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LOCAL AUTHORITY CLIMATE ACTION PLAN

Appropriate Assessment Conclusion Statement

Prepared for:
Laois County Council



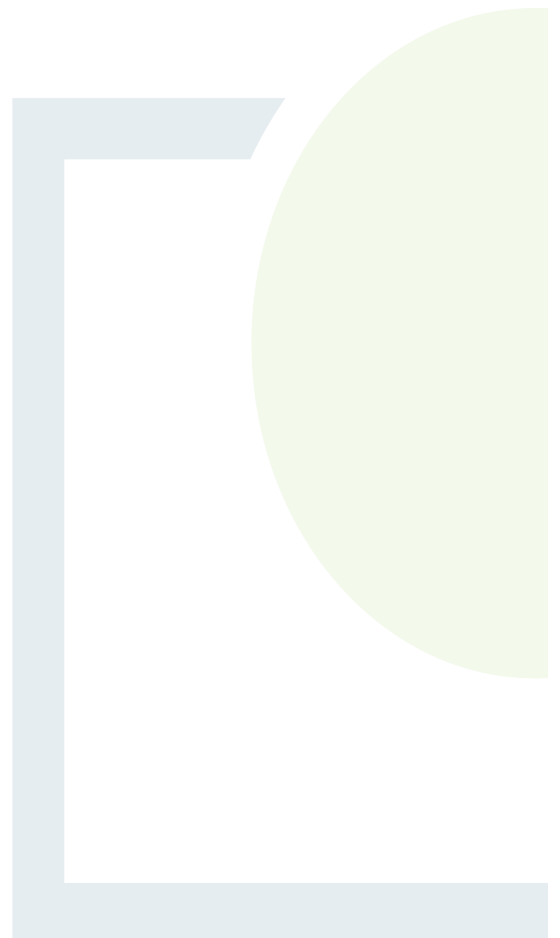
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APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT CONCLUSION STATEMENT

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Abstract: Fehily Timoney and Company is pleased to submit this Appropriate Assessment Conclusion Statement for the Laois Local Authority Climate Action Plan to Laois for publication alongside the Plan.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	INTRODUCTION	1
1.1	Background.....	1
1.2	Requirements in relation to AA Conclusion Statements.....	1
2.	HOW THE FINDINGS OF THE AA WERE INTEGRATED INTO THE LACAP	2
2.1	Integrated Biodiversity Assessment Approach	2
2.2	Mitigation through integration of environmental considerations into the LACAP.....	2
3.	CONSIDERATION OF ALTERNATIVES	11
3.1	Introduction.....	11
3.2	Approach to Developing Reasonable Alternatives.....	11
3.3	Identification and Description of Reasonable Alternatives.....	12
3.4	Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives and Reasons for Choosing the Preferred Plan	14
4.	AA CONCLUSION.....	15

LIST OF FIGURES

	<u>Page</u>
Figure 3-1: 'Why? What? Where? When?' Model for framing alternatives - Adapted from Figure 4.3 Developing and Assessing Alternatives in the Strategic Environmental Assessment Process (EPA, 2015).....	12

LIST OF TABLES

	<u>Page</u>
Table 2-1: Proposed Environmental Mitigation Measures - Additional text included in Plan actions relating to environmental protection related obligations and environmental enhancement opportunities.....	4
Table 2-2: Proposed Environmental Mitigation Measures - Environmental Governance Principles included in the plan	10
Table 3-1: Reasonable Alternatives to the LACAP.....	13



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

This is the Appropriate Assessment (AA) Conclusion Statement for the Laois Local Authority Climate Action Plan (LACAP) 2024 - 2029. The obligation to undertake AA derives from Article 6(3) and 6(4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC as transposed into Irish legislation by the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 and the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended.

AA is a focused and detailed impact assessment of the implications of a strategic action (such as a plan or programme) or project, alone and in combination with other strategic actions and projects, on the integrity of any European Site in view of its conservation objectives.

AA was undertaken for the LACAP. This AA Conclusion Statement documents the AA process applied during the preparation of the LACAP and should be read in conjunction with the LACAP and associated documents including the Natura Impact Report (NIR) for the Plan.

1.2 Requirements in relation to AA Conclusion Statements

Guidelines entitled 'Appropriate Assessment of Plans and Projects in Ireland Guidance for Planning Authorities' (2009) published by the then named Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government recommend that plan-making competent authorities; include a clear and discrete AA Conclusion Statement as a distinct section in the written statement of the plan separate to the SEA statement.' These guidelines recommend that the following information is included in an AA Conclusion Statement:

- Summary of how the findings of the AA were factored into the plan (provided in Section 2 of this document);
- Reasons for choosing the plan as adopted, in the light of other reasonable alternatives considered as part of the AA process (provided in Section 3 of this document); and,
- A declaration that the plan as adopted will not have an adverse effect on the integrity of a Natura 2000 site or sites (provided in Section 4 of this document).
- Copy of NIR (the NIR was published alongside the AA Conclusion Statement and is available for review).¹

¹ This NIR provides the following information:

- Sufficient detail of the LACAP to make clear its size, scale and objectives.
- A description of baseline conditions, conservation objectives, and relevant ecological and environmental issues in relation to relevant European sites that be affected by plan implementation (in the absence of mitigation).
- Potential adverse impacts of the Plan on the relevant European sites.
- How those environmental effects will be avoided and prevented through mitigation.



