandchildren was also supported by the programme.

Collaborative Projects/Social Inclusion

Laois County Council partnered with stakeholders in respect of projects during 2021, to include:

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

Migrant Services

Laois County Council ensured the continuation of a Migrant Support Service in the county for a one year duration during 2020/2021, with RESPOND contracted to deliver the service.

The Refugee Interagency Working Group (RIAWG) concluded its work on the 17th of December 2021. From 2019-2021, 19 Syrian families and 6 individuals were accommodated in Laois under the programme. Overall, 106 individuals were resettled, which included 14 Irish born babies.

Laois Public Participation Network (PPN)

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 634 groups currently registered. 54 new Member Groups registered in 2021.

Supporting Communities during Covid 19 - Laois PPN supported communities in Laois and PPN Member groups in 2021 through key actions like the Laois PPN Interactive Map, Training & Capacity Building and Laois Check In-Cards

Training and Capacity Building - In 2021 Laois PPN organized a variety of well attended training and capacity building events relating to each of the 3 Pillars: Community, Social Inclusion and Environmental.

Laois Connects 2021 - Laois PPN held 2 online events for Laois Connects 2021 - Rory's Stories - An Unexpected Journey to Self-Belief and Understanding Self Harm Talk - An online talk presented by the HSE.

Plenaries - Laois PPN held 2 County Plenaries and 3 Municipal District Plenaries online in 2021.

County Laois Joint Policing Committee(JPC)

The County Laois JPC met 4 times in 2021. A review of the JPC Strategic Plan 2016-2020 was agreed for commencement, and with a view to preparing a new Plan.

Community & Voluntary Awards

The 2021 Community & Voluntary Awards was opened to applications in 2021 and will take place at a virtual ceremony in January 2022, hosted by Laois County Council in association with Laois PPN and the Laois Volunteer Centre. Nominees will be honoured in eight categories for their contribution to community life in Laois, including an individual Unsung Hero Award and a newly established COVID-19 Community Response 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 2021 All Island Pride of Place Competition by Abbeyleix Tidy Towns in the population category. The virtual awards event where the winners will be announced was postponed due to Covid and is due to take place in April 2022.

Community Projects (Elected Members) Fund 2021

Over 77 community groups/projects were assisted by the operation of this fund in 2021 in a total amount of €110,421.

Town & Village Renewal Scheme

In 2020 €383,375 in funding was awarded under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme 2020 benefitting 5 projects at 9 locations in County Laois. Of these, 1 project is fully complete with the remaining 4 due for completion during 2022. Two projects awarded under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme 2019 were also completed in full in 2021. In

addition, all 2020 projects under the Accelerated Measures Scheme were completed in 2021.

Disability Participation and Awareness Fund

In 2021 Laois County Council were Successful in an application under the Disability Participation and Awareness Fund and awarded €75,000 under for the delivery of a suite of projects to be delivered in the early part of 2022.

Project/Initiative	Amount
Carry out Accessibility works at Portlaoise Leisure Centre	€65,000
Deliver the Sightless Cinema Initiative	€3,500
Deliver an Access for All/Social Inclusion Week	€3,500
Deliver Disability Awareness training programme for staff.	€3,000
	€75,000

(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

Roads & Transportation Department 2021

The 2021 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 €30M. The 2021 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 continue throughout 2022. The Outdoor Dining and Accessories Scheme was administered by the Roads Dept facilitating the reopening of businesses during Covid 19.

Graigecullen-Portarlinton Municipal District (Eastern Area)

In the Eastern Area, there was a total road surfacing length of 12.2 km completed by Restoration Improvements Works (Strengthening) in 2021.

There was also a total road surfacing length of 17.6 km completed by Restoration Maintenance Works (Surface Dressing) in 2021.

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

- Moyanna Bridge (L39305): This involved the complete re-construction of bridge including masonry arch, abutments and road reinstatement.
- Rossmore/Springhill Bridge (L7918): The scope of works included the removal of a length of damaged parapet and wingwall and the re-construction of this section of parapet and wingwall.
- Emo/Kennels Cross Bridge (R419): This involved the reconstruction of a section of cracked arch, wall and parapet. Rock armouring was also provided on the downstream end of the bridge embankment to prevent potential scour of the structure.

Safety Improvement Works were completed in Portarlington at the junction of the R419 Portlaoise Road and Foxcroft Street beside the old fire station. These works included the realignment of the kerb/footpath on the sharp bend and road surfacing.

Safety improvement works were also carried out at the crossroads adjacent to Treacy's The Heath (junction of the R445 and L7812) and at Castletown crossroads (junction of L3978 and L7980).

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

- Emo Park, Emo
- Milford, Kilmoroney
- Skehana, Ballylinan
- Killeen, Maganey
- Ballymaddock, Stradbally
- Clogrenan

Significant road drainage works were carried out across the Municipal District in 2021 including;

- Rahin Road, Ballylinan (to resolve historic flooding issue)
- Monure (installation of drainage pipework to river)
- Melbourne Lane, Luggacuren (installation of large diameter culvert for stream in verge where embankment had subsided)
- Clogh Road, The Swan (raising existing gulleys on roadway)
- Springhill, Killeshin (piping of open drain in verge)
- Coolane (construction of new culvert road crossing where old culvert collapsed)
- Killeen (installation of new road drainage to stream)
- Portarlington and Stradbally (jetting of road drainage)

Drainage works were also completed at Ballymaddock and Coolnabacka under the Climate Adaptation and Resilience Works 2021 allocation.

Under the 'Towns & Villages Renewal Scheme', new seating, litter bins, planters and a tourist information board was procured for Stradbally. New seating, footpath bollards, planters and tourist information board were procured for Portarlington. In consultation with Portarlington Tidy Towns committee, new solar compactor bins were also ordered for expected delivery in early 2022.

A 5-year River Maintenance Programme was developed in 2020 for Barrow Drainage District works. In 2021, the following river maintenance works were completed under this Programme:

- Vegetation and silt removal on the River Barrow between Stradbally River and Blackford Stream (800m)
- Vegetation and silt removal on the River Barrow between Belan and the M7 motorway (2,300m)
- Vegetation and silt removal on the Timogue River between Poles Bridge and Stradbally River (500m)
- Vegetation removal on the Stradbally River between Stradbally and Garrans Bridge (3.2km)

Footpath repair and construction works were completed across the Graiguecullen/Portarlington Municipal District in 2021. These are some of the larger footpath projects:

Portarlington:

- Main Street (both sides) from Bank of Ireland to Market Square
- Foxcroft Street
- Link Road
- Edenderry Road (completed sections on both sides of R419) to Marian Hill – this was funded under the 2021 Active Travel allocation.
- Canal Road Footpath and Cycleway

Stradbally

- Vicarstown Road

Under the Additional Outdoor Infrastructure Scheme, an outdoor paved area along with a pedestrian crossing was constructed adjacent to the Stradbally Library/ Arts centre.

