

COMHAIRLE CHONTAE LAOISE

LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL



TUARASCÁIL BHLIANTÚIL

ANNUAL REPORT 2021

JOINT ADDRESS BY THE CATHAOIRLEACH AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE



Cllr. C. Bergin
Cathaoirleach

We welcome the publication of the 2021 Annual Report which outlines the Council's progress on delivering on our strategic priorities and highlights the ongoing valuable work and some of the many achievements of this Council during the year.

The work and achievements of Laois County Council are enhanced by working in partnership with a range of stakeholders and we would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge them for their ongoing support and co-operation.

The continuation of the Coronavirus pandemic throughout the world saw every aspect of people's lives affected during 2021. While restrictions have been eased as a result of the various measures put in place including the vaccination programme, the Management and Staff of Laois County Council continued their work through 2021 with a mix of office and remote working. Each department within the Council continued to ensure that the changing needs for our services were met.



John Mulholland
Chief Executive

The provision of housing remains a priority for Laois County Council with the delivery of a further 108 new housing units under the Rebuilding Ireland Programme and providing 220 families with housing solutions in 2021. Retrofitting works on 157 homes also commenced as part of a pilot initiative under the Housing Retrofit Programme.

The initial round of consultation on the review of our County Development Plan and the preparation of a new County Development Plan 2021—2027 took place in January 2021 with the new Plan being adopted in 2022.

In terms of energy efficiency and decarbonisation, the Council has long been a forerunner in this area and in 2021 continued to work towards the common goal of reducing our carbon footprint.

Work continued in 2021 on The Cube, Low Carbon Centre of Excellence which will be a multi-point incubation hub for the development of a Low Carbon Centre of Excellence attracting and developing companies with a low carbon focus. The Council also continued its programme of street light replacements and replaced an additional 2,539 lights with LED's resulting in total savings to Laois of 747,500kwh.

While businesses continued to be severely impacted throughout the year, the Rates Waiver Scheme 2021 was applied to 989 commercial rate accounts with a total value of €3,827,742.92. The Business Support Unit also responded to the covid crisis by working closely with the business community and encouraging them to avail of relevant supports for their businesses. These supports were designed to help businesses stabilise and adapt to the evolving situation and to prepare for getting back on the road to recovery. 2021 saw a significant increase in participants on training courses, a very high demand for mentoring and an increase in the uptake of all incentives and business supports including the new Green for Micro programme.

The Council aims to establish and promote the best practice in heritage management and conservation by partaking in initiatives such as the All Ireland Pollinator Plan and the survey of wetlands. A major new project linking conservation of medieval heritage and biodiversity has been launched by Laois and Offaly County Councils. The three year project was 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.

A number of initiatives to improve the health and wellbeing of people in Laois were launched in 2021 including the "Leave a light on" and the "Keep Well" campaigns to help individuals and communities to keep up their resilience and wellbeing through an especially challenging winter.

Finally, we would like to thank the elected members and the staff of Laois County Council for their ongoing co-operation and support and their commitment to serving the people of County Laois.

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MISSION STATEMENT

“The Council will lead the sustainable economic, social, cultural and community development of our County and deliver quality public services to the communities we serve”

Mandate

Laois County Council is the primary democratically elected authority in County Laois which provides an extensive and diverse range of services that impact upon the county’s economic, social, environmental, infrastructural, Industrial, tourism, and cultural activities. These services include the provision and maintenance of houses, roads, planning and economic development, waste management, environmental protection, recreational activities, libraries, cultural and community development, including recreation and sport. Laois County Council act as agents for the delivery of water and waste water services. The Council is serviced by a large workforce, including the Chief Executive, professional, technical, legal, administrative, financial and outdoor employees.

Council Membership

Laois County Council consists of 19 Elected Members— six members each from the Borris-in-Ossory – Mountmellick and Graiguecullen-Portarlinton Municipal Districts and seven members from the Portlaoise Municipal District



Elected Members with the Chief Executive at Laois County Council AGM in June 2019

Council Meetings

Council Meetings in 2021 were usually held on the last Monday of each month in the Council Chamber. However, due to Covid-19 and in order to comply with public health guidance, meetings were held in the Dunamais Theatre, Donaghmore Workhouse and Museum, the Council Chamber and also by remote means. There were seventeen meetings held in 2021 with no meeting held in August.

Corporate Policy Group (C.P.G.)

The Corporate Policy Group is designed to enhance the democratic mandate and policy making role of the elected members. The C.P.G. is supported by the Chief Executive and comprises the Cathaoirleach of the Council and the four Chairs of the Strategic Policy Committees (S.P.C.'s) together with the Cathaoirleach of the Graiguecullen/Portarlinton Municipal District. The main function of the C.P.G. is to co-ordinate the work of the different S.P.C.'s and provide a forum where policy decisions affecting the whole Council are agreed for submission to the full Council for decision. The C.P.G. met on 12 occasions in 2021.

Municipal Districts

The following are the details in relation to the number of Municipal District Meetings held in 2021:

Borris-in-Ossory/Mountmellick Municipal District - 12 meetings

Graiguecullen/Portarlinton Municipal District—11 meetings

Portlaoise Municipal District—12 meetings

MEMBERS OF LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL

MEMBERS OF BORRIS IN OSSORY-MOUNTMELICK MUNICIPAL DISTRICT



Patrick Bracken (F.F)



John King (F.G.)



Oliver Clooney (Non Party)



Conor Bergin (F.G)



Seamus McDonald (F.F)



James Kelly (Non Party)

MEMBERS OF PORTLAOISE MUNICIPAL DISTRICT



Mary Sweeney (F.G)



John Joe Fennelly (F.F)



William Aird (F.G)



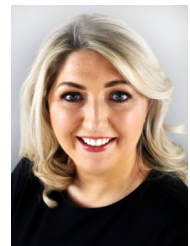
Noel Tuohy (Labour)



Catherine Fitzgerald
(F.F.)



Caroline Dwane Stanley
(S.F.)



Thomasina Connell
(F.G.)

MEMBERS OF PORTARLINGTON-GRAIGUECULLEN MUNICIPAL DISTRICT



P J Kelly (F.G.)



Aisling Moran (F.G.)



Padraig Fleming (F.F.)



Ben Brennan (Non Party)



Aidan Mullins (S.F.)



Paschal McEvoy (F.F.)

Cllr. Tom Mulhall resigned from Laois County Council with effect from the 26th January 2021. Cllr. Mulhall was first elected to the Council in 2009, representing the now Graiguecullen Portarlington Municipal District and went on to become Cathaoirleach in 2016. Cllr. Mulhall was a dedicated public representative and was widely respected. The Elected Members together with Management and Staff wished Cllr. Mulhall every good wish for his retirement.



Tom Mulhall (F.G.)

DIRECTOR OF SERVICES:

Donal Brennan

SENIOR EXECUTIVE OFFICER, HUMAN RESOURCES/CORPORATE AFFAIRS

Pat Delaney

CORPORATE AFFAIRS

Corporate Plan

Laois County Council's Corporate Plan 2019 –2024 was adopted by the Members of the Council in November, 2019. The Corporate Plan provides the framework for the implementation of a coherent strategy for the development of the county for the period 2019-2024 and was prepared following consultation with employees, elected representatives, community, voluntary and environmental interests, external stakeholders and other public bodies operating at local level.

Customer Charter

Laois County Council's Customer Charter sets out the way in which the Council endeavours to deal with its customers. The document is on display in all public Council Offices and on our website at www.laois.ie. This Charter includes a commitment to equality in service provision and a recognition of the diverse nature of the community we serve. The Charter also includes a Customer Complaints Procedure which may be availed of by any person not satisfied with the quality of service received.

Highlights

There were no Civic Receptions held during 2021 due to Covid 19.

Annual Service Delivery Plan

The Members at their meeting of the Council held on the 13th of December 2021 adopted the Annual Service Delivery Plan for 2022. The implementation of the Plan will be reviewed in 2022 as part of the process of developing the 2023 Plan. The performance of the Council in relation to the performance indicators as specified by National Oversight and Audit Commission will also be taken into account.

Partnership

The following were the members of the Workplace Partnership Committee as at 31st December 2021

Management Nominees

Bernie Foran
Susan Grant

Union Nominees

Anne Marie Maher
Rosa Bray
Deirdre Alexander
Tom O'Carroll
Edmond Kenny

Due to Covid 19, the Partnership Committee did not meet during 2021.

Irish Language Scheme

Laois Local Authorities Irish Language Scheme was confirmed by the Minister for Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and came into effect on 1st December 2009. The scheme is available to view on our website, www.laois.ie. Work continues on the preparation of a new scheme. Laois Local Authorities recognise that our customers have the right to choose to do business with us in their preferred language and they are facilitated in their dealings with us as far as practicable, whether that is through Irish or through English.

If you wish to contact the Council in Irish, please send an e-mail to gaeilge@laoiscoco.ie.

Freedom of Information (F.O.I.)

The Freedom of Information Act 2014 was enacted on 14 October 2014. It introduced significant changes to the Freedom of Information regime repealing and replacing the Freedom of Information Acts 1997 and 2003 and expanding the scope of FOI to a number of further bodies. It also consolidated, modernised and updated the legislation generally.

Applications received in 2021

Applications on hand at 31 st December 2020:	5
Applications Received in 2021:	74
Decisions taken during 2021 (including 19 applications discontinued):	76
Applications not Continued with:	19
Applications dealt with outside of FOI:	7
Applications on hand at 31 st December 2021:	3

Nature of Requests

Personal:	16
Non-Personal:	57
Mixed:	1

Appeals

There were 0 appeals to the Information Commissioner in 2021.

Sources of Requests

General Public, Solicitors and Others:	46
Journalists:	28

National Performance Indicators

Section 126c of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 sets out the functions of the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) which includes examination of the performance of local government bodies against forty two indicators.

The report in respect of 2020 was published by NOAC in September 2021.

Laois County Council's performance in each area in 2020 is included in this report in each of the relevant sections.

Reporting of Protected Disclosures

1 disclosure was received by the Designated Officer for Protected Disclosures during 2021.

Register of Electors 2022/20223

<u>Dail Constituency</u>	<u>Presidential Electors</u>	<u>Dail Electors</u>
Laois—Offaly	52,398	53,167
Kildare South	5,807	5,908
<u>European Parliament Constituency</u>	<u>European Electors</u>	<u>Potential European Electors</u>
South	58,931	826
<u>Local Electoral Areas</u>	<u>Number of Electors</u>	
Borris in Ossory-Mountmellick	20,250	
Graigucullen-Portarlinton	20,264	
Portlaoise	21,536	
<u>Postal and Special Voters</u>		
Gardai	Laois –Offaly	1
	Kildare South	0
Defence Forces	Laois –Offaly	167
	Kildare South	40
Diplomats	Laois –Offaly	7
	Kildare South	0
Physically Disabled	Laois-Offaly	9
	Kildare South	0
Occupation	Laois—Offaly	1
	Kildare South	0
Special Voters	Laois-Offaly	16
	Kildare South	0

HUMAN RESOURCES

Recruitment Statistics

A total of 553 people (including retained firefighters) were employed by Laois County Council at 31 December 2021.

During 2021 the Council held 33 competitions and in many cases interviews were held online during the mandatory restrictions to prevent the spread of Covid 19.

Successful Delivery

Since January 2021, we have successfully delivered on the following outputs for our Council (figures presented are up to the end of December 2021).



Work Life Balance Initiatives

Laois County Council continued to implement work/life balance initiatives for staff during 2021. At year-end six employees were availing of the Career Break Scheme, 30 employees were availing of the Work Sharing Scheme 2020/2021, 33 employees availed of the Parental Leave Scheme, 39 employees availed of the Shorter Working Year Scheme with 3 employees availing of the Unpaid Leave Scheme.

National Performance Indicator 2020

Performance Indicators in this document come from the National Oversight and Audit Commission Report No. 44, published 30 September 2021, which refers to 2020, as this is the most recent data set available.

In relation to the national performance indicator on the number of working days lost to certified and un-certified illness the following statistics apply:

Total No. of Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) staff in Local Authority	Certified	Uncertified
449.38	2.26%	0.16%

The national target for absences on certified and uncertified illness leave is set at 3.5%.

Industrial Relations

Laois County Council continued to maintain 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.

Employee Training & Development

Laois County Council is committed to the training and development of all our employees in the context of securing the goals and objectives of the Council and the skills development of employees. Laois County Council is committed to continuous improvement in service delivery through the personal development of its employees.

The annual training programme is primarily based on the training needs identified through staff Team Development Plans and Personal Development Plans as part of the Performance Management Development System process. The Programme also incorporates Health & Safety requirements, National FETAC programmes, third level open learning programmes and business related seminars/workshops as they arise.