2. HOW THE FINDINGS OF THE AA WERE INTEGRATED INTO THE LACAP

2.1 Integrated Biodiversity Assessment Approach

The environmental assessment for the Plan undertaken was carried out in accordance with an Integrated Biodiversity Impact Assessment based methodology in accordance with EPA's guidance document entitled '*Final Report: Integrated Biodiversity Impact Assessment, Streamlining AA, SEA and EIA Processes. Best Practice Guidance.*' (2012).

The methodology employed facilitated the integration of SEA and AA processes relating to biodiversity impact assessment to ensure the effective and streamlined assessment of biodiversity impacts. The plan-making, SEA and AA processes - including scoping, baseline evaluation, impact assessment and mitigation/monitoring measure development processes - were carried out concurrently to facilitate holistic and complete assessment of biodiversity impacts. The effective communication and integration of scientific knowledge and analysis between assessments took place. The SEA was suitably informed by the analysis and conclusions in AA.

2.2 Mitigation through integration of environmental considerations into the LACAP

The plan making process was carried out in parallel with the SEA and AA processes. Regular communication and interaction took place between the environmental assessment team and the plan making team. Environmental considerations that came to light during the SEA and AA processes, including consultation processes, were regularly communicated to the plan making team during the plan making process. As necessary, environmental mitigation measures to ameliorate the potential negative environmental effects of implementing the LACAP were developed and then integrated into the LACAP. Much of the environmental mitigation was embedded in the plan early on in the process as a result of this. This process was carried out in an iterative manner to ensure optimal plan making and environmental outcomes. Environmental considerations were also integrated into the plan so as to facilitate maximizing identified positive environmental effects of the LACAP.

Mitigation measures were suggested that maximize the co-benefits of climate action for other environmental components such local air quality, human health, biodiversity, water quality and other interrelated areas (i.e., win-win solutions).

Additional text clarifying environmental protection related obligations and environmental enhancement opportunities has been attached to a variety of defined actions in the plan. This text has been shaped to ensure that environmental considerations are appropriately taken into account during plan implementation. This text has also been shaped to ensure plan implementation generates the minimum level of negative environmental effects and the maximum level of positive environmental effects. These text additions - relevant to AA - are presented in Table 2-1.

Several environmental governance principles were established to ensure plan implementation generates the minimum level of negative environmental effects and the maximum level of positive environmental effects. These environmental governance principles shall underpin and guide plan implementation and shall apply to and be integrated into all actions/activities which result due to the implementation of the plan. These principles are defined in Table 2-2. The principles were incorporated into the plan itself.

These environmental mitigation measures were integrated into the LACAP and will prevent negative effects and maximize positive effects associated with the LACAP.



The risks to the safeguarding and integrity of the qualifying interests, special conservation interests and conservation objectives of the European sites have been addressed by the inclusion of these mitigation measures.

Multiple actions as originally defined in the Plan will also serve to benefit the biodiversity environment, including a variety of biodiversity enhancement related actions, climate adaptation related actions, and actions designed to reduce GHG emissions and local air pollution.



Table 2-1: Proposed Environmental Mitigation Measures - Additional text included in Plan actions relating to environmental protection related obligations and environmental enhancement opportunities