A range of traffic calming measures were also installed across the Municipal District in 2021 including speed ramps, speed radars, pedestrian crossings, road signage and road markings.

Portlaoise Municipal District (Central Area)

In the Central Area, a total road length of 9.4Km was improved under Restoration Improvement Works (Strengthening) Schemes.

A total road length of 7.1km was resealed and had skid resistance improved under Restoration Maintenance Works (Surface Dressing) Schemes.

Footpath Programme including Urban Renewal

Over €100,000 of footpath works were carried in the towns of Portlaoise and Abbeyleix in 2021.

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 Portlaoise Municipal District Office manage 35,000m² of annual cut meadows and 1000m² of short cut meadows in Portlaoise town environs, 1800m² of which was newly established in 2021. A Bluebell Meadow was established on JFL Avenue near the Bridge Street Centre.

In conjunction with Portlaoise Tidy Towns a roundabout strategy for the provision of lighting, sculptures and planting for Market Square, Fairgreen, O'Moore Park, Garda station roundabouts in Portlaoise was developed.

In 2021, the Portlaoise Municipal District Office in conjunction Portlaoise Tidy Town, Irish Wildlife Trust and National Learning Network are promoting Portlaoise as "A town in a garden" with the expansion of the planting of Pollinator friendly plants and bulbs.

Climate Action

The 10,000 Trees for Portlaoise Project in conjunction with Trees on the Land, Portlaoise Tidy Towns and Climate Action Plan was progressed in 2021. Over 6,000 new trees were planted in spring 2021 at:

- Clonminam Link Road, Pairc an phobail, Portlaoise Southern Circular Route, and Private lands
- Fruit trees on Fr. Browne Avenue and Aughnaharna

A further 6,500 new trees were planted in December 2021 on the Borris Road, Clonminam Link Road, Portlaoise GAA, Ardbranagh Residential Estate, Mulhalls & Kyle Centre boundaries, St Fintan's Hospital, Community Garden O'Moore Place.

Outdoor Dining

In 2021 outdoor dining tables and seating facilities were provided at the following locations in Portlaoise:

- Market Square
- Hynes Square
- Main Street
- Lyster Square

A new bespoke canopy over the outdoor dining area at Hynes Square was designed and to be delivered in 2022.

Community Involvement Schemes

Road surfacing, footpaths and drainage works were carried out at

- St. Brigid's Place;
- Marian Avenue, Portlaoise

Climate Change Adaptation Schemes & Drainage programme

Drainage works were carried out at the following locations:

- Woodgrove, Portlaoise
- Aughnacross, Spink
- Ballytarsna, Abbeyleix
- Crutt, Spink
- Portlaoise rural & environs (Broomville, Triogue Manor, Summerhill Lane, Togher Woods), Ballinakill (Ralish, Drimaterril, Iron Mills)
- The Rock
- Moyadd

The type of works involved replacing undersized drains with new culverts, high quality soakaways and open water courses and improving the road drainage network.

Road Safety Schemes & Junction Improvement Works

Works to enhance road safety to enhance visibility and driver safety were carried out at

- Raggettstown and Cappanashannagh, Ballinakill
- Cashel, Ballyroan
- Coole, Raheen

Bridge Rehabilitation Works

Significant bridge rehabilitation works were completed at Sheeran's Bridge, Colt. Masonry repairs and repointing to the parapet walls, abutments and retaining walls were completed. The bridge was repaired using traditional techniques with all the works undertaken by Laois County Council direct labour staff.

The contract for the permanent replacement of the Bridge Street Bridge, Portlaoise was awarded in 2021 with work scheduled to commence in 2022.

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 - Market Mews, Woodgrove, Broomville, Glenbarrow Estate, Aghnaharna Drive, Beladd Lower, Marian Avenue, Fairgreen, Bellingham
- Ballymullen Road, Abbeyleix
- Ballinakill National School

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 2021.

2021 IBAL Anti-Litter League

Portlaoise achieved 1st place out of 40 towns that were assessed as part of the Irish Business Against Litter League (Round 1). Portlaoise achieved second place overall in the final round of judging. Portlaoise achieved the status of “Cleaner than European Norms”.

Other Works

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 18km was completed by Restoration Improvements Works (Strengthening). A total road surfacing length of 19km was completed by Restoration Maintenance Works (Surface Dressing).

Community Involvement Schemes

Road surfacing, footpaths and drainage works were carried out at:

- St Fergal's Cemetery, Ballacolla
- St. Joseph Terrace, Mountmellick
- Killeen, Camross
- Raheenleigh, Cullahill
- Ossory Court, Borris in Ossory

Local Improvement Schemes

Road surfacing and drainage works were carried out at:

- Derry House, Rosenallis
- Crannagh, Mountrath
- Cuddagh, Castletown
- Glebe, Coolrain
- Cuddagh South, Ballacolla
- Knockiel, Rathdowney
- Keelough Glebe, Pike of Rushall

River Drainage

River maintenance works were completed at the following locations:

- Vegetation removal on the River Barrow between Borness Bridge and Portnahich Bridge
- Siltation removal works were completed on the River Owenass between Convent Bridge and Borness Bridge.
- Removal of gravel bars beneath Irishtown Bridge and Convent Bridge in Mountmellick.

Bridge Rehabilitation Works

Borraghaun Bridge, Errill

The foundations of Borraghaun Bridge settled as a result of scour action which caused a partial collapse of both facades. Repair works were undertaken to the abutments, spandrel walls and arch barrel to restore the structural integrity of the structure.

R421 County Bridge Clonaslee

This bridge is located on the Laois/Offaly border in the townland of Garryhedder, Clonaslee. Significant bridge rehabilitation works were completed involving the reconstruction of parapet walls and masonry repairs to the retaining walls. In addition, the bridge façade was repointed. The bridge was repaired using traditional techniques with all the works undertaken by Laois County Council direct labour staff.

R423 Blackwater Bridge, Mountmellick

A collapse of the downstream parapet of the Blackwaater Bridge occurred in early 2021. Action was taken by our direct labour staff to demolish the defective sections of damaged parapet and reconstruct them using salvaged stone and lime mortar. Scaffolding was erected to the upstream and downstream facades of the bridge to facilitate the removal of vegetation from all the bridge elements. It was possible to deflect the end of the parapet wall away from oncoming traffic which will make the bridge safer for all road users.

In addition to bridges mentioned above, Council staff also repaired several other bridges including Tinnahinch Bridge, Cashel Culvert and Sheeren's Bridge.

Drainage Programme

Drainage Schemes were delivered at a number of locations around the Municipal District in 2021 including:

- Gurteen, Ballacolla
- Tullamore Road, Clonaslee
- Capponellan, Durrow
- Rathcoffee, Rosenallis
- Knockiel, Rathdowney

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

The following schemes were funded under the Climate Change Adaptation Grant:

- Embankment stabilisation works at Cardtown Cross, Camross
- Drainage works at Lackamore, Killeigh
- Modifications to the pavement at Pound Street Rathdowney to prevent fluvial flooding at Mill Street.