The Training Unit had difficulty arranging a comprehensive training programme for 2021 due to Covid restrictions. However, it was decided that mandatory and essential training would continue to be rolled out in compliance with Covid guidelines and the total expenditure incurred in 2021 was €365,065 (inclusive of expenditure for Fire Services). A sample of the training programmes provided is as follows: -

- Safepass
- Confined Spaces (Medium Risk)
- Manual Handling
- 360^o Excavator Training
- Road Opening and Reinstatement
- First Aid Refresher
- Signing, Lighting and Guarding at roadworks
- Temporary Traffic Management Level 1 & 2
- Domestic Heat Pump Systems
- Standard for Rented Housing Training
- Managing and motivating remote workers
- Occupational First Aid
- Certificate in Road Programme Management

- Introduction to Flood Risk Management
- Driver CPC
- Water Treatment Plant Operations

Open Learning Programme

Laois County Council endeavours subject to available resources, to facilitate and support employees wishing to pursue third level open learning courses that are relevant to and contribute to the business development of both the Council and the employee's role and responsibilities. A number of open learning programmes facilitated during 2021 were as follows:

- Certificate/Diploma in Local Government Studies with the IPA
- IPASS Certificate in Payroll Techniques
- Masters in Climate Change with DCU
- Post Graduate Diploma in Climate Entrepreneurship with TCD
- Post Graduate Library and Information Management with Ulster University

Staff Policies

In line with best practice in Human Resource management, the Council developed a suite of HR staff policies of which the following were introduced or revised during 2021:

- Dignity at Work policy
- Parental Leave

Equality & Supporting Diversity

Laois County Council is an equal opportunity employer and is committed to a broad range of policies, practices and procedures which have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality and protect human rights of staff and people availing of its services.

INFORMATION COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY

HEAD OF INFORMATION SYSTEMS:

Pat Grassick

The Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Department manages the Council’s ICT infrastructure, software systems and websites. This includes the server datacenter, desktop and laptop computers, mobile phones and the wired and wireless network communication equipment in County Hall, Area Offices, Libraries, and other Council locations throughout the county.

The ICT Department provides technical support to all other sections of the Council and to the Members and is responsible for the implementation, maintenance, development, and security of the Council’s ICT systems. More than 7,300 technical support calls were handled by ICT support staff in 2021, an increase of over 12% through the Covid 19 pandemic. This reflects the remote working environment that prevailed during the pandemic and demonstrates the value of ICT support in the delivery of services by the Council.

The ICT Department is committed to a policy of continuous improvement of ICT services, both within the Council itself and to the public who avail of the Council’s services with a growing focus on online services to the citizens of Laois.

ICT Response to Covid 19 Pandemic

Further investment was made to facilitate hybrid working in Laois County Council to ensure the continuity of service required by the public. The main meeting rooms were equipped with video conferencing technology, and this has helped engagement with the public, Councillors and staff throughout the Covid pandemic in accordance with the workplace restrictions that applied.

ICT Security

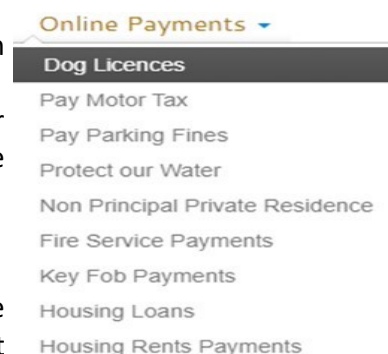
Cyber Security remained to the forefront with security hardening of our IT systems and staff training a key focus. Investment was made in a Cyber Security and GDPR training portal to raise awareness of cyber threats posed to the Council.

An Information Security Committee was put in place to direct policy in protecting data, both digital and paper-based records, within the Council to ensure continued focus on protecting the data of our citizens.

Website and Consultation Portal

The Council’s website provides a source of information and news items relating to Council activities. In 2021 over 600,000 views were counted on the Laois.ie website. The Planning pages again proved to be the most popular area for users of our website with close to 14% of all views for planning related content. Online payments accounted for 5% of all website traffic in 2021.

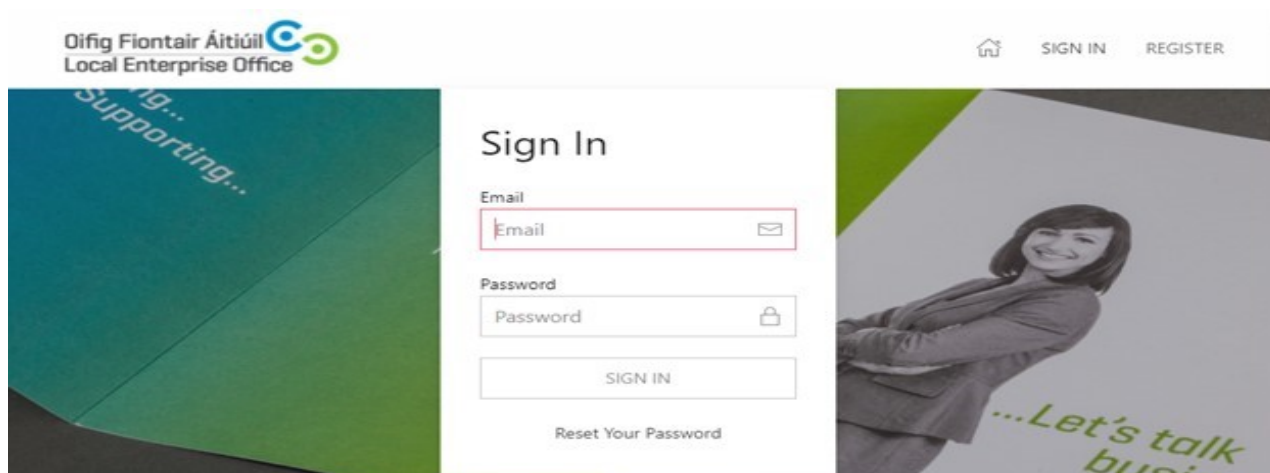
The Laois County Council Online consultation portal carried 17 public consultations in 2021 with over 250 online submissions received from the public including submissions in relation to the Draft County Development Plan 2021-2027.



ICT Infrastructure

In 2021 the power supply (UPS) underpinning our primary server room was upgraded to ensure continuity of service in the event of a power outage and further protect the provision of service.

The Laois Local Enterprise Office launched their online client engagement portal to digitize the services and engagement between local businesses and the Local Enterprise Office.



National Performance Indicators 2020

Per capita total page views of the local authority's websites in 2020	Per capita total number of followers at end 2020 of the local authority's social media accounts	Overall Cost of ICT Provision per WTE	Overall cost of ICT as a proportion of Revenue Expenditure
7.3	0.61	€4,327.81	2.2

CLIMATE ACTION & COMMUNITY STRATEGIC POLICY COMMITTEE

DIRECTOR OF SERVICES:

Donal Brennan

SENIOR EXECUTIVE OFFICER:

Carmel McNicholl

Members	Sectoral
<i>Cllr John King (Chair)</i>	<i>Ruth Sullivan (PPN, Community/Voluntary)</i>
<i>Cllr Pdraig Fleming</i>	<i>Bobby Delaney (PPN, Environment)</i>
<i>Cllr P J Kelly</i>	<i>Donald Scully (Agriculture Farming Pillar)</i>
<i>Cllr James Kelly</i>	<i>Michael Gorman (PPN, Social Inclusion)</i>
<i>Cllr Oliver Clooney</i>	<i>Ann Fingleton (PPN Business/Commercial)</i>

Laois Local Community Development Committee (LCDC)

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



- Social Inclusion Community Action Programme (SICAP) - administration of the annual budget of €604,226. The contract implementer is Laois Partnership Company.
- Community objectives in the Local Economic and Community Plan.
- Implementation of the Laois Local Development Strategy operated under the LEADER Programme 2014-2020 in partnership with the local authority (financial partner) and local development company (implementing partner).
- LEADER Programme 2014–2020 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.
- The Transitional LEADER programme commenced on the 1st April with Laois LAG being awarded the sum of €1,092,976 for projects. As of 31st December 2021, 16 projects were approved to the value of €574,675.97
- In addition, Laois LAG were notified that under LEADER EURI funding, Laois has been awarded €485,767 for projects. Project animation commenced in 2021.
- Healthy Ireland – Round 3 Grant in the sum of €338,851 received from the Department of Health to cover a number of initiatives. Due to Covid 19, project completion date for this fund was further extended from 31st December 2021 to 31st March 2022.
- Laois LCDC approved funding for 68 applicants totalling €136,524 in respect of the DRCD Community Enhancement Programme in 2021.
- The LCDC funded a further 4 projects amounting to €23,794 under the newly established Dormant Accounts Social Enterprise Capital Grant Scheme.
- An amount of €237,048 was allocated to Laois LCDC under the Community Activities Fund, advertised in November 2021.

Laois Community Support Response Forum

Laois County Councils Community Response Helpline (telephone line/email support) was set up by Community and IT staff and went live from Tuesday 31st March 2020. Considering the reduction in Covid 19 cases, it was decided nationally that all helplines cease operations effective from 29th October 2021. A total of 816 callers to the Helpline were supported during its operation.

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.



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. In 2021 Laois PPN organised a variety of well attended training and capacity building events. 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. In addition, Laois PPN held 2 County Plenaries and 3 Municipal District Plenaries online in 2021.

Laois Community & Voluntary Awards 2021

The 2021 Community & Voluntary Awards 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 the 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.



Educational Partnership

The Schools Business Partnership “Skills at Work” programme changed this year to “World of Work”, and is aimed at 2nd year students as this intervention has been shown more effective in addressing/averting the issue of early school leavers. This programme is run 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 Department of Education and Skills.

Laois Comhairle na nÓg

In 2021 Laois Comhairle na nÓg held 37 meetings mostly online with 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.

Pride of Place 2021

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.



County Laois Joint Policing Committee(JPC)

The County Laois JPC met 4 times in 2021.

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.

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 assumed responsibility for 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 on the 17th of December with 19 families and 6 individuals being accommodated in Laois during the programme. Overall, 106 individuals were resettled, which included 14 Irish born babies.

Make Way Day 2021

Laois County Council participated in Make Way Day which took place on September 24th 2021. Make Way Day is a campaign that brings the disability and wider community together to consider the needs of people with disabilities in the public spaces we all share. The campaign is led by the Disability Federation of Ireland and is a unique collaboration across Ireland between the voluntary and local government sectors.



Laois Connects 2020 Promoting Positive Mental Health & Wellbeing

This year the Laois Connects Programme took place from the 1st October to the 31st of October 2021.

Traditionally the programme would have been implemented over a one-week period. With the demands of 2020 and the first 9 months of 2021 being so difficult, the initiative was extended 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.



Town & Village Renewal Scheme

In 2020, €383,375 in funding was awarded under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme 2020, benefiting 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.



Laois Age Friendly Programme

The Age Friendly Alliance met 5 times and the Older Peoples Council met 3 times during 2021. The meetings were all online and the impact of the pandemic was very much on the agenda. Engagement took place with various stakeholders, e.g. our Libraries, An Garda Síochána and TFI Local Link and many others to ensure 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. In association with the Healthy Ireland programme, 2000 free face coverings were distributed 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 supported by the programme.

Healthy Ireland

Healthy Ireland, A Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing 2013-2025 is a national framework for action to improve the health and wellbeing of Ireland over the coming generation.

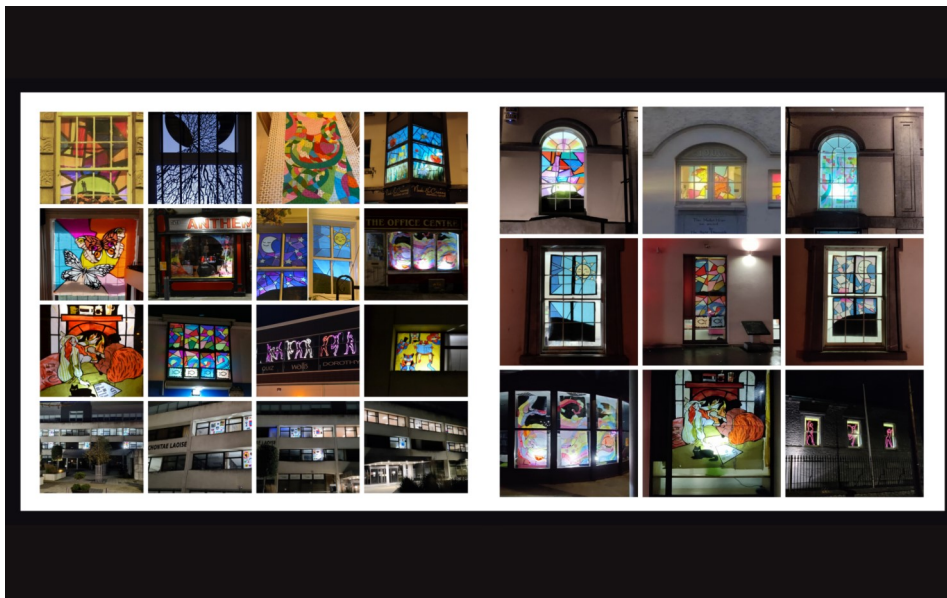
Now in its 4th year, the 'Healthy Ireland Fund' aims to support innovative sectoral, evidence-based projects, programmes and initiatives that support key national policies in areas such as mental health, physical activity, nutrition and sexual health, that promote a tobacco free Ireland and reduce alcohol consumption while also developing spaces and places for health and wellbeing. Among the successful initiatives under the Healthy Ireland programme are the "Keep Well Campaign", "We're Breastfeeding Friendly Laois initiative" and "Leave a Light on" initiative.