Action Reference	Original Action	Recommendations integrated into the Plan, included in:
23	Establish a baseline of derelict and vacant properties in prioritised locations under Town Centre First Programme and promote the redevelopment of same through engagement with the owners and use of legislative powers if required.	Establish a baseline of derelict and vacant properties in prioritised locations under Town Centre First Programme and promote the sustainable redevelopment of same through engagement with the owners and use of legislative powers if required.
28	Laois County Council will retrofit from its existing social housing and voids to a B2 standard, subject to the availability of national funding.	Laois County Council will retrofit from its existing social housing and voids to a B2 standard, subject to the availability of national funding; having due regard to all relevant environmental sensitivities, as appropriate.
30	Laois County Council will establish a safe and accessible "Learn to Cycle" park to promote cycling skills and confidence, fostering a culture of active travel and sustainable mobility within the community.	Laois County Council will establish a safe and accessible "Learn to Cycle" facility to promote cycling skills and confidence, fostering a culture of active travel and sustainable mobility within the community
32	Laois County Council will complete three Local Transport Plans for largest urban centres population over 5,000 in County Laois i.e. Portlaoise, Mountmellick and Portarlinton.	Laois County Council will complete three Local Transport Plans for largest urban centres population over 5,000 in County Laois i.e. Portlaoise, Mountmellick and Portarlinton - whilst having appropriate regard to environmental sensitivities and opportunities to promote climate action co-benefits.
34	By the year 2029, Laois County Council aims to transition a further 30% of its public lighting inventory to higher efficiency (lower energy) lighting sources and bringing the overall percentage of its public lighting stock using higher efficiency lighting sources to 94%.	By the year 2030, Laois County Council aims to transition 94% of its public lighting inventory to lower energy lighting sources having due regard to environmental sensitivities and bringing the overall percentage of its public lighting stock using higher efficiency lighting sources to 94%.
35	In response to the predicted frequency of higher intensity rainfalls, Laois County Council aims to propose a real term increase of 1% per annum above inflation over the life of this plan for gully maintenance and general drainage piped maintenance.	In response to the predicted frequency of higher intensity rainfalls, Laois County Council aims to propose a real term increase of 1% per annum above inflation over the life of this plan for gully maintenance and general piped drainage piped maintenance.
36	Considering the predicted frequency of higher intensity rainfalls, Laois County Council will propose a real term increase of 1% per annum above inflation over the life of this plan for masonry bridge works.	Considering the predicted frequency of higher intensity rainfalls, Laois County Council will propose a real term increase of 1% per annum above inflation over the life of this plan for masonry bridge works. During the execution of these works, the Council will continue to have due regard to the need to appropriately protect and conserve protected structures in accordance with relevant protected structures regulations, and the need to not negatively impinge on any protected species or European sites.



Action Reference	Original Action	Recommendations integrated into the Plan, included in:
37	Laois County Council will continue to support the development of flood protection schemes in the towns of Mountmellick, Portarlinton and Clonaslee; these schemes will make these settlements more resilient to flooding.	Laois County Council will continue to support (subject to statutory processes and adherence to environmental standards) the development of OPW flood protection schemes in the towns of Mountmellick, Portarlinton and Clonaslee; these schemes will make these settlements more resilient to flooding.
38	In response to the predicted frequency of higher intensity rainfalls, Laois County Council will prepare a three-year forward plan for river maintenance of river channels (together with associated bridges) under its jurisdiction every two years. This comprehensive maintenance plan will be subject to statutory procedures (including Appropriate Assessment (AA) and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) procedures, if and as required) recognising the sensitivity of the sites involved. The design process, the Plan, together with any statutory procedures will have due regard to environmental sensitivities such as the receiving water environment, biodiversity, European sites, protected species, local air quality, and cultural heritage including engagement with relevant statutory bodies as required.	In response to the predicted frequency of higher intensity rainfalls, Laois County Council will prepare a three-year forward plan for river maintenance of river channels (together with associated bridges) under its jurisdiction every two years. This comprehensive maintenance plan will be subject to statutory procedures (including Appropriate Assessment (AA) and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) procedures, if and as required) recognising the sensitivity of the sites involved. The design process, the Plan, together with any statutory procedures will have due regard to environmental sensitivities such as the receiving water environment, biodiversity, European sites, protected species, local air quality, and cultural heritage, including engagement with relevant statutory bodies as required.
39	In response to the predicted frequency of higher intensity rainfalls, Laois County Council will propose, in its annual budgets, a real term increase of 1% per annum above inflation over the life of this plan for river drainage maintenance works.	In response to the predicted frequency of higher intensity rainfalls, Laois County Council will propose, in its annual budgets, a real term increase of 1% per annum above inflation over the life of this plan for river drainage maintenance works. During the execution of these works, the Council will continue to have due regard to environmental sensitivities at these locations, including water quality, biodiversity, European sites, riparian corridors and aquatic ecology.
44	By 2027 at least one of Laois County Councils' HGV fleet will be upgraded to use either waste HVO or CNG to reduce CO2 emissions.	By 2027 at least one of Laois County Councils' HGV fleet will be upgraded to use either sustainably sourced waste HVO or CNG to reduce CO2 emissions.
46	Building on the experience of solar powered public lighting at Ballyfin, Laois County Council will pilot LED PV solar street lights at two further locations.	Building on the experience of solar powered public lighting at Ballyfin, Laois County Council will pilot LED PV solar street lights at two further locations; while ensuring the lumen levels and spectral range are maintained or reduced/controlled to avoid effects to biodiversity.
48	Over the lifetime of this plan Laois County Council will carry out a Renewable Electricity Strategy (RES) for the County, based on revised national guidance.	Over the lifetime of this plan Laois County Council will carry out a Renewable Electricity Strategy (RES) for the County, based on revised national guidance. Such a strategy would be appropriately shaped by planning and environmental protection requirements associated with renewable energy development.