Footpath Works

Footpath improvement works were undertaken during 2021 at the following locations:

- Derry Road, Durrow
- Forest, Mountrath
- St. Josephs Terrace, Mountmellick
- Ballacolla Village

Active Travel/NTA Projects

Laois County Council received an allocation of €3.7m in 2021 from the National Transport Authority for the delivery of Active Travel projects. Active Travel is utilising modes of transport where we must use physical energy, such as walking or cycling. Delivery of Active Travel projects largely centres around walking and cycling improvements.

In 2021 delivery of a number of projects commenced:

- Triogue Blueway Portlaoise, Phase 1
- Portlaoise Cycle Parking
- New footpath from The Rock GAA Club to Mountmellick
- Footpath improvement works on the R419 Edenderry Road, Portarlinton
- Pedestrian crossing at Summerhill Lane, Portlaoise.

Design work also commenced in 2021 on several other Active Travel projects, a number of which are expected to be delivered in 2022:

- Vulnerable Road User improvements on Father Browne Avenue, Portlaoise
- VRU improvements on the Dublin Road, Portlaoise
- New footpath and pedestrian crossing at Rathleague, Portlaoise linking the N80 to Portlaoise GAA Club
- New footpath in Ballyroan from the primary school to the GAA Club
- New footpath and pedestrian crossing in Stradbally on the N80 as far as the cemetery
- New footpath in Ballinakill from the R432 to the swimming pool.

Road Design

Laois County Council completed a large number of maintenance and improvement schemes in 2021 which included, the completion of, 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.

Capital Pavement Works 2021 – Expenditure €400,000

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

- N78 Ballylinan
- N80 Laught & Commons

N80 Footpath Remedial Works 2021 – Expenditure €38,250

- Upgrade of existing N80 Footpath at Emmett Street, Mountmellick (€19,250)
- Upgrade of existing footpath outside the Community School in Mountmellick (€19,000)

RSRM Schemes – Expenditure

2021 Low Cost Safety Scheme – €220,000

- 001 – Ballinakill – Hedge & Tree removal.
- 002 - Treacys Cross Roads – Traffic Island and signage instillation.
- 003 - Cork Road Durrow – Pedestrian crossing & Lighting instillation.
- 004 - Cashel Ballyroan - Hedge removal and fence instillation.
- 005 - Junction of R419 Foxcroft Street Portarlington – Junction realignment.
- 006 - Rosenallis Road at Clonaslee - Pedestrian crossing & Lighting instillation.
- 007 - Coole Raheen - Hedge removal and fence instillation.
- 008 - Lea Cross Portarlington – Public lighting instillation.

2021 Specific improvement grant

Derrin Cross, Borris in Ossory - €200,000 – Junction realignment, Public lighting, concrete post and rail fence removal and replaced with passively safe fencing, junction island and signage.

Public Lighting

There are total 9,500 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.

Winter Maintenance

Call-out operations were carried out on 77 occasions during the 2020/2021 winter season treating 458km of the salted network in Laois. So far there has been 25 call-outs during the 2021/2022 winter season.

Water Services

Irish Water Capital Investment Plan 2019 to 2024.

Irish Water continues to fund all Water Services Capital Projects. Laois County Council in conjunction with Irish Water has completed various schemes to support the socio-economic development of the County.

Networks and Water Conservation.

Water Network Improvement and upgrade works were completed in Portlaoise, Portarlington and Mountmellick. First fix, find and fix and lead replacement works continued throughout the county. Significant progress was made in Portarlington in the area of leakage management and in addition several projects in Portlaoise, Portarlington, Stradbally, Rathdowney, Durrow and Abbeyleix, including mains rehab and back yard services, were funded by Irish Water funded via a Stimulus Package during 2021.

Programmes

Disinfection/PH control programme: the boil water notice at the Strand WTP has been lifted, installation is process proved and commissioned. Civil works commenced in Derryguile, Kyle and Lough WTP. MECIA works progressed at Knocks, Derryguile, Lough and Ballyroan WTP. Upgrade works will be progressed in early 2022 at Derrymoyle and Kilminchy.

Containerised unit programme: UV containerised unit along with break tank installed on site at Aughfeerish WTP with the commissioning/testing/process proving completed. Disinfection upgrade works also completed.

Inlet Works Storm and Sludge Programme at Castletown WwTP: new storm tank intended to be installed on site by the end of 2022.

In relation to the Portlaoise Water Supply improvement Scheme, borewell PW09 at Coolbanagher has recently been developed and is to be used when required. Also, with respect to the Portarlington Water Supply, 2 no. borewells at Doolough have been brought into production. Further progress was made in Durrow with the bringing into service of a borewell at Fermoy WTP.

Ballyroan wastewater treatment plant capacity is being extended from 600 PE to 900 PE. This was done directly by Laois County Council, Water Services Operations and Maintenance. Installation is now complete. This will provide capacity for a housing scheme under construction by Laois County Council's Housing section in Ballyroan and there will also be capacity for some further development.

Water Services Laboratory

Laois County Council's Water Services Laboratory is an INAB accredited facility certified under the international standard ISO 17025:2017. The Laboratory has retained its accreditation status which it was granted in October 2016 by INAB. In accordance with the EPA approved 2021 programmes, as an essential service Lab staff continued to conduct testing and sampling throughout 2021 in accordance with Covid-19 safe systems of work plans/risk assessments. The sample throughput increased from 3,529 in 2020 to 4,076 in 2021. During 2020-2021 there was a capital investment of € 157,000 in instrumentation.

Multi Annual Rural Water Programme 2019 to 2021

The strategic objective of the Rural Water Programme is to improve quality, reliability and efficiency of water services to rural dwellers where Irish Water services are not available. Work continued to support the Group Water Scheme Sector in conjunction with the DPHLG and with the support of the National Federation of Group Water Schemes financially, administratively and technically to ensure that a safe, dependable and

adequate water supply is provided to the rural population and farming community in Laois in compliance with the European Union (Drinking Water) Regulations, 2014, as amended, thus protecting the public health of the people of Laois and supporting the socio-economic development of the agricultural sector.

Some works were delayed due to the COVID 19 restrictions however the following works were carried out/completed during 2021:

Measure 2 -Public Health Compliance

- Raheenavannagh GWS
- The Heath GWS
- Derrynaseera GWS
- Barrowhouse GWS

Measure 3 - Enhancement and Water Conservation

- Derrynaseera GWS
- Ballacolla GWS
- Ballypickas GWS
- The Heath GWS
- Errill GWS
- Cullohill GWS

Measure 4 - New Group Water Schemes

- New GWS at Shanbo, Borris-in-Ossory
- Vicarstown GWS

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

- The Rock GWS
- Moyadd GWS
- Kilbride
- Ullard
- Raheen

Measure 6 - Community Water and Wastewater Connections

- Wastewater Community Connection at Goodwin Estate

Group Water Schemes Annual Subsidy Payments: €465,703.67 was processed in respect of subsidy payments to Group Water Schemes.