The ‘Keep Well’ campaign was launched in November 2020 and continued to mid 2021. The focus of the campaign was helping people - individuals & communities - to keep up their resilience and wellbeing through an especially challenging winter through to Spring/Summer.

The “We’re Breastfeeding Friendly Laois” initiative was launched in October 2021 by Minister Frank Feighan T.D. to coincide with National Breastfeeding Week. The campaign aims to help improve the health and wellbeing of breastfeeding mothers, babies and their families by encouraging businesses, organisations and community groups to become ‘Breastfeeding Friendly’.

The “Leave a Light on” campaign launched in October, 2021, was a collaborative project, funded by Healthy Ireland Laois and commissioned by Dunamase Arts Centre. Artists and local secondary school art students were commissioned to create window designs inspired by the theme of positive mental health. The artwork was displayed from mid-October, in association with Laois Connects, with Áras an Chontae participating in this initiative. The Council’s

Library Service also supported the initiative to continue through the month of November, by channeling packs and materials to the wider communities, to create their own window designs at home. Citizens enjoyed a Virtual Tour of the exhibition trail around Portlaoise town centre. During the virtual tour, a video presentation highlighted important information contacts and details on Mental Wellbeing and Suicide Prevention supports that are available.



Community/Environmental Programmes

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

- Online workshops on topics of interest were 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 and 15 schools received Green Flag awards in 2021.
- 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 the course being delivered to participants homes.
- The Picker Pal Programme supports schools, children and their families through a fun, year round programme of interactive activities along with a Picker Pal pack given to each family to take home to go on a litter picking adventure. Up to 1,200 children and their families participated in this programme over the academic year in County Laois.



Applications for funding support were invited from interested bodies, groups, committees and organisations who intended to engage in environmental/amenity works during 2021. These included:

Community (Environmental) Grant Scheme

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 judging categories of the National Tidy Towns Competition. During 2021 €31,841 was allocated in grants to 22 groups under this scheme.

Climate Change

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. The Council achieved an estimated efficiency increase of 46.8% which exceeds the national target of 33% for 2020.

- ◇ A cross sectoral Climate Action Team which meets on a monthly basis.
- ◇ Laois County Council co-ordinates a Low Carbon Implementation Group which is comprised of a range of stakeholders including those who are collectively working towards the common goal of reducing the carbon footprint of Portlaoise Town. This work continued in 2021 and a second interim report has been produced.
- ◇ Sustainable Energy Communities: Portlaoise 2040 SEC and Durrow SEC have applied for Energy Master Plan for Portlaoise. Portarlington Business Association SEC received approval for an Energy Masterplan from SEAI.
- ◇ School Sustainable Travel Study is being conducted in Portlaoise Town by An Taisce to identify benefits and barriers to the development of a cycling culture in school aged children.
- ◇ Climate Literacy Courses for Transition Year students in 5 Secondary Schools in County Laois has commenced. This incorporates a teacher training element over 9 weekly action based learning modules.
- ◇ Midland Science delivered four Climate Action Workshops over 8 weeks to all 5th classes in Portlaoise Town as part of Portlaoise Low Carbon Town Project and also held workshops in each Secondary School.

Midland Energy Agency

Laois County Council are the lead authority for the Midland Energy Agency and the Energy Officer co-ordinates monthly working group meetings and quarterly steering group meetings between all the Local Authorities in the MEA. Roscommon County Council are now joining the MEA which will align the MEA with the Climate Action Regional Office Midlands Subgroup.

Burial Grounds

The Community Section has responsibility for 27 active burial grounds within the county. Grant aid is provided to voluntary cemetery committees and improvement works were carried out on a number of the burial grounds as part of the annual works programme.

National Performance Indicators 2020

Percentage of local schools involved in the local youth council/Comhairle na Nóg scheme	Percentage number of organisations included on the County Register and proportion of those organisations part of the Social Inclusion College with the PPN
80%	12.71%

ARTS SECTION

Laois Arthouse, Stradbally

The Laois Arthouse celebrated its 10th year in operation in May 2021 and maintained a full occupancy of Artists in Residence, although individual studios closed for periods in line with Government regulations. In July, the Arthouse Gallery, re-opened with an exhibition “Painting the Particular”, paintings of suburban Dublin 2004-2016 by Mary Burke, ceramic work by Monica O’Meara, “Moving On” from 17th September – 22nd October Oct 2021, with a final exhibition of work in celebration of 10 years of artists. “In Trust, In Gratitude, In Hope” features the work of over 60 artists with connections to the Arthouse. The Laois Arthouse Collective continued to meet virtually on a regular basis with a cohort of members working together to provide online supports .



The Artists in Schools Scheme

5 schools participated in this scheme in 2021. The scheme allows students to have an in-depth experience with a professional artist and gives them the opportunity to experience different art media. Schools included at primary level were Scoil Mhuire in Abbeyleix, Scoil Fionntaine Naofa in Shanahoe and Scoil Tobar an Leinn, in Raheen. Schools included at secondary level were Dunamase College, and CBS, Portlaoise.

Summer Arts Programme

The annual Adult Summer Art course with artist Mary Burke was held in the Malthouse, Stradbally. Eight participants took part in creating art works that responded to the town of Stradbally.

Laois Bealtaine Festival

Online events included a comic play titled “*Getting Hitched*” with Carnation Theatre Company and a very popular 4 week online Short Story Writing Course with writer Pauline Clooney. Laois Arthouse artists took part in an art competition and online exhibition titled “*Caring and Sharing*” resulting in the selection of a piece of art to be presented to three public hospitals in Laois.

Laois Youth Theatre

Workshops were adapted during the year to include a series of online and limited outdoor workshops. Independent youth theatre programmes in Mountrath and Portarlinton continued to be supported.



Laois Culture Night

Laois Culture Night was held on Friday 17th September, Highlights included live events at:

PORTLAOISE - Music from the Bandwagon at Laois Music Centre, at the Dunamais Arts Centre the premiere screening of Portlaoise native Aishling Conroy's award winning film, and a concert with Pádraig Rynne, Tara Breen, Jim Murray and Dónal Lunny. At Kavanaghs Upstairs there was performance art.

RATHDOWNEY - the unveiling took place of a high quality mural by Waterford Walls.

MOUNTMELLICK – audiences enjoyed the Anne Jellicoe Outdoor Projection at Mountmellick Community School and Mountmellick Comhaltas performed at St Vincent's Hospital.

STRADBALLY - Laois Arthouse Gallery hosted 'Moving On' – An Exhibition of Ceramics.

PORTARLINGTON - Art Workshops were held at Mount Henry Art Studios.

Online events included the screening of Weaving Textiles & Poetry – a film made in celebration of "Poetry Town", and Mountmellick's rich textile heritage. Platform 31 winner, artist Ella de Burca was featured in *Conversation with Kevin Kavanagh*. A Virtual Tour of Abbeyleix Heritage House and Museum took place and a film screened on *The Art of Woodcraft* by sculptor Evgeny Chubatyy.



Mapping Arts and Health Across the Midlands (MAHAM)

The **MAHAM** (Mapping Arts, Health and Wellbeing across the Midlands) project completed in 2021 and published a report with collected data on the range of arts and health activity taking place across the region.

Leaves Festival of Literature and Music 2021

The 2021 annual festival was curated by **Clíodhna Ní Anluain**. The festival ensured creativity and arts engagement with events including readings/discussions, theatre productions, writers in schools and workshops, presented from 2nd -7th November 2021, in partnership with the Dunamais Arts Centre. Highly accomplished writers and panels presented at the Dunamais Arts Centre as well as at some online events – Audiences were limited due to Covid 19. leavesfestival.ie



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 attracted significant online audience.

Phase 2 completed in December, 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 that was again recorded, giving the performers an important promotional tool to utilise when restrictions were eased once again. In addition to these events Music Generation Laois produced a



programme of events throughout the county, including a major outdoor event to premier new music by Martin Tourish and the Music Generation Laois, Trad Orchestra.

Platform 31

Artist Ella de Burca was selected as the Laois recipient of a grant of €8,000, a national opportunity for artists to develop their practice and test new ideas of collaboration, research, audience development, place-making and sharing their work. The programme is designed to support and offer career development for 31 mid-career artists (one artist in each of the 31 local authorities around Ireland)

In the Open | Faoin Spéir

An Arts Office collaborative application with the Dunamais Arts Centre to the Arts Council for the Faoin Spéir Project Scheme was successful. Funding was secured for a series of performance arts projects in 7 towns. Stradbally, Abbeyleix, Rathdowney and Portarlinton completed very successfully in 2021, and events will take place in Mountmellick, Mountrath, and Portlaoise in 2022.

Poetry Town 10th -18th September 2021

Funded by Poetry Ireland and the Arts Council, Mountmellick was one of the twenty towns across the country selected. Poet Laureate Dr Arthur Broomfield was commissioned to write a poem for the town. The national photo launch for Poetry Town also took place in Mountmellick.

Dunamais Arts Centre

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

Laois Music Centre (LSM) and Music Generation Laois

The Council continues to provide financial support with both music education programmes now coming under the management of the Laois Offaly Education and Training Board. A comprehensive programme of participative musical events took place throughout the year, and continued support and collaborations with the Arts Office will be fostered and developed into the future.

Per Cent for Art

Arrangements for two separate "Per Cent for Art" commissions were progressed for Portlaoise, one on a site adjacent to the roundabout at O'Moore Park and the other on a site outside the new library on Main Street, Portlaoise.

Supports to the Arts

Financial supports for individuals and groups continued in 2021 through the Arts Act Grants Awards Scheme and the Tyrone Guthrie Centre Bursary.

Creative Ireland Laois Programme

This programme supported by Creative Ireland in partnership with Laois County Council included a range of activities and events during the year some of which included:

- Abbeyleix Climate Action Project – recently announced as winners of the Chambers Ireland Excellence in Local Government award in the category ‘Supporting Sustainable Communities’.
- 2478 children and young people participated in Cruinniú na nÓg with the inaugural launch of the Laois Series: Sense of Place Art Competition, workshops, film screenings and young person edition of “In Your Nature podcast”.
- Swandive Productions were awarded the inaugural Laois Short Film Bursary for short film ‘Superhuman’.
- Culture Night’s new mural artwork celebrating the people and spirit of Rathdowney by artist ADW, and a video mapped projection of Anne Jellicoe (1823–80) by artist Caroline Conway at Mountmellick Community School.
- The Laois Arthouse celebrated its 10th anniversary with the exhibition ‘In Trust. In Gratitude. In Hope.’ with 60 artists responding to a specially commissioned poem ‘The Window Seat’ by poet Pat Boran.
- Musical Memories Phase 3 intergenerational music project was extended into Men’s Sheds and Rath and Errill National Schools as well as outdoor musical visits to St. Vincent's Community Nursing Unit, Abbeyleix Hospital, and St. Brigid's Hospital, Shaen.
- Laois County Council Arts Office in partnership with the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) launched a new professional development initiative for artists and art educators with a visual arts background interested in working with older people and in particular those living with dementia. This training was aimed at artists and arts educators with facilitation experience that are interested in working with person's living with dementia and their carers/family and provide expert guidance on how to deliver dementia-inclusive art viewing workshops where the person living with dementia and their carer/family can participate. This is free of charge to participating artists. All training and assessment was delivered online.

SPORT & LEISURE SECTION

2021 provided additional challenges due to COVID 19 and resulted in considerable re-organisation of planned events and activities delivered by the Sport and Leisure Section. In spite of these challenges there were several highlights to the year.

Leisure Provision

Due to Covid 19 restrictions, Portarlington Leisure Centre was closed until June 2021 and has since remained open thanks to the significant efforts of management and staff. Portarlington Leisure Centre benefited from an SEAI Better Energy Community Grant in 2021 which involved the installation of solar PV panels which will result in ongoing energy savings.

Portlaoise Leisure Centre remained closed to the public during 2021, primarily to facilitate extensive upgrading works to all areas of the building, in order to facilitate re-opening in early 2022. These works were partly funded through the Sports Capital Programme and Better Energy Community (SEAI) grant scheme.