Action Reference	Original Action	Recommendations integrated into the Plan, included in:
49	Laois County Council will conduct a feasibility study for Solar Farm at Kyletalesha landfill.	Laois County Council will conduct a feasibility study for Solar Farm at Kyletalesha landfill, ensuring this study has appropriate regard to planning and environmental protection considerations.
55	Laois County Council will pilot a Transport Mobility Hub at Portlaoise train station, evaluating its success, and conducting a feasibility assessment for potential expansion to other train stations in the County.	Laois County Council will pilot a Transport Mobility Hub at Portlaoise train station, evaluating its success, and conducting a feasibility assessment for potential expansion to other train stations in the County. Development supported by this action will, as normal, be carried out in line with planning and environmental protection requirements.
57	Laois County Council will work with other agencies to identify priority locations for bus shelters throughout the county and work with funding agencies to secure provision of bus shelters and upgrades to existing.	Laois County Council will work with other agencies to identify priority locations for bus shelters throughout the county and work with funding agencies to secure provision of bus shelters and upgrades to existing. Development supported by this action will, as normal, be carried out in line with planning and environmental protection requirements.
58	Laois County Council will work with other agencies to assist the installation of designated bus cages, where bus pull in bays are unattainable; priority bus corridors in main towns where viable; bus hubs in main towns where feasible to allow for driver rest/comfort stops.	Laois County Council will work with other agencies to assist the installation of designated bus cages, where bus pull in bays are unattainable; priority bus corridors in main towns where viable; bus hubs in main towns where feasible to allow for driver rest/comfort stops. Development supported by this action will, as normal, be carried out in line with planning and environmental protection requirements.
59	Laois County Council will continue engagement with, and support roll out of the Safe Routes to School Programme in conjunction with An Taisce.	Laois County Council will continue engagement with, and support roll out of the Safe Routes to School Programme in conjunction with An Taisce - Active travel developments will continue to be carried out in a manner that has due regard to environmental sensitivities (such as local human receptors, Biodiversity, European sites, water quality and hydrology, existing traffic and transport conditions and amenity value).
61	Laois County Council will examine suitable locations Park n Ride / Park n Stride facilities away from town centre locations	Laois County Council will examine suitable locations Park n Ride / Park n Stride facilities away from town centre locations. Development supported by this action will, as normal, be carried out in line with planning and environmental protection requirements.
63	Laois County Council will formulate a Fleet Decarbonation Roadmap	Laois County Council will formulate a Fleet Decarbonation Roadmap, to provide a "roadmap" to the sustainable decarbonisation of the fleet.
68	Laois County Council will carry out a review of older masonry bridges on upper stretches of rivers that may be impacted by increased scour due to the higher intensities of rainfall. It is acknowledged that such River maintenance plan will be subject to its own AA and SEA procedures given the sensitivity of the sites in question.	Laois County Council will carry out a review of older masonry bridges on upper stretches of rivers that may be impacted by increased scour due to the higher intensities of rainfall. It is acknowledged that any Plan arising from such a Review will be subject to statutory procedures (including Appropriate Assessment (AA) and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) procedures, if and as required) recognizing the sensitivity of the sites involved. Due regard will be given to environmental sensitivities such as the receiving water environment, biodiversity, European sites, protected species, local air quality, and cultural heritage within such a Plan.