Well Grant Applications: €174,189.93 was paid out to 39 applicants in respect of well grant

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

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 31st December 2021. All files are being monitored & progressed. Due to prolonged dereliction some properties are being re-referred for investigation and report

Environment

Area of Activity	Objectives	2021 Progress Update
<p>Environmental Protection</p>	<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 & maintain air quality and to protect against noise pollution</p>	<p>In 2021, The Environmental Protection Team:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigated complaints and water quality issues referred by members of the public, EPA and LAWPRO/Inland Fisheries Ireland • Carried out assessments, inspections and reports on planning applications. • Reviewed, inspected and enforced Discharge Licenses • Assisted LAWPRO in referrals form Prioritised Areas for Action • Carried out investigation and sampling for the Kilminchy Area Project • Special Focus on water quality in the Fushoge, Owenass, Ballyroan and Triogue Catchments • Carried out inspections and maintenance of the EPA’s Ambient Air Quality Monitoring Programme (AAMP) stations in Laois. (Portlaoise and Mountrath). • Carried out Air Quality Monitoring (Nitrogen Dioxide) in the towns of Abbeyleix, Durrow and Cullahill.



Advertisement for three steps to improve air quality, promoted through local press in December 2021.

Area of Activity	Objectives	2021 Progress Update
<p style="text-align: center;">Waste Management & Enforcement</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>Throughout 2021, the Environment Section</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued to comply with requirements of the Eastern Midlands Waste Management Plan (EMWMP). • Engaged with the Eastern Midlands Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authority (WERLA). Prioritised the National Waste Enforcement Priorities for 2021. • Increased the level of effective waste enforcement in the County. • The staff also arranged for the removal of huge quantities of illegally dumped waste from numerous sites around the county in 2021 – 526 tonnes <p>In 2021 the Environment Section continued to work with householders to promote compliance with Laois County Council’s Waste Management (Storage, Presentation & Segregation of Household & Commercial Waste) Bye Laws 2018 and EU Food Waste Regulations 2015 (Brown Bins). Over 760 letters / household visits were issued or carried out in 2021 and further follow ups and house inspections are scheduled for 2022.</p> <p>Four projects were completed under the Anti-Dumping Initiative (ADI) funded by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (DCCA):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) National Autumn Blitz 2021 This county wide initiative focusing on support for local groups to undertake local area clean ups was completed during September 2021 in conjunction with Tidy Towns and kindly sponsored by Bord Na Mona. b) UAV/Drone technology and Audio Device The audio messaging device (AMD), which is currently installed at Bruders Bridge, Portlaoise to deter the high level of illegal dumping in this area has received very positive feedback and a reduction in the no. of illegal dumping incidents in the area. The Environment Section also purchased two drones and training has been completed on the operation of this technology. c) Bulky Waste Amnesty Over 300 mattresses and approx. 40 tonnes of Bulky household waste were collected from a number of areas with high occurrences of illegal dumping. This project was focused on removing bulky waste streams in advance of Halloween bonfires. The positive result of this was evident in smaller & safer levels of Bonfire activity in these areas and a reduction in the incidents of illegal dumping of such bulky items.

d) Clean up of Bog Areas – Cloninagh/Errill Bogs
Work completed on clean-up of two large scale illegal dumping sites in Cloninagh & Errill Bogs.



Bags of litter collected by voluntary groups
2021
Being taken to landfill by Litter Warden



Launch of National Autumn Blitz



Launch of National Autumn Blitz 2021 by Cathaoirleach Connor Bergin.

Area of Activity	Objectives	2021 Progress Update
<p style="text-align: center;">Litter Management</p>		<p>Litter Wardens issued 79 Fixed Penalty Notices for offences under the Litter Pollution Act. Two Section 9 Notices issued to property owners requesting that the litter be removed from their premises.</p>
	<p>To prevent, control & 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. 730 litter pickers, 536 rolls of bags, 1,806 pairs of gloves as well as 112 hi-viz vests and anti-dumping signs.</p>
	<p>To encourage & promote public awareness</p>	<p>The Litter Wardens and landfill staff further assisted the voluntary/community groups by collecting and disposing of the collected waste, 131 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 2021 Portlaoise was ranked in second position out of 40 towns / cities surveyed.</p>
	<p>Partnership with Communities & Business</p>	<p>Cleaner than European Norms. This was another excellent result for Portlaoise, one of its best ever, with eight of the ten sites surveyed achieving top ranking.</p>
	<p>Enforcement of the Litter Pollution Acts</p>	<p>In partnership with local Tidy Towns groups, the Environment launched their Anti Dog Fouling campaign for Portlaoise and the whole county in Pairc an Phobail on Tuesday, 27th April 2021. The campaign aimed to promote responsible dog ownership and encourage dog owners to clean up after their dogs, through a multi-faceted advertising programme with emphasis on public education and awareness and encouragement to do the right thing.</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 Ballinakill, Ballylinan, Ballyroan, Borris in Ossory, Castletown, Clonaslee, Clough, Durrow, Graiguecullen, Killenard, Mountrath, Portlaoise, Stradbally and The Swan in 2021.</p> <p>The Council continued to manage and operate the Civic Amenity Area in 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 to the layout and signage to increase accessibility and awareness for the public using the facility have been carried out at the site along with the provision of debit/credit card payments facility.</p>



Launch of Anti Dog Fouling campaign with Cathaoirleach Catherine Fitzgerald

Fire Services

Laois County Fire & Rescue Service

The Fire Service continued to provide a quality service in the areas of Fire Prevention, Fire Brigade Operations, Community Fire Safety Awareness and Major Emergency Planning.

In 2021, Laois County Fire & Rescue Service attended **614** emergency incidents consisting of **265** fires, **239** special service incidents & **110** false alarms.

To enhance equipment standards the programme for replacement and updating of equipment was continued in 2021. A specialised breathing apparatus sets decontamination unit was purchased – the first in Ireland - to improve the health & safety of our fire-fighters and develop the “clean fire-fighter” concept. In addition, new breathing apparatus cylinders, ladders, and an electronic asset management system was procured.

Laois County Council funded a comprehensive replacement programme for new structural fire-fighting PPE for Laois County Fire & Rescue Service. This state-of-the-art kit was rolled out in May 2021 to provide the best protection possible to the fire-fighters of Laois County Fire & Rescue Service.

Covid-19 meant that a reduced training programme was carried out following very detailed risk assessments & training needs analysis, with only essential training delivered.

To enhance Safety, Health and Welfare for fire crews the Standard Operational Guidelines program to implement a set of for fire brigade operations continued in 2021. In addition, our Health, Safety & Welfare Management Programme was approved by Senior Management and was reviewed 30 times throughout the year.

73 fire safety certificate applications and **53** licensing applications were received, with **103** planning applications also referred to the fire service during the year.