In June 2021, Laois County Council licensed the operation of both Portlaoise and Portarlington Leisure Centres to the board of Portarlington Leisure Centre. The board of Portarlington has restructured significantly and in December 2021 it agreed to change its name to Laois Leisure CLG with the intention to rename the facilities as Laois Leisure Portlaoise and Laois Leisure Portarlington.

Laois County Council continues to provide advice and support to Ballinakill Community Development Association, who operate Ballinakill Outdoor Pool. 2021 saw the completion of works funded under the Town & Village Renewal Scheme, which has improved the energy efficiency and accessibility of the facility. Additionally, Laois County Council made a financial contribution towards the staffing and safety costs of operating the facility, during a very successful Summer season in 2021.

Playing Facilities

Laois County Council continued to manage twenty community play facilities during 2021 which required a considerable annual maintenance and repair programme, responding to unprecedented increase in usage as a result of Covid 19. Accessibility and biodiversity upgrades continued in four play areas throughout County Laois.

The Council continues to assist local groups with the development of two community playgrounds. Ballinakill playground installation works were practically completed in December 2021 and the facility will open in March 2022 under the management of Laois County Council.

Part V111 planning approval was granted to Borris in Ossory Development Association in partnership with Laois County Council in 2021 to develop a community playground, which will be completed in the Summer of 2022.

Bike Week

'Bike Week' is a national programme which encourages people to use their bicycles for travel and leisure and was co-ordinated by the National Transport Authority and funded by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. Laois County Council secured funding of €12,400 to deliver the 2021 Bike Week Programme, co-ordinating over 17 events with the assistance of Schools & Community partners countywide, from 12th to 18th September, in parallel with European mobility week. Events included family fun cycles, school cycling events and workplace cycles including Laois County Council's Pedals Away Cycle Bus Trip on Wednesday 15th September 2021.



CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE ACTIVITY PROGRAMME

National Recreation Week/National Play Day

National Recreation Week/National Play Day is a joint initiative between the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and Local Authorities. The Sport and Leisure Section delivered a series of workshops in partnership with local groups countywide in July 2021. These events were aimed at creating playful communities, to encourage children and young people in targeted areas to play outdoors.



Special Projects 2021

CLÁR Projects

Work on these maintenance and development projects continued throughout 2021. Funding was secured for three additional recreational projects under CLÁR 2021.

Outdoor Rural Infrastructure Programme (ORIS)

Work on these maintenance and development projects continued throughout 2021. Funding was secured for an additional 7 projects under ORIS 2021.

Healthy Ireland Projects 2021 Funding

Laois County Council continued the delivery of the Active Parks Programme in 2021, including during Laois Connects Mental Health Awareness week in October, with delivery of the programmes in public areas/parks in Portlaoise, Portarlinton, Mountmellick, Castletown, Ballinakill, Abbeyleix, Stradbally and Mountrath. The programme which offers free activity sessions for adults and groups of all ages and abilities was extremely successful and well received in all of the communities with unprecedented feedback outlining the importance of these sessions to participants with requests for more.



Support of Clubs/Community Groups

During 2021 the Sport & Leisure Office continued to successfully work with clubs, schools and community groups to apply for and draw down funding to develop their facilities including;

- Sports Capital Grant Scheme
- Large Scale Sports Infrastructure Scheme
- CLÁR Programme
- Town and Village Renewal Scheme
- Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS)

Active Community Hubs

The Section continues to work with Laois Sports Partnership and local communities to provide support for Stradbally/Vicarstown/Timahoe Hub and Rathdowney/Errill Hub. The aim of the active community hubs is to encourage and support local communities to be more proactive in planning and delivering physical activity programmes at local level.

Green Flag Award for Parks

The Section worked with other sections to secure the retention of the prestigious Green Flag Award at Páirc an Phobail, Portlaoise and the People's Park Portarlinton in 2021.

URBACT

In 2021, Portlaoise was selected along with five other partner towns of Rathdrum, Rush, Donegal Town, Sligo and Cork City to participate in a European knowledge sharing initiative, with the objective of promoting and delivering a number of projects to the end of 2022 to enhance play opportunities for all ages in Portlaoise.

LAOIS WATER SAFETY

Water Safety Awareness 2021

Laois County Council in conjunction with Water Safety Ireland – Laois Area Committee continued to promote Water Safety Awareness in 2021 and due to Covid 19 restrictions effort was concentrated on an on-line awareness campaign.

Water Safety Classes 2021

Water Safety Ireland – Spring and Autumn Water Safety Classes did not resume in 2021 due to the closure of Portlaoise Leisure Centre. Water Safety Ireland Laois delivered a very successful Swim Week with Kayak Skills at Ballinakill Outdoor Pool in association with Wooden Bridge Paddlers in July 2021.

Paws Programme

Laois County Council in association with Water Safety Ireland , continued to successfully support and deliver the Primary Aquatic Water Safety Programme (PAWS) in county Laois primary schools. Due to Covid 19 restrictions, the pool based PAWS programme was not delivered in 2021.

Ring Buoys

During 2021 Laois County Council continued to inspect, maintain, erect and replace ring buoys at open water locations countywide.

LIBRARY SERVICES

COUNTY LIBRARIAN:

Bernie Foran

The Library service continues to play a pivotal role for all communities in county Laois. Public Libraries continued to offer an efficient frontline service for all members providing them with access to books, media, online services and internet/wifi/printing facilities.

Public Libraries re-opened after public health restrictions due to Covid 19 on the 8th of May 2021 offering full lending services. The Library service continue to offer book deliveries to the housebound and cocooners and a “call and collect “ service which means customers can pre-order any books or library resources in advance and call to the library and collect them.

During Covid 19, Library services adapted and continued to operate with our online Library services supported by staff on a remote basis. The library continues to provide access and support the public to access all of our online material including Ebooks which continues to be very well used, with in excess of 35,000 online items issued during the period January-December 2021.

Capital Development

- **Portlaoise Library**

Works continued and resumed on the new Library during 2021 as guided by public health restrictions on Main Street, Portlaoise with completion of foundation works, piling, ground floor, first works blockwork and steel works. The contractor is Frank C . Murray and Sons Construction Ltd., Ballybritt, Roscrea. The new Library will provide over 1800 square meters of public space and will include children’s library, adult and local history sections, study areas, community meeting spaces, digital suite and exhibition space. The new Library development is part funded by the Department of Rural Community Development with a grant of €3 million euro and the URDF Project 40 funding of €2.7 million. The latest building programme completion date is now late Q3/early Q4 2022.



- **Rathdowney Library Roof Repair and Replacement**

Works commenced in September and were completed in December 2021 to repair and upgrade the roof in Rathdowney Library. The works were part funded by the national small scale capital grants programme for Public Libraries funded by Department of Rural and Community Development. Laois County Library were approved a grant of €100,000 towards the repair of the roof of the library.

Events and Programming

Library staff continued to provide events and activities on an online programme, producing and facilitating live videos and content featuring storytime and crafts for younger users, literature and local history talks. Regular events were hosted online via zoom and included music, health, history and parenting talks. The Library continues to promote literacy, wellbeing, culture and positive mental health throughout all of our social media posting, sharing links to HSE Creative Ireland Healthy Ireland, Culture, Heritage and Biodiversity and other local pages.

Age Friendly Activity Packs

Cathaoirleach Catherine Fitzgerald, launched the Laois County Library Service Age Friendly Activity Pack in February 2021. Library staff compiled and designed the packs including the booklet. These feel-good activity packs combined fun activities, stories, poems and puzzles. They also included well-wishes from some famous Laois personalities. The packs were distributed to cocooners, nursing homes, Sue Ryder Centres and various other outlets in Laois.



National Summer Reading Challenge-Summer Stars

With ongoing public health restrictions in place, Summer Stars 2021 programme offered an online and in-branch programme with selected online books and promotions for younger readers, quizzes, book readings and competitions. The Library service signed up 1,021 children in the county to the reading programme. During the months of June, July and August, we were delighted to welcome back our younger readers. For 2021, the Library service created and hosted a Library Storystroll in 6 outdoor public parks (and Abbeyleix bog). The Storystroll reproduced in full the children's book "Scouts Best Day Ever" by Jennifer Farley so that children and families could read along and then visit their local library to complete a treasure hunt and quiz.



First 5 Little Library Bags

Libraries in the county distributed a “First 5 little library bag” to each Early Learning Centre in the county during November and December. Each bag contained 5 books, one as Gaeilge and four in English and included other helpful resources developed by Barnardos. The initiative is a collaboration between Public Libraries, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and funded by the Dormant Accounts and will develop links between early learning care and the local library to encourage a love of books.



Europe Direct Portlaoise

Portlaoise Library has been successful in the recent call for Europe Direct centre’s 2021-2025 which will continue the Europe Direct Centre portfolio for another 5 year period in the county. The Europe Direct Centre at Portlaoise Library provides access to material (offline and online) covering a wide variety of topics, including: general information about how the EU works, information about the various EU institutions and agencies, the latest news about EU affairs and events, information about citizens rights in the EU. The centre receives funding for events and activities.



Historian in Residence/Decade of Centenaries

Laois County Library continued with the Historian in Residence scheme for 2021. Funded by Decade of Centenaries/Commemorations funding, the residency continues to focus on the heritage, culture and local history of Laois during this time.

In 2021 Laois County Library service were delighted to launch the publication of “Opening a Window on the Past”. Under the Decade of Centenaries program 2019-2020, supported by Creative Ireland Laois and Laois County Council, the County Library and Archives section engaged a historian in residence to research the role of Laois women during this historic decade (1913/1923). The residency explored the experiences of Laois women during this period and examined their contribution to events and impact on social change.

Regina Dunne was appointed under this scheme and using her research from Laois County Council Archives, Military Archives and other sources, she recounts the lives of two remarkable Laois women, Helen Roe and Lucy Franks. This publication looks at their shared belief in education and demonstrates their tenacity, vision and achievements that left lasting legacies in the county today. It also sheds light on education, society and culture in the period. The book was launched on 14th August at Bloom Head Quarters.



Ronnie Mathews Archive/Creative Ireland

Archival work commenced in 2021 on the Ronnie Matthews Collection. The collection, acquired earlier this year by the Council, will be processed in conjunction with Eneclann, Ireland’s leading history and heritage company. Ronnie Mathews, a well-known historian and author of several books on Portarlinton, had collected documents, maps and artefacts relating to the town over his whole life, and the collection also includes some items collected by his father. The material will now be carefully archived and catalogued by Eneclann Ltd., and arrangements made for any necessary conservation. Funding has been made available through the Creative Ireland Programme (2017 - 2022) for essential archiving and cataloguing work, as the materials are prepared to be made available for research and future display.



Library of Sanctuary Portlaoise

Portlaoise Library was named as the first public library of Sanctuary in March 2020. During 2021 the library engaged regularly with Laois Integration Network to celebrate our diverse community. In 2021, the library service featured a series on Facebook interviews with members of the international community in Laois as they speak about their home countries in Ireland. See below links

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzZkpU-IJmw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsVAAkh2Cjk>

Dormant Accounts Funding

The library service have been awarded Dormant Account Funding for three library projects below totaling €21,296

- Sanctuary Library project €8,100
- Supporting parents (parenting classes and resources) €6,480
- Sensory Library (Equipment and Resources) €6,716

Sensory Library

Laois Count Libraries recently introduced sensory library services and facilities. Funded by the Dormant Accounts Funding during 2020 and 2021, administered by the Department of Rural and Community Development, the funding has targeted library services to marginalised, socially excluded and disadvantaged communities.

The facilities in Mountmellick library include a Sensory Room which provides a relaxing, quiet, calming environment with light projections and water feature. Other Laois libraries including Abbeyleix, Mountrath and Rathdowney offer pop up sensory spaces. Mountmellick library now has on offer a Tover-tafel or “Magic table” which consists of a series of interactive light games, specially designed to help those with dementia, autism and learning disabilities. It is suitable for all ages. Games, projected on to a table with infrared sensors, respond to hand and arm movements. Both the sensory room and magic table can be booked for half hour sessions by ringing Mountmellick Library on 057 8644572 or emailing mountmellicklibrary@laoiscoco.ie Portarlinton and Abbeyleix Libraries also offer an interactive touch screen. Mountmellick and Portarlinton Libraries have a loanable Toy and Sensory Resource Collection. This is a great way for parents, teachers and SNAs to identify what works for them. This collection will soon be available in Rathdowney Library. Our catalogue for the Toy and Sensory Resource Collection has been delivered to all primary schools in the Laois area and to Public Health nurses. The catalogue is available from the libraries and online at <https://laois.ie/wp-content/uploads/Laois-Library-Sensory-Toy-Booklet.pdf>

Bookfund

The Book Fund for 2021 was €115,000.