Action Reference	Original Action	Recommendations integrated into the Plan, included in:
69	Laois County Council will collaborate with neighbouring local authorities to develop a comprehensive Electric Vehicle (EV) charging strategy, ensuring a seamless and regionally integrated charging infrastructure to support the widespread adoption of electric vehicles.	Laois County Council will collaborate with neighbouring local authorities to develop a comprehensive Electric Vehicle (EV) charging strategy, ensuring a seamless and regionally integrated charging infrastructure to support the widespread adoption of electric vehicles, having due regard to environmental sensitivities (such as material assets, the receiving water environment, biodiversity, European sites, local air quality, and cultural heritage).
70	Laois County Council will develop a Tree Strategy to provide the vision and direction for long-term planning, planting, protection and maintenance of trees, hedgerows and woodlands within County Laois.	Laois County Council will develop a Tree Strategy to provide the vision and direction for long-term planning, planting, protection and maintenance of trees, hedgerows and woodlands within County Laois whilst taking measures to promote the use of native species over non-natives and having due regard for water quality and soil stability issues whilst undertaking the planning process.
72	Laois County Council will carry out shade related tree planting in 10 previously constructed housing estates, subject to need and local agreement.	Laois County Council will carry out shade-related tree planting in 10 previously constructed housing estates, subject to need and local agreement. There will be a commitment under this measure to plant native trees.
76	Laois County Council will develop and implement a good practice document for the reduction in use of chemical pesticides and herbicides lands and areas managed by the Council.	Laois County Council will develop and implement a good practice document for the reduction in use of chemical pesticides and herbicides lands and areas managed by the Council. Laois County Council will adopt defined good practice guide in the use of such products to reduce the risk of unintended adverse effects on the receiving environment.
91	Laois County Council will continue to support further education institutes in providing third level courses locally in County Laois.	Laois County Council will continue to support further education institutes in providing third level courses locally in County Laois whilst promoting and supporting the use of active travel a preferred means of transport to/from any further education institutions.
100	Laois County Council will pilot replicable, scalable demonstration projects during the lifetime of this plan (Community Climate Action Fund projects).	Laois County Council will pilot replicable, scalable demonstration projects during the lifetime of this plan (Community Climate Action Fund projects), Development supported by this action will, as normal, be carried out in line with planning and environmental protection requirements.
111	Laois County Council will, in partnership, apply, over the period 2024-2026, for feasibility and eco tourism concept development through Just Transition Regenerative Tourism Fund, while also promoting the need for such a project to consider environmental protection requirements and climate action co-benefit opportunities	Laois County Council will, in partnership, apply, over the period 2024-2026, for feasibility and eco tourism concept development through Just Transition Regenerative Tourism Fund, while also promoting the need for such a project to consider environmental protection requirements and climate action co-benefit opportunities.
2.10	Enhance the town's green infrastructure to bolster biodiversity.	Enhance the town's green infrastructure to bolster biodiversity. Development supported by this action will, as normal, be carried out in line with planning and environmental protection requirements.
2.12	Implement tree management strategies to maximize canopy cover in the area.	Implement tree management strategies to maximize canopy cover in the area with a focus on promoting native trees; having due regard to environmental sensitivities such as European sites and biodiversity.



Action Reference	Original Action	Recommendations integrated into the Plan, included in:
3.1	Develop a Playful School Active Travel Zone to promote safe and active commuting.	Develop a Playful School Active Travel Zone to promote safe and active commuting. Development supported by this action will, as normal, be carried out in line with planning and environmental protection requirements.
3.5	Progress with Phases 2 and 3 of the Triogue Way project.	Progress with Phases 2 and 3 of the Triogue Way project. Development supported by this action will, as normal, be carried out in line with planning and environmental protection requirements.
3.7	Establish a School Travel Cluster to enhance safe and sustainable school commuting.	Establish a School Travel Cluster to enhance safe and sustainable school commuting; having due regard to environmental sensitivities such as Biodiversity, European sites, water quality and hydrology etc.
3.9	Implement Local Transport Plan to improve active travel infrastructure, road safety and modal shift to sustainable transport option	Implement Local Transport Plan to improve active travel infrastructure, road safety and modal shift to sustainable transport option; Development supported by this action will, as normal, be carried out in line with planning and environmental protection requirements.
3.12	Identify and construct new cycle and pedestrian routes, including Tyrrells-Borris Rd-Dublin Rd via HSE lands at St. Fintan's, connecting to Block Rd.	Identify and construct new cycle and pedestrian routes, including Tyrrells-Borris Rd-Dublin Rd via HSE lands at St. Fintan's, connecting to Block Rd. Development supported by this action will, as normal, be carried out in line with planning and environmental protection requirements.
3.14	Provide protected cycle lanes to ensure cyclist safety.	Provide protected cycle lanes to ensure cyclist safety. Development supported by this action will, as normal, be carried out in line with planning and environmental protection requirements.
3.15	Develop a program to upgrade roundabouts, giving priority to pedestrians and cyclists over vehicles.	Develop a program to upgrade roundabouts, giving priority to pedestrians and cyclists over vehicles. Development supported by this action will, as normal, be carried out in line with planning and environmental protection requirements.
3.16	Enhance bus service infrastructure by establishing a bus terminal and related facilities.	Enhance bus service infrastructure by establishing a bus terminal and related facilities; whilst promoting adherence to planning and environmental protection requirements, where appropriate.
3.17	Create park and ride/stride designated sites linked with bike rental locations.	Create park and ride/stride designated sites linked with bike rental locations. Development supported by this action will, as normal, be carried out in line with planning and environmental protection requirements.
3.18	Install EV chargers and mobility hubs at the Train station to promote electric vehicle use.	Install EV chargers and mobility hubs at the Train station to promote electric vehicle use. Development supported by this action will, as normal, be carried out in line with planning and environmental protection requirements.
3.21	Support the development of EV charging points throughout the town.	Support the development of EV charging points throughout the town, having due regard to planning and environmental protection requirements, as normal, and available grid capacity.
4.7	Facilitate a District Heating Feasibility Study to investigate effective heating solutions.	Facilitate a District Heating Feasibility Study to investigate effective heating solutions., ensuring the study has appropriate regard to planning and environmental protection constraints and considerations.