Laois County Council Fire and Rescue Service participated in **88** fire safety consultations with members of the public and fire safety consultants throughout 2021. **1** premises was requested to provide Fire Safety Assessment was requested under Section 18(6) of the Fire Services Acts 1981 and 2003.

Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 restrictions, our community fire safety programme had to be severely curtailed. It was not possible to deliver the annual Fire Safety Primary Schools Programme which is normally delivered to all 3rd class pupils throughout the County between October and December annually.

In addition, our participation in National Fire Safety Week 2021 had to be delivered on-line/virtually as it was not possible to host the annual fire station open night.

However, our **Community Fire Safety Group** actively delivered fire safety messages to communities via our Public Participation Network (PPN) , Age Friendly, Community and Enterprise, Library Services, Local Link Laois-Offaly, Fire Station representatives along with local papers , newsletters, local radio and our social media platforms to target our most at risk demographic during Fire Safety Week and Halloween. Laois County Fire & Rescue Service partnered with Laois Local-Link to run a smoke detector in the home competition in local newspapers, radio, Facebook , Twitter and on our www.laois.ie with LCFRS personnel installing the smoke detectors for the winners.

All **Major Emergency Management** facilities were upgraded in 2021 with teleconferencing facilities added. All relevant plans, sub-plans and procedures were updated throughout the year.

Enterprise & Economic Development

The Council continued to promote enterprise and economic development in the County through the Business Support Unit (BSU) in line with the **Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP)** 2016 – 2021. The BSU forms a central point of contact for existing and prospective businesses. It aims to nurture a pro-business environment which supports enterprise and promotes Laois nationally and globally as a location of choice for business and investment.

2021 continued to have its challenges with the impact of Covid 19 on every aspect of business and society. The BSU responded to the Covid crisis by working closely with the business community and encouraging them to avail of all available supports. These

supports were designed to help businesses stabilise and adapt to the evolving situation, in preparation for getting back on the road to recovery. The BSU also continued to work with businesses impacted by Brexit and provided a range of supports to help micro-enterprises prepare for the challenges posed.

2021 saw a significant increase in participants on training courses. There was a very high demand for mentoring and an increase in uptake of all incentives and business supports including the new Green for Micro Programme.

Key actions of the Business Support unit in 2021 were:

- 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 the 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 in the county.
- Ongoing collaboration with Laois Chamber
- Collaboration with Portlaoise Innovation Centre DAC on The CUBE Low Carbon Centre of Excellence

2021 Highlights:

- €405,582 approved in grant aid to 18 businesses with potential to create 55 new jobs
- 70 Trading Online Vouchers were approved to the value of €153,747
- 27 Laois Businesses funded under the Refundable Aid Stimulus Package to the value of €200,229
- 74 training courses delivered with 1,153 participants taking part
- 324 businesses took part in one to one mentoring sessions
- Supported 10 Laois companies in making applications to Micro Finance Ireland
- 10 companies participated in the Lean for Micro Programme
- 16 companies participated in the Green 4 Micro programme
- 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

- 5 Laois Companies participated in the Midlands ‘Engenuity’ Engineering Programme
- Over 100 companies availed of Brexit supports
- 30 Shop front grants received in 2021 and 19 were approved
- 2 businesses submitted applications under the Business Incentive Scheme
- 47 applications received under the Portarlington Façade Enhancement Scheme
- 13 applications received under the Portlaoise Façade Enhancement Scheme (Phase 2)

(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), Portarlington (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.

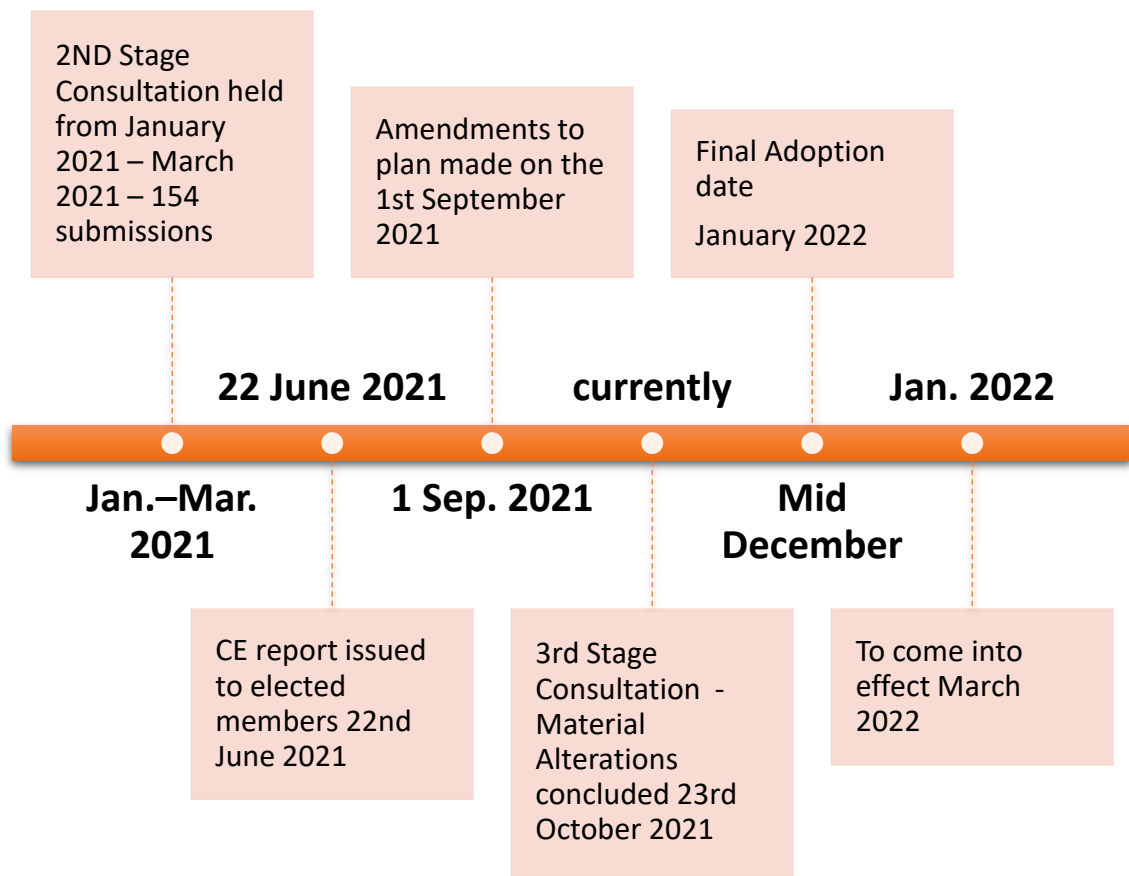
Review of the Laois County Development Plan 2017-2023 and preparation of a new plan for the period 2021-2027



The statutory 10-week consultation process for the Draft Laois County Development Plan 2021 – 2027 began on 12th January 2021 with public notices appearing in the Irish Independent and local newspaper the Laois Nationalist, and ended on 23rd March 2021. The Draft Plan was put on public display in the Planning Department, Aras an Chontae, JFL Ave, Portlaoise, Co. Laois and was also available to view on <http://consult.laois.ie>.