National Performance Indicators 2020

No of Library visits per head of population per the 2016 census	0.93
No of items issued to borrowers in the year	113134
Library Active Members per head of population in 2020	0.09
Registered Members in the library	14402

TRANSPORT, WATER SERVICES, ENVIRONMENT AND EMERGENCY SERVICES STRATEGIC POLICY COMMITTEE

DIRECTOR OF SERVICES:

Simon Walton

SENIOR ENGINEER:

Adrian Barrett

<u>Members</u>	<u>Sectoral</u>
<i>Cllr. Paddy Bracken (Chair)</i>	<i>John Killeen, Development/Construction</i>
<i>Cllr. John Joe Fennelly</i>	<i>John Talbot, Agriculture/Farming</i>
<i>Cllr William Aird</i>	<i>Deirdre O'Connell Hopkins, Trade Union</i>
<i>Cllr Ben Brennan</i>	
<i>Cllr Noel Tuohy</i>	

In 2021, the Roads Department received road grants and budget funding of €27 million. Over the year additional funds were received over and above what was adopted in the roadworks scheme bringing the figure to €30M. The 2021 Roadworks Programme was progressed across all three Municipal Districts and is complete.

Significant additional funding was received during the 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.

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 – €220,00

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

2021 Specific improvement grant

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

Public Lighting

There are a total 9,500 lights in Laois. 60% of lights are now upgraded to LED resulting in 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. To date there have been 25 call-outs during the 2021/2022 Winter season.

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 out 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 1,000m² of short cut meadows in Portlaoise town environs, 1,800m² 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 and the Garda station roundabouts in Portlaoise was developed.

In 2021, the Portlaoise Municipal District Office in conjunction with Portlaoise Tidy Town, Irish Wildlife Trust and National Learning Network promoted 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 and the 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 is 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.

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.

Climate Change Adaptation Schemes and Drainage programme

Drainage works were carried out at the following locations:

- Woodgrove, Portlaoise,
- Aghnacross, 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.

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's direct labour staff.



The contract for the permanent replacement of the Bridge Street Bridge, Portlaoise was awarded in 2021 with works 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

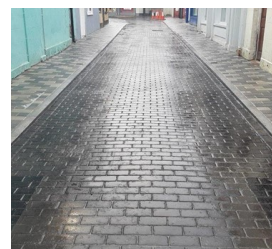
Portlaoise achieved 1st place out of 40 towns which were assessed as part of the Irish Business Against Litter League (Round 1). Portlaoise achieved second place overall in the final round of judging and achieved the status of “Cleaner than European Norms”.



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),
- Active Travel—Installation of bicycle stands in Lyster Square, Market Square, Main Street and Pairc and Phobail.



Graigucullen-Portarlington Municipal District (Eastern Area)

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

A total road surfacing length of 17.6 km was 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
- Clogrennan

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/Portarlinton Municipal District in 2021. These are some of the larger footpath projects:

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

Portarlinton:

- 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.

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 Blackwater 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 the bridges mentioned above, Laois County 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,
- Footpath extension at Forest, Mountrath,



- Smart Cycle Bench in Clonaslee,
- Smart Cycle Bench in Mountrath.

- Time limited parking was introduced to Mountrath in December 2021. To facilitate this the public car park at the Bank of Ireland was improved with resurfacing and an upgrade to the public lighting . These works costing €65,000 were funded under NTA Public Realm Improvement Projects 2021 .



- Funding in the amount of €19,364 was provided under the Outdoor Recreational Infrastructure Scheme to improve the existing walking track in Borris in Ossory.



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 involves 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.

National Performance Indicators 2020 PCSI

Ratings in Pavement Surface Condition Index (PSCI)

Road Class

Road Type	1—4 Rating	5—6 rating	7—8 rating	9—10 rating
A) Regional	17.8%	5.4%	63.7%	13
B) Local Primary	7.00%	26.1%	52.1%	12.1%
C) Local Secondary	9%	28.6%	54.1%	7.5%
D) Local Tertiary	17.4%	25.5%	36.9%	11.4%

	Regional Road Strengthening	Regional Road Resealing	Local Road Strengthening	Local Road Resealing
Length	17.2km	9.1Km	23.8km	29.9km
Amount expended	€4,715,464	€501,427	€3,170,484	€1,088,813

WATER SERVICES

A/SENIOR ENGINEER:

Tom O'Carroll

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. In relation to the Portlaoise Water Supply improvement Scheme, borewell PW09 at Coolbanagher has recently been developed and is currently on standby to be used when required. Also with respect to the Portarlinton Water Supply, 2 borewells at Doolough have been brought into production. Further progress was made in Durrow with the bringing into service of a borewell at Fermoy Water Treatment Plant.



Programmes

Disinfection/PH control programme – a boil water notice at The Strand WTP has been lifted, installation is process proved and commissioned. Civil works commenced in Derryguile, Kyle, Five Wells and Lough WTP. MEICA works progressed at Knocks, Derryguile, Lough and Ballyroan WTP. Upgrade works are to progress at Derrymoyle and Kilminchy WTP early in 2022. Containerised unit program – 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 Program – Castletown WwTP : new storm tank intended to be installed on site by the end of 2022.

Ballyroan WwTP Capacity Increase

Ballyroan wastewater treatment plant capacity was 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.

Networks and Water Conservation.

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

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, laboratory 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.

Existing customers include Irish Water for all public water supplies and wastewater schemes in Laois, Offaly County Council for private water supplies in Offaly and LAWPRO for river and lake catchment projects in the Midlands. In addition, the laboratory undertakes sampling and testing programmes for both the Water Services Department and Environment Department of Laois County Council.

There is ongoing engagement with WSTO, the Water Committee of the CCMA and the DPHLG to finalise the Business Plan for the implementation of the Network of Accredited Local Authority Laboratories Shared Service. Under this Plan the Laboratory will develop into a regional scale facility providing services to neighbouring local authorities. It is projected the sample throughput in the Laboratory will increase in the short-term from the current figure of 4,076 to 9,000. There is continued efforts to enhance our accreditation status by extending our accreditation scope and investing in modern instrumentation which will allow greater analytical capacity. During 2020-2021 there was a capital investment of € 157,000 in instrumentation.

Multi Annual Rural Water Programme 2019-2021

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

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

€174,189.93 was paid out to 39 applicants in respect of well grants.

Dangerous Structure and Places.

A Register of Dangerous Places/Structures is maintained by the local authority and 14 open files are on the register in Laois at 31st December 2021. All files are being monitored and progressed. Due to prolonged dereliction some properties are being re-referred for investigation and report

Welfare Units

Laois County Council and Irish Water implemented a pilot programme in 2020 to provide welfare units for staff. Each accessible unit contains office space, kitchen space, a changing room and a bathroom with shower. During the year, welfare units were provided in:

- Fermoyle WTP
- Kyle WTP
- Ballyroan WwTP
- Ballylinan WwTP
- Borris in Ossory WwTP
- Ballinakill WwTP
- Derryguile WTP

Performance Indicators 2020

% registered schemes monitored

82.61

ENVIRONMENT

A/SENIOR ENGINEER:

Tom O’Carroll

The key aims of the Council’s Environment Department are to promote sustainable development, to provide an environmentally efficient waste management infrastructure, to implement the Eastern Midlands Waste Management Plan and to maintain proper regulatory and monitoring systems for environmental protection and control of pollution.

The Environment Section is responsible for a range of statutory and non-statutory functions, which include:

- Environmental Complaint Management
- Waste Management
- Environmental Protection – Water, Air & Noise
- Litter Management – Prevention & Control
- Recycling & Civic Amenity Sites
- Planning
- Tidy Towns

Each year as part of Laois County Council’s commitments and obligations under EU and State rules, an RMCEI Plan (Recommended Minimum Criteria for Environmental Inspections) is developed outlining Laois County Council’s inspection objectives. The RMCEI contains non-binding criteria for the planning, carrying out, following up and reporting on environmental inspections. Its objective is to strengthen compliance with EU environment law and to contribute to its more consistent implementation and enforcement in all Member States.

Environmental Complaint Management

The Environment Section operates an Environmental Complaints Management System and a free-phone litter/dumping reporting facility. Complaints are categorised and referred to the appropriate personnel for investigation. The following is the breakdown of the 1,090 complaints received in 2021.

Complaint Type	Complaints	Investigated	Active	Resolved
Litter	184	184	2	182
Abandoned Vehicles	35	35	2	33
Waste Enforcement	680	680	22	658
Management & Infrastructure	11	11	0	11
Air	56	56	8	48
Water	67	67	4	63
Noise	32	32	2	30
Veterinary	25	25	3	22
Total	1,090	1,090	43	1,047

Waste Management

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.

Waste Enforcement

The Waste Enforcement Section is committed to maintaining and improving the high quality environment it has provided for the people of Laois through the enforcement of Waste Legislation and Regulation. The Section has had a successful year in resolving waste complaints working closely with colleagues in the Planning Enforcement Section. In 2021, 715 waste enforcement related complaints were received.

The Environment Section is responsible for reviewing and issuing new Waste Facility Permits and Certificate of Registrations. In 2021, 11 Waste Facility Permits and three Certificates of Registration were registered in Laois.

Waste Enforcement worked with the Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authority (WERLA) in tackling national waste enforcement priorities in 2021 and will be focusing on national waste enforcement priorities for 2022 as directed by Eastern and Midlands Region WERLA.

The National Waste Enforcement Priorities 2022 – 2024 are:

- Tackling Illegal Waste and Multi-Agency Sites of Concern
- Construction and Demolition Waste
- End of Life Vehicles and Metals
- Household and Commercial Waste
- Producer Responsibility Initiatives and local priorities

Education and Awareness

A number of campaigns and courses were delivered through social media and local advertising on furniture upcycling course, illegal waste collectors, recycling, reuse, food Waste.

Anti-Dumping Initiatives 2021

A number of projects were completed under the Anti-Dumping Initiative – Not in Our Nature, which was funded by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (DCCA). The initiatives included:

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 number 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 was completed on the clean-up of two large scale illegal dumping sites in Cloninagh & Errill Bogs.

Clean-Up Laois Week

Although it was not possible to hold the Clean up Laois Week this year due to the Covid 19 pandemic, the Environment Section continued to support Tidy Towns, local residents and clean up groups with the provision of litter pickers, gloves, hi-viz vests and refuse sacks. Environment staff liaised with these groups to arrange for the pick up and disposal of the collected rubbish.

During the year, the Litter Wardens, with the co-operation of community groups along with the Council appointed contractors, removed **540.78** tonnes of illegal dumped waste to authorised facilities.

Environmental Protection

Environmental Protection staff are involved in the implementation of legislation and policy regarding river water and groundwater quality, air quality and noise pollution as they apply in Laois.

A) Water Quality

- Approximately 101 Planning Applications were assessed and reports generated on water pollution prevention measures
- The Council continued to monitor discharge licenses to rivers and groundwater in 2021 under Section 4 of the Local Government (Water Pollution) Acts 1977 to 1990. 14 licences were operational in 2021.
- The Council also inspected septic tanks in accordance with the EPA's National Inspection Plan 2018 – 2021: Domestic Waste Water Treatment Systems. A total of 25 inspections were carried out in 2021. Six Advisory Notices were issued as a result of these inspections.
- Laois County Council received 67 water complaints in 2021, of which 4 complaints remain open. Complaints were investigated and carried out according to Public Health Advice and Covid

Restrictions.

- Laois County Council liaised with and supplied information to Central government, the EPA and LAWPRO in relation to the Draft River Basin Management Plans 2021-2027 and the Draft Water Framework Directive Planning Guidelines.

B) Air Quality

There was one active Air Emissions License in the county in 2021. Laois County Council received 56 air quality complaints in 2021. The nature of these complaints included agricultural odour problems and smoke nuisance. 60 smoky coal inspections were carried out in 2021. In collaboration with the EPA, an Air Quality Monitoring survey was carried out in the towns of Abbeyleix, Durrow and Cullahill. Live air quality data for all three monitoring stations in the county (Portlaoise, Mountrath and Emo Court) can be found at www.airquality.ie.



C) Noise Pollution

Laois County Council received 32 noise complaints in 2021. Some of these complaints were domestic in nature and in these cases the Council encourages neighbours to discuss the problem between themselves and to come to an agreed solution. Other complaints concerned commercial/industrial activities in the County.

Litter Management - Prevention & Control

Laois County Council has 3 full-time Litter Prevention and Control Officers.

The Council issued 79 fixed penalty notices in 2021, for breaches of Litter Pollution Act, 1997 and commenced legal proceedings in 5 cases.

In partnership with local Tidy Towns groups, the Environment Section 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 to 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.



Staff continued working with Tidy Towns groups to provide Mutt Mitt Dispensers along popular walking routes in many areas.