Action Reference	Original Action	Recommendations integrated into the Plan, included in:
4.9	Develop office hubs and co-working spaces in Portlaoise to facilitate remote working and reduce commuting.	Develop office hubs and co-working spaces in Portlaoise to facilitate remote working and reduce commuting. Development supported by this action will, as normal, be carried out in line with planning and environmental protection requirements.
4.10	Upgrade all public lighting to energy-efficient LED technology.	Upgrade all public lighting to energy-efficient LED technology; having due regard to environmental sensitivities



Table 2-2: Proposed Environmental Mitigation Measures - Environmental Governance Principles included in the plan

Support the National Climate Action Plan (which itself supports international climate obligations) in a manner which will assist in addressing the causes of climate change the impacts of which affect humans, flora, fauna, habitats, heritage and the broader environment.
Support the National Climate Action Plan (which itself supports international climate obligations) in addressing the local impacts of climate change which has the potential to impact humans, flora, fauna, habitats, heritage and the broader environment.
Within the context of the range of Plans, Strategies and similar documents produced by the Council, to further provide for environmentally positive measures within the actions undertaken pursuant to this plan.
Promote climate action projects that support habitats such as protected trees, hedgerows wetlands, flood zones which contribute to green infrastructure.
In the context of advancing climate action, to support opportunities to improve ecological connectivity of non-designated habitats and sites to improve overall ecosystem resilience and functioning
To support community led projects (such as Abbeyleix Bog Project) which support peatland restoration, rehabilitation and maintenance and similar carbon improvement projects.
Within the context of European, National and Regional policy instruments (such as the Water Framework Directive, River Basin Management and similar) to seek to have co-benefits with such instruments within the actions arising from this plan
Within areas such as biodiversity protection and enhancement; improved air, water or soil quality; or enhanced recreation, amenity and cultural heritage value to seek to have co-benefits with such areas within the actions arising from this plan
That developments by the Council and their partners continue to have regard to the potential for potential environmental impacts and environmental protection requirements.
Having regard to climate change potentially affecting the rate of spread of invasive species, to continue within the Council's own infrastructural projects to take precautions and carry out the appropriate management to avoid spreading invasive species, particularly in regard to Schedule III species.



3. CONSIDERATION OF ALTERNATIVES

3.1 Introduction

This section provides an overview of reasonable Plan alternatives considered during the plan-making processes. The environmental effects of reasonable alternative, including effects on biodiversity and European sites, were considered when choosing the preferred Plan.

3.2 Approach to Developing Reasonable Alternatives

A range of alternatives to the LACAP were considered during the plan-making process. The approach for identifying reasonable alternatives to the LACAP is defined below:

1. Iterative communication was held between the plan-making and environmental assessment teams to identify the various alternative approaches and options being considered to achieve the vision of the plan - the reduction of GHG emissions at Local Authority organizational level and within the Community in support of Climate Action policy. This communication commenced early on during the plan-making process.
2. Reasonable alternatives considered were identified. For an alternative to be considered reasonable, it must be practical/functional, realistic and implementable. An evaluation of whether each alternative was practical/functional, reasonable and implementable took place. This evaluation considered the following factors:
 3. The vision of high-level objectives of the LACAP.
 4. The geographic scope of the LACAP.
 5. The actual powers and functions of the Local Authority.
 6. The climate action merits of the alternative.
 7. The genuine ability of the alternative to achieve the plan vision and high-level objectives.
 8. The technical feasibility of the alternative.
 9. The availability of resources, including financial resources to deliver the plan within the required timeframe.
 10. The policy hierarchy and the parameters placed around the LACAP by higher-level policy.
 11. The legislative context and the parameters placed around the DLACAP by climate action and environmental related legislation.

The toolkit contained in the EPA's guidelines entitled 'Developing and Assessing Alternatives in Strategic Environmental Assessment Good Practice Guidance' (2015) was utilized when identifying reasonable alternatives. The 'Why? What? Where? When?' Model defined in the guidelines were used when framing reasonable alternatives, as shown in Figure 3-1.