154 written submissions were received within the statutory timeframe, with **7** submissions were received outside the consultation deadline. A Chief Executive Report was prepared and circulated to members on the 22nd June 2021. A Full Council meeting was held on the **1st September 2021** where Elected Members considered the Chief Executive’s Report.

Following that meeting the Proposed Material Amendment to the Draft Laois County Development Plan 2021 – 2027 was prepared.



Consultation on the Proposed Material Amendments to the Draft Laois County Development Plan 2021- 2017 together with the associated Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Appropriate Assessment (AA) Determinations and Reports was carried out for a period of 4 weeks from 23rd September 2021 to the 23rd October 2021. 36 submissions were received and the 3rd Chief Executive Report was submitted to the elected members on the 17th November 2021 outlining the submissions and the CE recommendations. The plan was adopted on the 25th of January 2022.

LOCAL AREA PLANNING



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. A Draft of the Masterplan went on public display until 25th October 2021. A report on the submissions will be prepared and presented to the Portlaoise MD for their endorsement in 2022.



Portarlinton Regeneration Strategy

Downey Planning Consultants were engaged to prepare a regeneration Strategy for the town Centre of Portarlinton with a particular focus on the Market House and Market Square in 2021.

A Draft of the Masterplan went on public display in April - May 2021. A report on the submissions was prepared and presented to the Portarlinton / Graiguecullen MD which was endorsed by them at the September MD Meeting.

This informed the Rural Regeneration Development Fund application in 2021 which was successful in securing funding in 2021.

DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT

The number of planning applications received in 2021 was 930. However, it should be noted that 188 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.

2021 PERFORMANCE

The following table gives a breakdown of valid planning applications received and decisions made during 2021:

Total No of Planning Applications	930
Number of valid applications received:	742 (Valid Applications)
Invalid applications returned to applicant:	20.21% (Invalid Applications)
Number of decisions made:	692 (Decisions Made)
Number of applications granted:	657 (Decisions to Grant)
Number of applications refused:	35 (Decisions to Refuse)
Referrals to Area Offices (working days):	within 14 days achieved
No of applications appealed to An Bord Pleanála in 2021 -	15 applications

424 pre planning meetings were held in 2021.

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 2021:

1. Playground in Borris In Ossory (April 2021)
2. Housing Development Carraig Glas Stradbally (September 2021)

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 2021 by the Enforcement team to ensure that any breaches of planning law were investigated and followed up.

In 2021, Council Staff attended Court 65 times in respect of enforcement prosecutions and while some cases are still ongoing, 7 cases have been successfully resolved during 2021.

The Planning Authority served 67 enforcement notices, 259 warning letters and investigated 143 complaints all of which highlight the active pursuit of planning non-compliance and unauthorised development by our Enforcement Section.

€12,660.30 Enforcement costs recouped

€36,687.17 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 2021 , a total of **553 New Buildings** were notified to Building Control. A total of 71 no. buildings were inspected (at varying stages of construction) - an inspection rate of **12.8%**

UNFINISHED HOUSING ESTATES

Laois County Council is responsible for the taking in charge of estates. In 2021, 5 no. estates were 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 2022.

The following estates were taken in charge in 2021 –

1. Millbrook (January 2021)
2. Aghnaharna Drive (January 2021)
3. Gracefield Manor (January 2021)
4. Court View Stradbally (Sept 2021)
5. Bellingham Portlaoise (Sept 2021)

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 2021: 26

Total Number of Files closed as a result of Dereliction being addressed in 2021: 11

Total Number of Files: 65

VACANT SITES

There were 10 sites entered onto the Vacant Sites register at the 1st January 2021. These related to sites within Portlaoise, Portarlinton, Mountmellick and Graiguecullen. Valuations have been received in relation to the sites.

Location of Sites	No of sites on the VSL register
Portlaoise	6
Portarlinton	3
Graiguecullen	1
Total	10

SHORT TERM LETTING

As part of the measures to help address pressures in the private housing rental market, new planning legislative reforms to regulate the short-term letting sector - as provided for in the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019 and supplementary regulations made by the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government entitled the Planning and Development Act 2000 (Exempted Development) (No. 2) Regulations 2019 - came into effect on 1st July 2019.

This applies to properties with Rent Pressure Zones. The following numbers relate to those reported in 2021 :-

Form 15 (2020 onwards)	Annual Notification. This form should be returned no later than 4 weeks of the start of each year for existing uses or 2 weeks prior to the first instance of the proposed change of use for new uses	7
Form 16	This form is only required to be completed if the 90-day cap is reached during the year. It should be returned no later than 2 weeks after the event.	0
Form 17	End of year notification. It shall be returned no later than 4 weeks after the end of each calendar year.	5

HERITAGE

Under the LCC Corporate Plan, the aims of the Heritage Office are:

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

In 2022, this was achieved through actions to

- Review and prepare a new County Heritage Plan
- 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

Review and prepare a new County Heritage Plan

A new Heritage and Biodiversity Strategy for Laois was written in 2021 with the assistance of People Place Consulting and in collaboration with the Laois Heritage Forum. Following public consultation and recommendation by the Housing and Planning Strategic Planning Committee, the strategy was adopted by Laois County Council in December 2021. It is available on the Laois County Council website and will be formally launched in early 2022.

Implement the actions of the County Heritage Plan

The following projects from the Laois Heritage Plan undertaken with the support of the Heritage Council during 2021.

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

Heritage Awareness programmes were organized for Biodiversity Week and Heritage Week. These were primarily online due to public health restrictions. A children's archeology dig including sessions for children with additional needs and autism was held at Abbeyleix heritage House. A series of films about Laois Heritage was commissioned and premiered live during Heritage Week – these can be viewed at the Laois Heritage Youtube Channel.

The Heritage Offices of Laois and Offaly County Councils supported a new BirdWatch Ireland podcast “In Your Nature” about birds and other wildlife, which has been downloaded almost 30,000 times.

Connecting Communities

The continuation of “Connecting Communities” programme, this year focusing on Timahoe, primarily management of vegetation and trees at the Timahoe early Christian site, in accordance with the aims of the Timahoe Conservation Plan.

Publications

Publications for 2021 included:

- Phase II of the book on the Rock of Dunamase was completed, with publisher Wordwell Books. The book will be published in 2022.
- The final version of the Fort Protector Conservation Plan (now with designer, to be launched early 2022)

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

National Biodiversity Action Plan Projects

Wetlands

Survey of Wetlands in Laois commenced in 2021. The Phase I desk study is now complete, and phase II fieldwork will be carried out in 2022.

We continued support for with research and surveys of ecology at Abbeyleix Bog, with surveys of wet woodlands and mosses.