Landfill and Civic Amenity Sites

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 number 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. All waste licence monitoring is being carried out and is up to date.

The Portarlington Civic Amenity Site is operational under the management of Bord na Mona Recycling . The Environment Section carries out regular site inspections to ensure good levels of service are being provided.

The Council also operates 42 bring sites (bottle banks) throughout the County and maintenance of these sites is being maintained & monitored daily.

Planning

The Environment Section assesses applications received for planning permission for compliance with environmental legislation and best practice.

The typical issues that are considered from an environmental perspective are:

- The proper management of C&D/Site Clearance Waste
- Nutrient Management Plans
- Farmyard Management/Nitrates Directive
- Noise Impact Assessments
- Quarry Operations
- Anaerobic Digestion Plants

Tidy Towns & Community Groups:

The Council continued to work with community groups in keeping the county clean and tidy.

2021 Awards & Achievements:

A) Tidy Towns

Abbeyleix was named as Ireland's tidiest small town at the scaled-back Tidy Towns awards event in the RDS in November 2021.

B) IBAL Anti-Litter League – Cleaner than European Norms

Portlaoise were ranked in second position out of 40 towns/cities surveyed. Eight out of the ten town sites inspected achieved the top litter grade (Grade A) in Portlaoise. This has been its highest to date and is down to the cooperation between Laois County Council and Portlaoise communities and businesses.

Midlands Energy Agency Overview of Energy Usage in 2021

The main contributors to energy consumption in Laois County Council are public lighting and buildings. The SEAI Annual Report 2021 on Public Sector Energy Efficiency Performance, reports that the Council made a 46.8% saving by the end of 2021 against the 33% target by 2020

- The Council continued to work as the lead local authority in the Midlands Energy Agency. Roscommon County Council joined the MEA in 2021 aligning it with the CARO Midlands Region.
- Display Energy Certs for buildings visited by the public and with a floor area greater than 250m² in line with SI426 (2014) DECs were completed.
- Laois County Council was the lead applicant for Better Energy Communities Programme Grant Application for a range of projects in the Midlands.
- Energy Retrofit projects undertaken in Laois County Council buildings included retrofitting of LED lighting in County Hall, installation of solar panels in Portarlinton Leisure Centre, BMS upgrade for County Hall and Portlaoise Leisure Centre which equated to 323,511kWh of energy saved.
- Laois County Council continued in its participation of the OPW Optimising Power at Work Programme at County Hall and have saved 152,671kWh since baseline year.
- Laois County Council continued its programme of street light replacements and replaced an additional 2,539 existing SOX and SON lights with LED's which is in addition to the 900 lights that were retrofitted in 2020. Total kWh savings to Laois were in the order of 747,500kWhs in 2021.

National Performance Indicators 2020

Total no of households availing of a 3 bin service at 31/12/2020	% of households availing of a 3 bin service	Total no of pollution cases that were the subject of a complaint during 2020	Total no of pollution cases closed during 2020	Total no of pollution cases on hand at 31/12/2020
11,750	99.96	1,057	1,067	22

% area unpolluted or litter free	% area slightly polluted	% area moderately polluted	% area significantly polluted	% area grossly polluted
22	75	3	0	0

% of schools that have been awarded/renewed green flag status in the two years to 31/12/2020

45

HEALTH & SAFETY

HEALTH & SAFETY OFFICER:

Jim Bolger

The implementation of the Council's Safety Management System (SMS) was once again affected by the ongoing Covid 19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the Council responded by continually supporting employees as appropriate who were involved in frontline community support initiatives by the provision of Safe Systems of Work/Risk Assessments. Additionally, the Council's Covid 19 Response Plan was maintained, covering all aspects of the pandemic in relation to work practices. Covid 19 consultation continued through engagement with the Council's appointed Covid 19 representatives. As the Council became more accustomed to the implementation of Covid 19, controls and protocols were implemented for the ongoing exposure to operational risks and the Council continued the inspection programmes. While training programmes were adversely affected from time to time throughout the year, the Council met its statutory obligations.

LAOIS CIVIL DEFENCE

Laois Civil Defence is a volunteer based organisation whose members are proud to serve as a high quality back-up service, supporting the primary response agencies and the local community. Volunteers are multi-skilled and the main programmes of activity undertaken by the organisation are:

- First Aid- Provision of first aid and ambulance service
- Rescue Skills - Urban rescue, open country search for missing persons with Laois being one of the counties providing drones for aerial search
- Fire-fighting - Pumping floodwaters and supplying water to the community
- Radio Communications - Operation of four independent radio systems U.H.F., V.H.F., Marine Band Radio and Tetra. These systems are operated from our alised Operational Support Unit.

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.

Laois County Fire & Rescue Service attended **614** emergency incidents consisting of **265** fires, **239** special service incidents and **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 and 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.



Covid-19 meant that a reduced training programme was carried out following very detailed risk assessments and 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 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 a Fire Safety Assessment 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.

The Community Fire Safety Group also used text and WhatsApp messages to get fire safety messages out to as many people in the community as possible and this new system included the **569** community groups available to PPN.

Annual Report 2021

INFRASTRUCTURE, WATER SERVICES, ENVIRONMENT, EMERGENCY SERVICES & SPECIAL PROJECTS

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.

National Performance Indicators 2020

Cost per Capital

€52.87

Average time taken in minutes to mobilise fire brigades in respect of fire incidences in fire stations (full time)	Average time taken in minutes to mobilise fire brigades in respect of fire incidents in fire stations (retained)	Average time taken in minutes to mobilise fire brigades in respect of all other (non-fire) emergency incidents (full time)	Average time taken in minutes to mobilise fire brigades in respect of all other (non-fire) emergency incidents (retained)
N/A	5.55	N/A	5.30

% Fire cases first attended within 10 minutes	% Fire cases first attended after 10 minutes but within 20 mins	% Fire cases first attended after 20 minutes	% All other emergency incidents first attended within 10 mins	% All other emergency incidents first attendance after 10 mins but within 20 mins	% All other emergency incidents first attendance after 20 mins
34.20	52.87	12.93	34.94	54.62	10.44

HOUSING, REGENERATION AND PLANNING STRATEGIC POLICY COMMITTEE

A/DIRECTOR OF SERVICES:

Angela McEvoy

A/SENIOR ENGINEER:

Trevor Hennessy

SENIOR EXECUTIVE OFFICER:

Georgina Ireland

SENIOR SOCIAL WORKER:

Fionnuala Daly

Members

Cllr. Thomasina Connell (Chair)

Cllr. Mary Sweeney

Cllr. Caroline Dwane Stanley

Cllr. Paschal McEvoy

Cllr. Catherine Fitzgerald

Sectoral

Michael Kelly Jr, (Development/Construction)

Bobby Fitzpatrick (Business/Commercial)

Michael Cobbe (Community/Voluntary)

Sheelagh Coyle (Social Inclusion)

HOUSING SERVICES

The Core Objective for Housing is to ensure that all our citizens enjoy an adequate standard of housing accommodation appropriate to their needs, and as far as possible, in a location and tenure of their choice and to provide a responsive and supportive housing service for those in need of assistance.

Highlights during 2021

- Delivery of 108 units under Rebuilding Ireland.
- Acquisition of 40 units for social housing in various locations across the county.
- Leasing of 22 units for social housing in various locations across the county.
- Successful delivery of 255 grants for disabled and elderly people living in the county.
- The Vacant Homes Office took possession of 12 vacant houses in 2021 and the CPO process was initiated/ is ongoing in respect of a further 8 vacant properties.
- 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).

Report on SPC

The Housing Strategic Policy Committee met 5 times, in February, March, June, September and November 2021 at which various issues were discussed and noted by Members.

Rebuilding Ireland Programme 2018 – 2021

The provision of housing is a core function of Laois County Council. In addition to the management of approximately 2,251 units, the Council was tasked with delivering 627 new units during the plan period. The total number of units delivered end of 2021 was 593, with delivery of some units delayed by Covid 19 restrictions over a two-year period.

These units were provided through a variety of means including direct build, acquisitions, Part V, turnkeys, leasing and in partnership with Approved Housing Bodies (AHB’s).



21 direct build and turnkey capital schemes are currently in progress in Stradbally, Durrow, Rathdowney, Errill, Mountmellick, Ballyroan, Borris-in-Ossory, Killeen, Ballylynan, Doonane, Ballybrittas, Mountrath, Portarlinton and Portlaoise which are being progressed through the Department of Housing Capital Stage Approval process.

Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan

The RBI Home Loan was introduced 1st February 2018 in all local authorities, including Laois and concluded at the end of 2021. By then, 129 Home Loans were approved and 107 were declined.

Local Authority Home Loan (LAHL) Scheme

The Local Authority Home Loan (LAHL) Scheme is available nationwide and replaces the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan scheme, from 4th January 2022. Like the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan, applications will be for purchase of new or second-hand residential properties and for self-builds. It also includes purchase of homes through State schemes such as the Tenant Purchase Scheme and Affordable Housing Schemes.

Affordable Housing Act 2021 and ‘Housing for All’ 2022-2026

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

Housing Assistance Payment

HAP commenced in Laois on 1st December 2016. There were 901 tenancies active by 31st December 2021, with 320 of these having transferred from rent supplement. All HAP properties must be inspected within 8 months from the time that the first HAP payment is made to the landlord. A total of 236 inspections were made in 2021.

The Homeless HAP Place Finder role was created in December 2018 to support homeless households in securing a HAP tenancy. In 2021, 59 homeless households were accommodated through HAP.

Traveller Accommodation

Laois County Council's Traveller Accommodation Programme 2019-2024 set a target for the delivery of 37 No. units of standard local authority housing which has already been achieved. The Programme also provided a target for the refurbishment of Oak Park Halting Site, with the provision of three additional bays. Construction works commenced on Oak Park in January 2022.

Estate Management

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.

Laois County Council's Strategic Plan for People with Disabilities 2021 – 2026

Laois County Council's Strategic Plan for People with Disabilities 2021 – 2026 was adopted in December 2021. The Strategy will form an integral part of the Housing Service Delivery Plans and will promote and support the delivery of accommodation for people with disabilities using all appropriate housing supply mechanisms.

Homeless Services/Emergency Accommodation

Laois County Council continued in 2021 to provide emergency accommodation, where appropriate, to households presenting as homeless. All housing supply mechanisms are utilised in seeking to accommodate those who are assessed as homeless.

Accommodation and supports are provided by Laois County Council to homeless individuals with complex needs, in accordance with the Housing First National Implementation Plan 2022 – 2026. A target for the provision of 35 units of accommodation over five years is included in this plan.

Private Grants

In 2021, Private Grants totalling €1,294,412 were paid out for Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes for Older People and People with a Disability. Through effective management of the funding available and despite lockdown measures the Housing Section has been able to keep the scheme open for the year.

Housing Needs Assessment

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.

Approved Housing Bodies

Approved Housing Bodies (AHB) provide and manage social rented housing to people who are listed on the Laois Housing List.

Laois County Council has a very positive working relationship with the Approved Housing Bodies who are active in the County.

National Performance Indicators 2020

Social Housing Stock

No of dwellings in the ownership of the Local Authority at 01/01/2020	2,180
No of dwellings added to the Local Authority owned stock during 2020 (whether constructed or acquired)	49
No of Local Authority dwellings sold in 2020	4
No of Local Authority dwellings demolished in 2020	0
No of dwellings in the ownership of the Local Authority at 31/12/2020	2,225
No of Local Authority owned dwellings planned for demolition under a DHLGH approved scheme	0

Housing Vacancies

% of the total number of Local Authority owned dwellings that were vacant on 31/12/2020 2.65

Average Re-letting time and cost; Maintenance Cost by Unit

Average time from date of vacation of dwelling to the date in 2020 when a new tenancy had commenced	18.61 wks
Average cost expended on getting the re-tenanted dwellings ready for re-letting (€)	9,576.85
Average per unit expenditure in 2020 on repair and maintenance of LA Housing (€)	761.34

Private Rented Sector Inspections

Total no of registered tenancies in the LA area at the end of June 2020	4,621
No of rented dwellings inspected in 2020	445
% inspected dwellings in 2020 not compliant with standard regulations	100
No of compliant and non compliant dwellings that became compliant during 2020	10

Long term homeless adults

Number of adults in emergency accommodation that are long-term homeless as a % of the total number of homeless adults in emergency accommodation at end of 2020	50.00
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PLANNING

A/SENIOR PLANNER:

David O’Hara

SENIOR EXECUTIVE PLANNER:

Donal Kiely

The overall objective of the Planning Department is to implement the provisions of the Planning Acts and provide appropriate support measures in order to promote the physical, social and economical well being of the county so that living standards are protected and raised, and work opportunities fostered and created, having regard to the principles of sustainability.