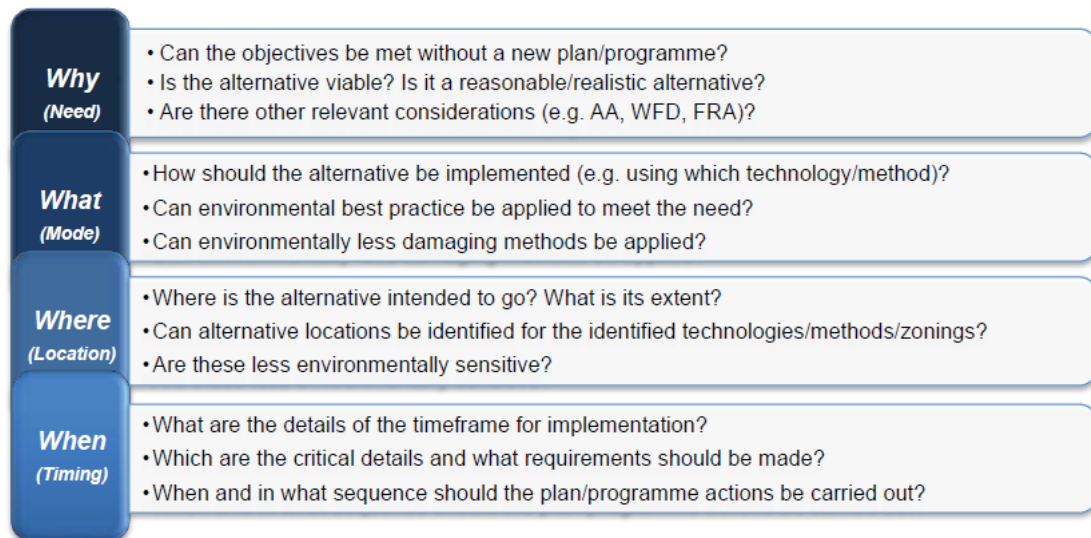


Figure 3-1: 'Why? What? Where? When?' Model for framing alternatives - Adapted from Figure 4.3 Developing and Assessing Alternatives in the Strategic Environmental Assessment Process (EPA, 2015).

3.3 Identification and Description of Reasonable Alternatives

Reasonable alternatives to the LACAP were identified. A description of these reasonable alternatives and the reasons for selecting these reasonable alternatives are presented in Table 3-1.

A 'Do Nothing' or 'Do Minimum' alternative was not a reasonable alternative in this instance as the preparation of an effective LACAP is a statutory requirement under Section 16 of the Climate Act.



Table 3-1: Reasonable Alternatives to the LACAP

Reasonable Alternative	Description of Reasonable Alternative	Reasoning for selecting this Reasonable Alternative
<p>Alternative 1 - The Pareto Approach: Prioritize reducing GHG emissions from largest GHG emitting sectors to mitigate against climate change impacts.</p>	<p>This alternative involved developing a LACAP that primarily focusses on climate mitigation and reducing GHG emissions associated with the largest GHG emitting sectors in the County that a local authority can reasonable influence having regard to the functions of a local authority - the Residential and Transport sectors.</p>	<p>This was a viable alternative that could achieve a significant reduction in GHG emissions by prioritizing and supporting climate mitigation related action for the Residential and Transport sectors. The alternative would cover the period from 2024 to 2029 (the duration of the prospective LACAP).</p>
<p>Alternative 2 - The Holistic Approach: Adopt a multi-pronged approach and focus on a range of priority areas to mitigate against and adapt to climate change impacts.</p>	<p>This alternative involved developing a LACAP that has a balanced focus on both climate mitigation and adaptation across several theme areas and all socio-economic sectors.</p>	<p>This was a viable alternative that would have enhanced potential to reduce GHG emissions across multiple sectors, potential to offset GHG emissions, and greater potential to protect the local community and the environment from climate change related risks. Climate mitigation and adaptation actions across a wide breath of theme areas would be supported by the LACAP. The alternative would cover the period from 2024 to 2029 (the duration of the prospective LACAP).</p> <p>This alternative will promote the creation of a range of climate action co-benefits, including potentially co-benefits for biodiversity and European sites.</p>
<p>Alternative 3 - The Holistic and Participatory Approach (Current LACAP): Adopt a multi-pronged approach - that has a strong community engagement emphasis - and focus on a range of priority areas to mitigate against and adapt to climate change impacts.</p>	<p>This alternative involved developing a LACAP that has a balanced focus on both climate mitigation and adaptation across several theme areas and all socio-economic sectors, and which has a strong community engagement emphasis, which underpins, supports and drives the climate action contained in the plan.</p>	<p>This was a viable alternative that would have enhanced potential to reduce GHG emissions across multiple sectors, potential to offset GHG emissions, and greater potential to protect the local community and the environment from climate change related risks. Climate mitigation and adaptation actions across a wide breath of theme areas would be supported by the LACAP. The range of climate mitigation and adaptation actions defined in the LACAP is likely to have better community level and organizational support given its strong community engagement emphasis. The alternative would cover the period from 2024 to 2029 (the duration of the prospective LACAP).</p> <p>This alternative will promote the creation of a range of climate action co-benefits, including potentially co-benefits for biodiversity and European sites.</p>



3.4 Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives and Reasons for Choosing the Preferred Plan

An evaluation of the potential effects of the reasonable alternatives on the baseline environment was carried out in accordance with the SEA Directive and best practice guidelines. This evaluation is documented in the SEA Environmental Report for the LACAP. A summary of this evaluation and the reason for choosing the preferred Plan is presented below.