Gardening for Biodiversity

A series of newspaper articles aimed at gardeners, on how to improve wildlife in your garden, was commissioned and published throughout the year in the Leinster Express.

An Irish language version of the Gardening for Biodiversity Book was published and is available to download from the Laois County Council website.

Awareness-raising for pollinators – A series of radio ads were played on Midlands 103 local radio throughout the year with a series of special programmes broadcast for Biodiversity.

Just Transition Fund

A major new project linking conservation of medieval heritage and biodiversity has been launched by Laois and Offaly County Councils. The three year project has been awarded €748,000 under the Governments Just Transition Fund which aims to support innovative projects that contribute to the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the Midlands and which have employment and enterprise potential. The total budget for the project is €880,000.

The Conservation and Pollination project started in 2021 with the appointment of the Conservation team led by Howley Hayes Cooney Architects. Conservation plans for all 6 graveyard sites will be published in early 2022. Masonry conservation and management for pollinators will commence in 2022.

Regeneration Projects

The Heritage Office worked in collaboration with other sections in Laois County Council and in the community, on the following regeneration projects in 2021:

- Timahoe Town and Village Renewal Scheme (ongoing). This will see conservation and refurbishment of the community-run Heritage Centre at Timahoe;
- Stradbally Town and Village Renewal Scheme (ongoing) will include conservation of stonework on the bridge and installation of pollinator and swift friendly features, in addition to public realm improvements;
- Portarlinton Rural Regeneration Fund Project will involve conservation of the historic Portarlinton Market House;
- Ballylinan Town and Village renewal (application submitted);
- Mountmellick O'Connell Square regeneration plan (ongoing).

Community Monuments Fund

A new funding scheme aimed at archaeological monuments was continued in 2021, with all 6 projects submitted to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage receiving funding under the scheme. The Community Monuments Fund in Laois in 2021 funded six projects.

Structure	Applicant	Amount
Killabban Church Conservation	Killabban Monastic Site Committee	€31,053
Old St Peter's Church Portlaoise	Laois County Council	€59,525
Dysart Enos Church	Dysart Enos Conservation Committee	€66,407
Kilbreedy Church and Graveyard	Ballacolla Tidy Towns	€8,610
The Heath	Eoin Sullivan	€22,174
Killabban Church Interpretation	Killabban Monastic Site Committee	€11,594
Subtotal CMF 21		€199,363

An additional project delivered in partnership with Carlow County Museum saw the grave effigy of medieval knight Robert Hartpole conserved and returned from Portarlinton to Carlow.

All Ireland Pollinator Plan

Laois County Council signed up as a Council Partner in the All Ireland Pollinator Plan in 2021. Actions taken by the Council departments to look after pollinators are included in the National Biodiversity Data Centre review of the year's actions by councils nationwide. Details of Laois actions are now included in the annual report of actions for Pollinators by Councils, at pollinators.ie.

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

Portlaoise Plane and Col Fitzmaurice

The Heritage Office worked closely with the Col Fitzmaurice Commemoration Committee to plan and deliver the safe return of the Portlaoise Plane home to Portlaoise, with a celebratory event in September at Laois Music Centre. A short film was made of the plane's arrival home to Portlaoise.

Colonel Fitzmaurice Newspaper Archive

With the help of Heritage Council Community Heritage Grant Funding, an invaluable collection of newspapers and other original archive material relating to the first East-West Transatlantic flight was professionally conserved, archived and scanned for upload to the Laois Digital Archive.

Abbeyleix Climate Action Project

Between September 2020 and March 2021 Dr. Niamh Shaw was Science Communicator in Residence in Abbeyleix, Co Laois. Niamh worked with Abbeyleix Tidy Towns to find creative ways to engage the community with all aspects of climate change. This Climate Action walk was created to celebrate the end of this residency.

The Climate Action Project was supported by Creative Ireland Laois as part of the Creative Ireland Programme (2017-2022) in partnership with Laois County Council, Abbeyleix Tidy Towns and Midlands Science. The walk was created thanks to the support of Healthy Ireland, an initiative of the Government of Ireland with funding from the Healthy Ireland Fund and the Sláintecare Fund delivered by Pobal, administered by Laois County Council.

A story map of the Abbeyleix Climate Action Walk was created and the walk can be experienced online at <https://arcg.is/yDuK9>.

Portlaoise Destination Town (Fáilte Ireland funded)

Following on from the Interpretation Plan and Conservation Plan for the 16th Century Fort Protector in Portlaoise, part of the Fáilte Ireland Destination Towns fund for Portlaoise has been dedicated to the design and installation of high quality interpretation for the story of the Fort and its people. Working in collaboration with other sections in Laois County Council and members of Laois Heritage Society, the material has been written and designed, and it is planned that installation will be completed in 2022.

Creative Ireland Projects

- “Know Your Locality” online course delivered for Laois Heritage Office by the Irish Heritage School, supported by Creative Ireland Laois.
- Work on archiving the Ronnie Mathews archive commenced, in partnership with Laois Library Service and supported by Creative Ireland Laois.

Conservation

Two separate architectural heritage conservation grant schemes (for Protected Structures) were run by Laois County Council in 2021, with funding from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

BUILT HERITAGE INVESTMENT SCHEME 2021

The Built Heritage Investment Scheme is for smaller scale, labour intensive projects to conserve and maintain protected structures. A total of 10 projects were awarded funding but two of those could not proceed in 2021 due to difficulty in sourcing thatchers.

Project Ref No	Structure	Grant
BHIS21/LS01	Stradbally Hall	€10,775.00
BHIS21/LS02	Thatched House, Durrow	€12,500.00
BHIS21/LS03	Thatched House, Fisherstown	€3,473.00
BHIS21/LS06	St Paul's French Church Portarlinton	€6,850.00
BHIS21/LS07	Thatched House, Jamestown	€6,000.00
BHIS21/LS09	Thatched House, Ballybodin	€1,000.00
BHIS21/LS10	Thatched House, Graigue	€12,250.00
BHIS21/LS12	The Forum, Mountmellick	€12,224.50
TOTAL		€65,072.50

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 2021

Structure	Applicant	Grant
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Lea Church of Ireland Church	Portarlington Union of Churches	€50,000
Presentation convent Portlaoise	Sophia Housing Association	€50,000
<i>Subtotal HSF 21</i>		<i>€100,000</i>

SECTION 57 DECLARATIONS

A total of 9 no. Section 57 Declarations in relation to works to Protected Structures at various locations throughout County Laois were processed in 2021.

BROADBAND

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

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 4 areas in rural Laois.

1. Vicarstown Community Centre ,
2. Emo "Old School" Community Centre
3. Oisín House Rossmore, Killeslin
4. Donaghmore workhouse and Agricultural Museum

An additional two have been added with Shanganamore Community Centre Barrowhouse live in January 2022, and Ballyroan Community Centre going live by end of Q2 2022.

These BCP's. Supported by the TVRS in 2021 for additional equipment to facilitate working and learning from the local community.

