

MINUTES OF THE STATUTORY BUDGET MEETING OF LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL HELD ON THE 13th OF NOVEMBER 2023 IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, ÁRAS AN CHONTAE,

PRESENT:	Councillor	Paschal McEvoy	In The Chair
	Councillors	Willie Aird John Joe Fennelly James Kelly Caroline Dwane Stanley Conor Bergin Ollie Clooney Padraig Fleming Barry Walsh	Paddy Bracken Marie Tuohy Seamus McDonald John King Thomasina Connell Catherine Fitzgerald Aisling Moran Aidan Mullins
APOLOGIES:	Councillor	Ben Brennan	P.J. Kelly

IN ATTENDANCE:

Messers John Mulholland, Chief Executive, Donal Brennan, Director of Services, Simon Walton, Director of Services, Ms. Angela McEvoy, Director of Services, Mr. Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance, Ms. Carmel McNicholl, A/Director of Services, Ms. Irene Delaney, A.O., & Ms. Michelle McCormack, S.O.

149. DRAFT BUDGET 2024

The Chief Executive, Mr. John Mulholland referred the Members to his report of November 8th 2023. He referred to last year's budget which was prepared against the background of a major conflict in Ukraine that, inter alia resulted in increased costs across the board, mainly in the energy sector.

The following is a summary of what was included in the report:

The impact of the ongoing Ukrainian conflict is still being felt in the Irish Economy. Inflation for 2023 is predicted to level out at 5% for the year having peaked at 9.6% in June. A slightly lower rate of 3% is predicted for 2024. While there was welcome moderation in the rate of increase in energy cost inflation in 2023, it remains the case that price inflation will give rise to ongoing pressures on the roll out of services across all service delivery areas of this Local Authority. In general, the costs for 2024 are expected to be 16.1% higher than those for provision of services in 2020. This upward cost pressure will continue to be felt for the foreseeable future and will erode cost savings and efficiency efforts on the expenditure side and the benefit of increased receipts and grants on the income side.

In September this Council was notified by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage of an increase in the Local Property Tax Baseline allocation in the sum of €3.061 million. When taken together with an adopted 10% increase in the Local Property Tax, Laois County Council will receive an income of €12.144 million from this source for the year ahead. This represents a net increase of nearly €2 million in comparison to 2023.

The increase in the County’s population to nearly 92,000 people brings increased demand for local and public services and the draft budget has been prepared with a view towards maintaining a satisfactory level of service to an ever-growing population.

The support and responsiveness of Government in increasing the baseline funding to Laois County Council is therefore acknowledged.

On the assumption that Government will further assist local authorities in the matter of public sector pay costs for the year ahead it has been possible to present a balanced Revenue Budget for 2024.

The last number of Budgets have been prepared with a view towards providing a business/community stimulus effect in the local economy. The 2024 Budget adopts the same approach and remains focussed on that effort but is also very much a regenerative and consolidation statement given the turbulence in the business sector over the last number of years.

The main objectives of Budget 2024 are set out hereunder:

- ❖ ***Housing and Regeneration of Vacant Buildings***
 - *Continue to meet and exceed the targets set out under “Housing for All”, specifically; social housing construction, affordable and cost rental supply, the use of the “Croí Cónaithe Fund” for vacant and derelict buildings and sites for self-builders.*
 - *Maximizing Housing Adaptation Grants.*
 - *Maintain resources and standards in estate management and enforcement of tenancy conditions.*
 - *Continue to improve public housing stock condition through planned maintenance and energy efficiency upgrades.*

- ❖ ***Economic Development***
 - *Continue to deliver the Local Enterprise Office programme of supports.*
 - *Continue to stimulate economic and business development in collaboration with the Laois Chamber Alliance, the Cube Innovation Centre and the Council’s Business Support Unit.*
 - *Maximize drawdown and use of the EU Just Transition Fund (2022-2027) so as to create jobs in Co. Laois and to align with climate action and energy efficiency policies.*
 - *Enhance the growing reputation of County Laois as an events and business location.*

- ❖ ***Place Making and Environment***
 - *Ensure increased focus on place making in the delivery of the Council’s Capital Programme.*
 - *Continue to work towards our 2030 climate action targets and meet the objective of the Water Framework Directive.*
 - *Protect the natural and built environment and heritage of the County.*
 - *Promote a clean and pristine environment conducive to a high standard of public health and wellbeing.*

❖ **Community and Rural Development**

- Continue to engage with and offer advice to communities on grant schemes and other supports.
- Continue to provide supports for festivals and events.
- Support culture and arts programmes in County Laois.
- Support the community wide role of our libraries in enhancing the quality of life for citizens.
- Provide continued support to refugees and set up a new integration support service.

❖ **Transportation and Mobility**

- Continue to invest in rural and urban infrastructure through the delivery of the 2024 Road Works Scheme and the municipal district works schedules.
- Delivery of sustainable and active travel projects in collaboration with the National Transport Authority.
- Provide a good standard of car parking, bicycle facilities and bus shelters at key locations.
- Provide and maintain public street lighting to a satisfactory standard.

❖ **Shared Services Centre**

- Continue to lead and host the national shared service on pay and superannuation.