Alternative 1 - The Pareto Approach - would lead to some positive environmental effects and would result in the reduction of GHG emissions in the sectors that the local authority can control or exert substantial influence on that contribute most in terms of GHG emission in the County - the Residential and Transport sectors. It is less likely that this alternative would have delivered the wide-ranging climate mitigation and offsetting related action required to fully realize GHG emission reduction potential in the County. It is also less likely this alternative would have defined a wide range of climate adaptation measures that would fully protect biodiversity, heritage resources, environmental receptors and people from climate change risks. This alternative approach may have generated several negative environmental effects, which would not be counterbalanced by the positive environmental effects associated with Alternatives 2 and 3.

Alternative 2 - The Holistic Approach - and Alternative 3 - The Holistic and Participatory Approach - would have both broadly delivered suitably wide ranging and effective climate action. These alternatives have the potential to generate multiple positive environmental effects, including a reduction in GHG emissions at organizational, community and sectoral levels, in addition to a variety of other environmental benefits. These alternatives would have placed a balanced emphasis on both climate mitigation and adaptation action, ensuring climate change related environmental risks are adequately understood and managed at community level. These alternatives will promote the creation of a range of climate action co-benefits, including potentially co-benefits for biodiversity and European sites.

Alternative 3 had the best potential to deliver effective climate action given its holistic, wide encompassing nature; and given its strong community engagement emphasis, which supports better participation in climate action at community level. Alternative 3 had better potential therefore to fully realize potential environmental effects than Alternative 2.

Reasonable Alternative 3 - The Holistic and Participatory Approach - therefore constituted the preferred alternative or preferred plan.



4. AA CONCLUSION

AA Screening of a draft version of the LACAP (the Draft LACAP) concluded that the Plan was likely to have significant effects on European sites forming part of the Natura 2000 network (in the absence of mitigation), either alone or in combination with other plans and projects.

It was concluded a Natura Impact Report (NIR) should be prepared for the Draft LACAP. Careful considerations were required with regard to the technical wording, focus and scope of the actions contained within the Draft LACAP, such that effects are avoided and/or minimised with regard to European sites and their Qualifying Interests and Special Conservation Interests.

A NIR was produced for the Draft LACAP. The NIR considered the potential for the LACAP to adversely affect the integrity of European sites, with regard to their Qualifying Interests and Special Conservation Interests. The Draft LACAP was informed by the AA and a Natura Impact Report was prepared outlining the likely environmental effects of the Plan on European sites in accordance with the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC. Measures were integrated into the Draft LACAP that mitigate its potential effects on any European site.

The draft version of this NIR has been consolidated and finalized having regard to the consultation submissions made during the Draft Plan consultation period, recommendations made in the Chief Executive (CE) Report on consultation submissions, and the modifications made to the original draft version of the LACAP that was put on display for consultation. The updates made to the report were clerical or minor and non-material in nature and have not changed the parameters of the environmental/ecological assessment undertaken or the environmental mitigation defined.

The Plan modifications arising from the consultation process, the CE Report, and the post consultation plan-making process were screened for AA. The Plan modifications were determined to be non-material and did not introduce any additional environmental/ecological effects not previously considered and mitigated during the SEA and AA processes.

The consolidated, final NIR for the LACAP accompanies this AA Conclusion Statement.

The NIR concluded the following:

- Stage 1 AA Screening and Stage 2 AA of the Laois Local Authority Climate Action Plan 2024-2029 has been carried out. Implementation of the LACAP has the potential to result in effects to the integrity of any European sites, if unmitigated.
- The risks to the safeguarding and integrity of the qualifying interests, special conservation interests and conservation objectives of the European sites have been addressed by the inclusion of mitigation measures that will prioritise the avoidance of effects in the first place and mitigate effects where these cannot be avoided. In addition, all lower-level plans and projects arising through the implementation of the LACAP will themselves be subject to AA when further details of design and location are known.
- In-combination effects from interactions with other plans and projects was considered in the assessment and the mitigation measures incorporated into the plan are seen to be robust to ensure there will be no significant adverse effects as a result of the implementation of the LACAP either alone or in-combination with other plans/projects.
- Having incorporated mitigation measures, it is concluded that the Laois Local Authority Climate Action Plan 2024-2029 is not foreseen to give rise to any significant adverse effects on designated European sites, alone or in combination with other plans or projects. This evaluation is made in view of the conservation objectives of the habitats or species, for which these sites have been designated.



Having regard to the above, the plan as adopted will not have an adverse effect on the integrity of any European site.



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