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.

WiFi4EU

WiFi4EU is a project developed by the European Union that intends to bring free WiFi to local communities. Municipalities that apply, can get a grant to set up hotspots in commonly frequented indoor and outdoor locations, such as public squares, cultural institutions, municipal buildings, or health facilities. The aim of WiFi4EU initiative is to bring high-quality WiFi access to places where it is not yet available but would provide value for the community.

Laois County Council are rolling out WiFi4EU in the following towns :

Portlaoise, Portarlington , Abbeyleix and Mountmellick.

This project was Tendered in 2021 and Network Infrastructure Support (NIS) were chosen to deliver this project. The project is currently underway and will be completed in 2022.



HOUSING

2021 saw the end of the Rebuilding Ireland programme, with a new *Housing for All* programme launched in September 2021, a 5-year plan to increase housing supply and address other housing related issues nationally. During its 4-year period, the Rebuilding Ireland Programme delivered in Laois a total of 593 social housing units via a number of means.

During 2021, a total of 167 social housing units were delivered via our LCC and AHB building and turnkey schemes and via other means, e.g., Part V, acquisitions, and leasing.

- A total of 33 housing units were acquired by Laois County Council for social housing across the county. A further 7 units were purchased by Approved Housing Bodies under the CALF and CAS schemes.
- Construction completed on 22 new units at Ballymorris Green, Portarlinton, 6 units at Shannon Street, Mountrath in 2021. 6 units at Featherbed Lane, Borris in Ossory and 7 new units at Corbally, Clonaslee were tenanted in 2021.
- Construction completed on 80 units which were delivered by various Approved Housing Bodies.
- 10 capital schemes (LCC Construction and Turnkey) are currently on site in Rathdowney, Mountmellick, Ballyroan, Durrow, Borris-in-Ossory, Killeen, Ballylinan, Portarlinton and Stradbally.
- 8 Approved Housing Body schemes are currently on site in Portlaoise and Portarlinton.
- 11 capital schemes in Mountmellick, Errill, Rathdowney, Stradbally, Durrow, Portarlinton, Mountrath, Ballinakill and Doonane and 3 in Portlaoise are being progressed through the Department's Capital Stage Approval process.
- 4 Approved Housing Body schemes are at various stages of Dept approval vis á vis planning, design and tender and are due to go on site in 2022.

Further to the publication of “Affordable Housing Act 2021”, “Housing Circular 28/2021 on Affordable Housing Act 2021 - Amendments to Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000”, and “Housing for all; a New Housing Plan for Ireland” in September 2021, Laois County Council prepared a **Housing Delivery Action Plan** in relation to the provision of social and affordable housing in Laois for the period 2022-2026.

This sets out the annual new build social housing delivery targets under Housing for All over the next 5 years as outlined by the Dept of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on 20th September 2021.

Annual Social Housing Delivery Targets 2022-2026

Year	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	Total
Units	200	79	80	87	88	534

Under the Return of Voids Programme, in addition to the Council’s own funding, the Department, in 2021, provided an additional €858,432 which part funded the refurbishment of 63 vacant units for the return to productive use in 2021. In total, 95 units were refurbished and re-let in 2021 at a cost of €1,441,916.

At the end of 2021, there were a total of 196 properties on the Rental Accommodation Scheme and a total of 510 properties leased under the various Social Housing Leasing options.

HAP commenced in Laois on 1st December 2016. There were 912 tenancies active by 31st December 2021. 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 142 inspections were made in 2021.

The new Homeless HAP Place Finder role was created in December 2018 to support homeless households in securing a HAP tenancy. In 2021, 59 homeless were accommodated through HAP. Overall, since the role was created a total of 160 homeless or those at risk of homelessness were accommodated through HAP.

In accordance with the Housing First National Implementation Plan 2018-2021, 13 supported tenancies were achieved with the assistance of The Peter McVerry Trust. The tenancies provided accommodation to rough sleepers and persons with complex needs at risk of long-term homelessness.

The Housing Section implemented the Traveller Accommodation Programme 2019-2024 during 2021. 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.

The Strategic Housing Plan for People with Disabilities 2021-2026 was adopted in December 2021.

In 2021, the Department provided €1,263,744 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 2021. The Department also provided €1,031,693 for Housing Adaptation Works for People with a Disability living in Social Housing.

A Housing Needs Assessment was carried out during the months of September to November 2021 and was completed and signed off on 19th November 2021. A total of 1,725 households were assessed. 593 households qualified for social housing support on the national Housing Needs Assessment date of 17th November 2020. 10 Households were determined not to qualify for social housing support.

In 2021 Laois commenced retrofitting works on 157 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 2021.

Regarding the National Performance Indicators, the statistical report in respect of 2020 which was published in September 2021 showed that Laois County Council improved its performance across a range of indicators despite Covid-19 challenges and while providing additional innovations and services during the pandemic. Laois County Council made advances, in particular, in the areas of Housing, Roads, Climate Action and Information Technology.

Covid-19 placed a considerable burden on the Council, with a reduction in revenues and strained resources. However, essential services were delivered throughout the pandemic while Laois County Council played a vital role in the national response to Covid-19.

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 websites, which reduces cost as well as being more environmentally sustainable.

With regard to the Register of Electors, the draft Register for 2022/2023 was published on 1st November, 2021.

The Council continued to maximise efficiencies in the conduct of Council business and to provide administrative support to the Elected Members in 2021. The Statutory requirements of the Ethics Framework in Local Government were also implemented in 2021.

(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 2021. 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 2021 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 continued to carry out the property management function of the Council in co-ordinating the purchase, sale, lease and transfer of properties. In 2021, a new Property Management Asset Register was developed by Irish Mapping and GIS Solutions Ltd. The new system will meet the requirements of the Council to manage and control the assets on a day to day basis and to reconcile the Register with the Fixed Asset Register in Agresso. Work will continue on registering our land and housing interests and in maintaining the Property Asset Register.

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, Wexford 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 Cork County Council is now commencing and is expected to be complete in 2022.

The following are the statistics on the project up to 31st December 2021:

Value of Payments	€5.166bn
Number of Payments	6,021,176
Number of Pay Groups Paid	12,328
Number of Payroll Runs	7,116

- 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 2022
- 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 2022
- 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 2021 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 2022 were agreed by the Members at their meeting held on the 29th of September 2021. The Internal Audit Work Programme for 2022 will proceed in accordance with the agreed programme, taking account of Management Team inputs as necessary.

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

Our safety management system (SMS) was enhanced by the adaption of Covid 19 Safe Operating Guidance (SOG's) documents. Our training programme was adversely impacted attributable to the pandemic. Our legislative database kept us informed of amendments and changes as appropriate. Our risk register was amended and updated throughout the course of the year. Covid-19 controls and arrangements impacted negatively on many of our resources. To minimise disruption to our operations, technology was widely used.

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 the period post the global pandemic.

John Mulholland

Chief Executive

26/01/2022