BUDGET 2024 MAIN POINTS

The Draft Revenue Budget put forward for consideration by the elected members now stands at €113.881 million. This represents an increase of €18.08 million or 18.8% over 2023. The sizeable increase is mainly accounted for by way of significantly increased expenditure in the housing and fire service divisions, the detail of which is set out in the following paragraphs.

Laois County Council continues to exercise diligent budgetary oversight and sound financial management over all aspects of its spending. It is anticipated that there will be little or no credit or debit balance going into 2024, i.e., expenditure will match income for 2023.

The main factors that shape the drafting of the 2024 budget have been outlined in the Chief Executive's report with other factors listed below:-

On the income side:

1. An assumption of a steady state business environment with little or no additional yield or loss from commercial rates
2. An increased income from the Local Property Tax baseline allocation in the amount of €3.061 million.
3. An increase of €730,000 from rents on 2,380 Council owned houses,
4. An assumption that Laois County Council will benefit from State Grants for road upkeep and roads improvements in line with previous years.
5. An expectation of movement in vacancy levels in certain retail and business sectors

6. An expectation that the costs of recent agreements with trades unions including Fire Services (estimated at €2.5 million for 2024) will be met fully by central government.

On the expenditure side

1. To continue to progress deep retrofitting work in 62 Council owned houses in 2024 and to continue with a planned maintenance programme to address heating systems and other upgrades in Council housing stock.
2. To provide physical improvements in the County's main towns and villages including a continued use of the CPO process to acquire derelict buildings.
3. A requirement to provide matched funding to support a number of projects and programmes including,
 - a. the Town and Village Renewal Schemes
 - b. The Rural Regeneration Development and Urban Regeneration Fund projects
 - c. Outdoor recreational improvement schemes
 - d. CLAR programmes
4. The requirement to meet targets and develop actions to comply with Public Sector obligations in the Climate Action Plan 2021 and the draft Local Authority Climate Action Plan.
5. The requirement to provide support to business and tourism in the county.

The following areas of additional expenditure and expenditure in new areas over 2023 are of particular note:

- A sum of **€3.56 million** for payment and processing of grants to owners of vacant and derelict sites (Croí Cónaithe)
- An additional sum of **€4.635 million** is provided towards payment and availability of social housing through approved housing bodies.
- **€150,000** additional expenditure over 2023 on the maintenance of Council housing units and an additional sum of **€37,000** is included for increased tenant engagement activity,
- **€100,000** additional expenditure is included for relets of Council houses,
- **€200,000** additional expenditure in a new programme to replace kitchen units and work tops in Council houses,
- The provision of **€158,000** towards retrofitting of Local Authority houses,
- Inclusion of **€133,750** as a contribution of LCC towards the affordable homes' subsidy,
- The budget includes a new provision of **€325,000** towards the role to be taken by Laois County Council in providing integration support services,
- An increased allocation **€165,000** towards the ongoing Ukrainian Refugee accommodation crisis,
- Provision of **€455,000** for footpath improvements and repair at municipal level,
- Provision of **€750,000** towards street cleaning services representing an increase of **€206,500** over 2023,
- An additional sum of **€145,500** towards the maintenance of burial grounds
- An increased allocation of **€15,000** towards refurbishment of new Civil Defence HQ (*this is a contribution to a capital fund of c €150,000*)
- An additional **€2.34 million** towards the cost of providing the County Fire Service following agreement with Government in 2023

- Additional funding of **€35,000** towards the running and operation of the Dunamaise Arts Centre,
- Provision of an additional **€30,000** towards the purchase of new library book stock,
- A provision of an additional **€80,500** towards tidy towns and community groups,
- Provision of an additional sum of **€101,500** for voluntary groups providing community and social services in the County,
- An additional **€152,500** for new IT applications and cyber security,
- An allocation of **€35,000** in respect of STEM, DREAMBIG and Dreamspace programmes in the youth educational sector,
- Continued support for small businesses through the rates incentive and vacant property incentive schemes.

It was noted that all the aspects of the Budget for 2024 were discussed in detail at the information meeting held on the 7th of November 2023.

Mr. Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance then proceeded to advise the Members on a division-by-division basis of the Council's Expenditure & Income proposals for 2024.

It was noted that the 2024 Draft Revenue Budget provides for an expenditure of €113,881,000.

Councillor John Joe Fennelly proposed the draft budget for 2023 as presented and this was seconded by Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald.

The Members collectively and individually complimented Mr. Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance and his team in the preparation of the budget. The Chief Executive, Head of Finance & Directors of Services responded to the various queries raised by the Members.

The Chief Executive extended his appreciation to Mr. Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance and staff in the Finance Section for their work in the preparation of the budget. He also extended his appreciation to the Directors of Services and their staff members for their commitment and hard work over the past year. The Chief Executive thanked the Cathaoirleach, Councillor Paschal McEvoy and his predecessor, Councillor Thomasina Connell, the Corporate Policy Group, the Chairs of the Municipal Districts, and the Elected Members for their assistance during the year.

130. CAPITAL INDICATIVE REPORT 2024-2026

It was noted that this item would be tabled for consideration at the December meeting of Laois County Council.

This concluded the business of the meeting.

SIGNED: _____
CATHAOIRLEACH

CERTIFIED: _____
**DIRECTOR OF SERVICES
CORPORATE AFFAIRS**