The Planning Department can be broken down into 5 separate areas:

- i) Development Management
- ii) Forward Planning
- iii) Planning Enforcement
- iv) Building Control
- v) Unfinished Housing Estates

(i) 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.

Local Performance Indicators 2020

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

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

Customer Service Initiatives

2021 saw the continuation of the scanning of planning applications as they are received by the Planning Authority. Throughout 2021, the public were able to access all planning applications on-line within two weeks of the Planning Authority receiving them.

424 pre-planning meetings were held in 2021, at which members of the public had an opportunity to discuss planning matters with a planner prior to submitting a planning application. The Planners also facilitated the public by holding a number of pre-planning meetings on site.

41 Section 5 applications were processed by Laois County Council in 2021.

The Planning website continues to be a successful tool for engagement with the public - approximately 31,800 hits in 2021.

Licensing of Outdoor Events

An outdoor event is defined as a public performance which takes place wholly or mainly in the open air or in a structure with no roof or a partial, temporary or retractable roof, a tent or similar temporary structure and which consists of music, dancing, displays of public entertainment or any activity of a like kind. The organisers of such events are required to obtain a licence from the Planning Authority where the audience comprises of 5,000 or more people.

No events occurred in 2021 due to the Covid19.

(ii) 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 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 Draft Laois County Development Plan was put on public display from 12th January 2021 to 23rd March 2021. 154 submissions were received by the Planning Authority during this period.

The 2nd Chief Executive Report was circulated to Councillors on the 22nd June 2021 for their consideration and discussed at a Special Meeting on the 1st September 2021.

The Proposed Material Amendments were subject to consultation in September and October 2021. 36 submissions were received, with the 3rd Chief Executive Report issued to Councillors on the 17th November 2021.

This was considered by Councillors at a Special Meeting on the 25th January 2022, with the intention of the Planning Authority to adopt the plan and bring it into effect in early 2022.

Local Authority Development (Part 8 projects)

Planning reports were prepared for the following Part 8 Local Authority projects and approved by the Council during 2021:

1. Fire Station, Stradbally
2. Abbeyleix Road Improvements

Local Area Planning

Stradbally Road Lands - Masterplan

Consultants were engaged to prepare a masterplan for the Tyrrell landbank at Stradbally Road, Portlaoise to address housing, recreation and amenity and connectivity with surrounding land uses. A Draft of the Masterplan went on public display until 25th October 2021. A report on the submissions was prepared and will be presented to the Portlaoise MD for their endorsement in 2022.

Portlarlinton Vision/Urban Framework

The preparation of a Portarlinton Regeneration Strategy concluded in 2021 with a vision/urban framework for the Town Centre on the following:-

- Land uses / dereliction and vacancy
- Heritage and heritage buildings – Market House
- Public realm

Following consultation in May 2021, the strategy was endorsed at the Municipal District meeting in September 2021.

(iii) 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.

(iv) 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.

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

(v) Vacant Sites

10 sites were entered onto the Vacant Sites register at the 1st January 2021. These related to sites within Portlaoise(6), Portarlinton,(3) and Graiguecullen(1). Valuations have been received in relation to the sites.

(vi) 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 buildings were inspected (at varying stages of construction) - an inspection rate of **12.8%**

(vii) Unfinished Housing Estates-

Laois County Council is responsible for the taking in charge of estates. In 2021, 5 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.

National Performance Indicators 2020

New Buildings Inspected

New Buildings Inspected as a percentage of new buildings notified to the local authority	No. of local authority planning decisions which were the subject of an appeal to An Bord Pleanála that were determined by the Board in 2020	% of the determinations that confirmed (with or without variation) the decision made by the local authority
16.61	6	100

Enforcement cases closed as resolved

Total no. of planning cases referred to or initiated by the local authority during 2020 that were investigated	Total no. of cases closed during 2020	% closed cases dismissed or statute barred or exempted development	% closed cases resolved to the local authority's satisfaction through negotiations	% closed cases due to enforcement proceedings	Total no. planning cases being investigated as at 31/12/2020
94	129	48.84	1.55	49.61	165

Cost per Capital of Planning Service

Cost per Capita
€24.95

Applications for Fire Safety Certificates

% applications for fire safety certificates received in 2020 that were decided within 2 months of their receipt	% applications for fire safety certificates received in 2020 that were decided within an extended period agreed with the applicant
21.31	57.38

HERITAGE

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.

Actions of the County Heritage Plan

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

Heritage Awareness events

Heritage Awareness programmes were organised 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 now been downloaded almost 30,000 times.

Connecting Communities

The "Connecting Communities" project continued in 2021 with a focus on the monastic site at 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 (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.

Support continued for the 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 advertisements aired on Midlands 103 throughout the year with a series of special programmes broadcast for Biodiversity.

Just Transition Fund Project

A major new project linking conservation of medieval heritage and biodiversity has been launched by Laois and Offaly County Councils. The three year project was 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 the 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;
- Heritage Input to conservation of the historic Portarlington Market House as part of the wider Portarlington Rural Regeneration Fund Project.

Community Monuments Fund

The National 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 in 2021.

An additional project delivered in partnership with Carlow County Museum saw the grave effigy of medieval

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	Dr Eoin Sullivan, Gort Archaeology	€22,174
Killabban Church Interpretation	Killabban Monastic Site Committee	€11,594
Total CMF 21		€199,363

knight Robert Hartpole conserved and returned from Portarlington 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. 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
BHIS21/LS02	Thatched House, Durrow	€12,500
BHIS21/LS03	Thatched House, Fisherstown	€3,473
BHIS21/LS06	St Paul's French Church, Portarlinton	€6,850
BHIS21/LS07	Thatched House, Jamestown	€6,000
BHIS21/LS09	Thatched House, Ballyboden	€1,000
BHIS21/LS10	Thatched House, Graigue	€12,250
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
Lea Church of Ireland Church	Portarlinton Union of Churches	€50,000
Presentation Convent, Portlaoise	Sophia Housing Association	€50,000
Total HSF 21	Thatched House, Fisherstown	€100,000

Section 57 Declarations

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

BROADBAND

Laois Digital Strategy 2020-2024

Laois County Council prepared and adopted its first Digital Strategy in 2020. Implementation of this strategy commenced in 2021 with the following projects: -

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. Oisin House Rossmore, Killeshin
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 are currently outdoor facilities at all locations but will have indoor availability once Public Health Guidance allows.

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

WiFi4EU

WiFi4EU is a project developed by the European Union that intends to bring free WiFi to local communities. Municipalities that apply, avail of 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 commenced rolling out WiFi4EU in Portlaoise, Portarlington, Abbeyleix and Mountmellick. This project was tendered in 2021 and Network Infrastructure Services were commissioned to deliver this project. The project is currently underway and will be completed in 2022.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

HEAD OF FINANCE:

Gerry Murphy

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTANT:

Julie Bergin

The Finance Department is responsible for the following services:

Motor Taxation, Accounts Payable, Revenue Collection(Rates, Fire charges, Rents, Loans, Development contributions), NPPR, Internal Audit, Preparation of Annual Budgets and Financial Statements, Financial Management and all ancillary matters

Commercial Rates

The General Annual Rate on Valuation was .2217

Prompt Payment of Accounts

The Council complies with the terms of the Prompt Payments Act as amended by the European Communities (Late Payment in Commercial Transactions) Regulations.

Total number of late payments in excess of €250: nil

Commercial Rates Waiver Scheme 2021

Circular Fin 01/2021 dated 27th January 2021 set out the guidelines for the first quarter 2021 for business affected by the covid 19 pandemic restrictions. This was further extended to the third quarter of 2021.

Circular Fin 20/2021 dated 21st October 2021 set out the guidelines for the final quarter 2021 for business affected by the covid 19 pandemic restrictions. This was targeted at commercial rates waiver to support certain sectors and was agreed by Government for the final quarter of 2021.

Commercial rates were waived for the period 1st January 2021 to 31st December 2021 to the eligible businesses. Laois County Council applied the waiver to 989 commercial rate accounts with a total value of €3,827,742.92.

National Performance Indicators 2020

5 Year summary of revenue account balance

2016	€-198,369.00
2017	€-128,095.00
2018	€-68,333.00
2019	€5,009.00
2020	€70,614.00

5 year summary of % collection levels for major revenue sources

The individual % figures for each of (a) Rates, (b) Rent & Annuities and © Housing Loans, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Rates	76	75	76	80	71
Rent & Annuities	95	96	96	96	93
Housing Loans	65	68	72	75	72

MOTOR TAXATION

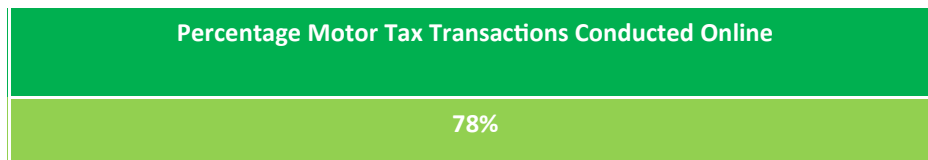
The Council collects vehicle licence duties within its functional area on behalf of the Department of Transport including processing conversions, trailer licences, registration books & trade plates. Staff also deal with matters that cannot be resolved online i.e. issues in relation to vehicle ownership, acquisition, cessation of exemptions, release of data as per legislative framework and ad-hoc queries. This section also manages the Cash Office for receipting purposes of all monies for the local authority.

Throughout the pandemic, staff continued to deliver a high standard of service to its Laois based customers – initially and during level 5 via postal service/dropbox but, for the most part, our public counters were open to customers with strict measures in place for the protection of our customers and staff. Staff experienced a dramatic increase in phone queries and were available to assist customers with their enquiries. The total number of transactions carried out by this office in 2021 is 16,172.

Vehicle Licences

Gross income for the year is €2,609,312.00, a reduction of €740,318.00, compared with €3,349,630 in 2020. The noted fall in income is expected from an increase in online transactions and especially during pandemic times.

National Performance Indicator 2020



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 requirement 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 land and housing interests and in maintaining the Property Asset Register.

Annual Financial Statement 2021

Revenue Account	Gross Expenditure 2021	Income 2021	Net Expenditure 2021
Expenditure by Division	€	€	€
Housing & Building	17,231,591	17,853,896	(622,305)
Roads Transportation & Safety	23,775,618	17,594,741	6,180,877
Water & Sewerage	4,440,020	4,391,371	48,650
Development Incentives & Controls	10,130,917	6,568,400	3,562,518
Environmental Protection	9,235,265	2,224,286	7,010,979
Recreation & Amenity	5,589,332	1,215,040	4,374,292
Agriculture, Education, Health & Welfare	857,181	366,837	490,344
Miscellaneous	<u>13,310,552</u>	<u>13,042,632</u>	267,920
Total Expenditure/Income	84,570,476	63,257,202	
Net Cost of programmes to be funded from Rates and the Local Government Fund			21,313,274
Rates			14,367,844
Pension Levy			-
Local Government Fund—General Purpose Grant			9,063,079
Surplus for Year before Transfers			2,117,649
Transfers from/(to) Reserves			(2,042,989)
Overall Surplus for year			74,660
General Reserve at 1st January 2021			70,614
General Reserve at 31st December 2021			145,274
Capital Account			
Balance at 01/01/2021			8,718,712
Grants			24,110,754
Other Income			6,768,432
Transfer from/to Revenue			1,456,129
Expenditure			(31,889,752)
Balance at 31/12/2021			9,164,275

FINANCE, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM

ENTERPRISE, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM STRATEGIC POLICY COMMITTEE

HEAD OF FINANCE/DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:

Gerry Murphy

HEAD OF LOCAL ENTERPRISE (Local Enterprise Office):

Evelyn Reddin

Members

Cllr. Conor Bergin (Chair)

Cllr. Aisling Moran

Cllr. Seamus McDonald

Cllr. Aidan Mullins

Sectoral

Pat Hennessy (Agriculture/Farming Sector)

Pat Culleton (Development/Construction)

Bernie Everard (Business/Commercial)

P.J. Phelan (Community Voluntary)

Deirdre O'Connell Hopkins (Trade Union)

The Business Support Unit of Laois County Council forms a central point of contact for existing and prospective businesses. Its aim is 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 devastating impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on every aspect of business and society. The Business Support Unit responded to the Covid crisis by working closely with the business community and encouraging them to avail of relevant supports for their businesses. These supports were designed to help businesses stabilise and adapt to the evolving situation, in preparation for getting back on the road to recovery. Its ongoing focus was to ensure that Laois businesses were in the strongest position possible in the face of this unprecedented and continuously evolving crisis. The Unit also continued to work with businesses impacted by Brexit and provided a range of supports to help micro-enterprises prepare for the challenges posed.

Despite these challenges, 2021 was a very productive year. 2021 saw a significant increase in participants on training courses, a very high demand for mentoring and an increase in the uptake of all incentives and business supports including the new Green for Micro programme.

Facade Enhancement Scheme- Portlaoise & Portarlinton



2021 saw the extension of the Portlaoise Façade Enhancement Scheme to Bull Lane, Lyster Square and Lyster Lane. The scheme assisted property owners to improve their premises by painting the exterior of both commercial and residential dwellings. Laois County Council contributed up to 75% of the approved costs of

the works up to a maximum of €750. The Scheme was also launched in Portarlinton and 47 property owners in French Church Street, Main Street and Market Square applied for the scheme.

Business Incentive Schemes

2021 was a busy year with a large volume of businesses applying for both the Shop Front Grant Accessibility Scheme and the Business Incentive Scheme. 19 businesses from around the county were approved for the Shop Front Grant Scheme which gives businesses the opportunity to improve/repair their shop façade. It also gives businesses an opportunity to make the entrances to their shops more accessible to people with mobility issues. A further 2 businesses applied for the Business Incentive Scheme which provides grant relief on commercial rates for eligible vacant properties over a three year period.

Support Local Campaign

The Business Support Unit continued to work collaboratively with Portlaoise Town Team and other major stakeholders to support and promote Laois businesses. 2021 saw the introduction of new lamp post banners on all the approach roads into Portlaoise which promoted the distinctive features of the town to visitors and tourists alike. A Christmas campaign was launched to encourage people to support Laois businesses in a safe manner with numerous Christmas markets taking place all around the county over the festive period. The Christmas lighting and street sound system were extended and improved in Portlaoise in 2021.

Town and Village Streetscape Enhancement Scheme 2021

The focus of this scheme is to support the upgrade and enhancement of shop front facades and residential facades within selected rural towns/village centres.

Laois County Council received an allocation of €260,000 in 2021 for the scheme. Mountrath, Mountmellick, Rathdowney, Ballinakill & Ballylinan are the towns and villages chosen for this scheme. The scheme covers commercial, residential and unoccupied premises.

The Business Support Unit liaised with business groups and tidy town representatives and a total of 66 applications were received in respect of the scheme in 2021.

J17 National Enterprise Park

2021 saw the completion of works at J17 National Enterprise Park with the installation of public lighting, as well as the completion of footpaths and cycle paths connecting the park to Clonminam Business Park. Further sites were sold in 2021 to companies who are at various stages of development. Laois County Council will continue to support these companies through the planning process and will also continue to market and promote J17 to international and national companies in 2022.



The Cube, Low Carbon Centre of Excellence

Work continued in 2021 in relation to The Cube Low Carbon Centre of Excellence, which will be located in Church Street, Portlaoise. Since the appointment of The Cube Director, Niall Kelly, significant progress has been made in the establishment of a multifaceted network of partners which will form the basis for the core delivery of services in the Cube. This includes collaborations with Trinity college, the International Energy Research Centre at UCC, the ESB, Community Power and Carbon Action, among others. The Covid pandemic hampered the completion of the building, however, despite this, construction commenced in 2021 and the estimated completion date is April 2022.

The Cube at Portlaoise will be a multi- point incubation hub for the development of a Low Carbon Centre of Excellence, assisting in attracting and developing companies with a low carbon focus.

Supporting our clients

Financial Grants

During the year, the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) which forms part of the Business Support Unit provided grant assistance to eligible Laois businesses to help fund start-up costs, business expansion plans, entry into new markets and job growth.

In 2021, €405,582 was approved in grant aid to 18 Laois companies with potential to create 55 additional full time jobs.

Training

The LEO training programme was delivered primarily online in 2021. In total, over 74 training programmes were delivered to 1,153 participants. This included 12 Start Your Own Business Programmes to 163 participants.

Mentoring

A total of 291 mentoring sessions were managed between experienced mentors and client companies in specific areas such as finance and social media. 324 participants availed of mentoring.

Trading Online Vouchers

Designed to assist small businesses to trade more online under the National Digital Strategy, the Trading Online Voucher scheme offers companies training and advice, along with the financial assistance of up to €2,500. A total of 70 no. vouchers were approved to the value of €153,747.

Micro finance Ireland

Micro Finance Ireland provide small loans through the Government's Micro-enterprise Loan Fund. The purpose of the fund is to help start ups and established businesses to get the finance they need for their business.

Under a partnership between Micro-finance Ireland and the Local Enterprise Offices, business loans of €2,000 to €25,000 are available through the Local Enterprise Office offering a preferential interest rate and flexibility on repayment terms on the loan. Companies must be less than 10 employees and a turnover of less than €2m to apply.

In 2021, Laois LEO assisted **10** companies to access loans through the MFI fund and arranged for follow on mentoring where needed.

Lean for Micro Programme

Lean for Micro is designed to encourage clients to adopt Lean business principles in their organisations to increase competitiveness. The Lean programme offers a framework to identify and eliminate wasteful processes and this is key to becoming and remaining competitive in business.

In 2021, Laois LEO supported **10** Laois based companies to implement LEAN in their business by engaging in the full LEAN for Micro Programme.

Green for Micro Programme

Laois LEO is promoting the green economy through the roll out of the Green for Micro Programme which is designed to help businesses prepare for the changes that are coming down the line. The Green For Micro programme offers a free two-day consultancy package with an independent industry expert who will set out a custom plan for the participating businesses.

In 2021, Laois LEO supported **16** businesses to engage in the Green for Micro Programme. Typical projects looked at resource use and identified opportunities for cost and emission savings. Other projects also involved carbon footprint analysis and implementation of simple environmental management systems.



Management Development Programme

This Management Development Programme is the Local Enterprise Office's most comprehensive offering to small businesses in Laois. The objective of the programme is to enable companies to become stabilised, ready for growth and to further improve competitive advantage. This programme is for established owners-managers planning for the next stage of their business cycle. It is targeted at businesses that are established a minimum of 3 years such that the caliber of participants is high and business needs are similar.

10 Laois businesses completed this programme in 2021.

Brexit Support

LEO continues to assist small businesses that are impacted by Brexit. Working in partnership with Enterprise Ireland, Local Authorities and other state agencies. LEO offer a range of supports to help micro-enterprises and small businesses prepare for the challenges posed by Brexit.

Collaborating with Stakeholders

Midland Food and Drink Programme

Laois LEO collaborated with the Midland LEOs of Offaly, Westmeath and Cavan to lead out a comprehensive training and development programme which was targeted at 20 up and coming food and drinks businesses from across the midlands. This included 5 companies from Laois: Seccoto Coffee; The Merry Mill; The Village Dairy; 12 Acres Brewing and Flavour Safari.



The participants worked through 5 modules which covered Food Development Opportunities, Developing Exports, Introducing Lean, New Product Design and Marketing. A significant programme of 1-1 mentoring was also provided.

Midlands “Engenuity” Engineering Cluster Programme

This is an ongoing collaborative initiative of the Midlands LEOs to develop engineering standards and to encourage shared learning and cooperation amongst engineering focused firms in the midlands.

As part of this initiative, 4 Laois based firms exhibited at the National Manufacturing & Supply Chain Conference and Exhibition at the RDS Simmonscourt in Dublin in November 2021.

Promoting Entrepreneurship

LEO co-ordinated a series of enterprise programmes and events that promoted entrepreneurship across all sectors which included:

- **Local Enterprise Week**
As part of our ongoing commitment to enterprise in the county, a series of free seminars were held during Enterprise Week in the first week of March with over 80 local entrepreneurs taking part. Due to Covid-19, all seminars and events were held virtually and there were also a number of large national events which took place which Laois entrepreneurs could avail of.
- **National Enterprise Awards**
Integrileads Ltd was nominated to represent Laois in the 2020/2021 National Enterprise Awards. The national final was held virtually from the Mansion House, Dublin on the 11th February 2021. Based out of the Slieve Bloom HQ co-working hub, Integrileads offers an innovative appointment setting service for national and international companies in the technology sector.
- **National Women’s Enterprise Day**
Female entrepreneurs across Laois registered for National Womens Enterprise Day 2021 which was held virtually on the 7th October and was titled ‘Build the Future’. It was hosted by MC Aine Kerr and the programme of events covered how to build the future of a business, covering topics like how to get started, internalisation, finding new markets, trading effectively online, innovation, networking and one-to-one business advice clinics.

Building for the Future—Student Enterprise Programmes

In 2021, an important part of Local Enterprise Office Laois’s work is fostering an enterprise culture in Laois and encouraging people to consider entrepreneurship as a viable career option. LEO strongly encourages youth entrepreneurship through the Student Enterprise Awards Programme. Over 300 students from 7 Laois second level schools took part in the 2020/2021 programme which encourages students to research, set up and run their own business with the help of the student enterprise co-ordinator. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, the County Finals and the National Finals were held virtually. Laois was represented by ‘O-Glo’ from St. Mary’s CBS Portlaoise at the National Final which was held in May 2021 where they won first prize in the **Most Effective use of Social Media** . The winning students were Colm Byrne, Aaron Dooley and Adam Ramsbottom who worked under the guidance of their teacher, Deirdre Moore. Their enterprise manufactures handmade candle holders using poured concrete which is fired and spray painted.



National Performance Indicator 2020

No of trading online voucher applications approved by the LEO in 2020 per 100,000 population	No of those trading online vouchers that were drawn down in 2020 per 100,000 population	No of participants who received mentoring from 01/01/2020 to 31/12/2020 per 100,000 population
207.7996	63.7567	354.2038

TOURISM

In 2021 Laois County Council continued to promote Laois by supporting a range of initiatives , working with state agencies and continuing to support the Board of Laois Tourism in their activities.

Laois Tourism

The Council supported the Board of Laois Tourism in 2021 with their work in promoting Laois. O’Connell Marketing Consultants were contracted by Laois Tourism to work with the Board in the marketing and promotion of 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.

Promoting the County

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

Weatherproofing & Outdoor Dining Project

Laois County Council in partnership with Fáilte Ireland will provide weatherproof facilities to enable year-round outdoor dining in Portlaoise and Durrow to continue to support the recovery of the tourism and hospitality sector.

Timahoe Heritage Centre

Under the Town & Village Grants Scheme, works have commenced on the conservation and upgrading of the community-run Heritage Centre in the former Church of Ireland in Timahoe. These works are to protect the fabric of the historic building and to provide facilities and heritage interpretation for tourists and local people.

Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trails

Coillte in association with Laois and Offaly County Councils continued to work on the development of the Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Project. There are now 11km of blue, 12km of Red and 2km of Black trails completed in Laois

Tourism Destination Towns Fund

Work commenced on the Tourism Destination Town Project for Portlaoise in 2021, which includes

finalising the proposals for the script, planning and design of wayfinding and interpretation signage for the town centre. The Paint Enhancement Scheme also commenced in the town. Civil and landscape works were completed on Bull Lane as part of the overall project.

Barrow Blue Way

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 Barrow Blueway Economic Plan was completed and launched in July. Its aim is to inform, guide and encourage community and business initiatives that will maximise the opportunity the Blueway presents for Laois and Kildare.

Festivals & Events:

With the Covid 19 pandemic ongoing throughout 2021, all of the large festivals held annually in the county were cancelled. However, some of the events that took place included the five-day Rás ná mBan ladies race. On Friday September 10th, the 3rd day of the race took place in Laois with the participants going through Crettyard, Stradbally, Portlaoise, Mountmellick, Rosenallis, Clonaslee, Kinnitty and The Cut on the Slieve Bloom Mountains where the race finished. A presentation of jerseys to the winning cyclist took place on the day. The Twin Trees Heywood Art & Culture Festival took place from August 18th to 20th. Laois County Council also supported various Christmas Markets across the county in December.

MY PAY, LOCAL GOVERNMENT SHARED SERVICES CENTRE/PAYROLL & SUPERANNUATION

DIRECTOR OF SERVICES:

John Forde

The project is currently running on schedule and within budget. There are currently 86 employees based in the Shared Services Centre. Waves 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 have been completed on schedule with Laois, Offaly, Longford, Roscommon, Westmeath, Leitrim, Galway, Carlow, Monaghan, Cavan, Kildare, Meath, Kilkenny, Louth, South Dublin, Tipperary, Kerry, Wicklow, Sligo, Mayo, Clare, Fingal, Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown, Donegal and Wexford County Councils along with Limerick and Waterford County and City Councils, Cork and Galway City Councils and the LGMA are now live.

The following are the statistics on the project up to the end of December 2021:

Value of Payments	€5,166m
Number of Payments	6,021,176
Number of Pay Groups Paid	12,328
Number of Payroll Runs	7,116

Work is well underway to bring Cork County Council on board in June 2022 as part of Wave 6. Work is ongoing with Dublin City Council with a view to bringing them on board in 2023.

The Superannuation element of the project has commenced:

- There are currently 20 Local authorities live for pension services with a plan in place to bring the remainder on board by 2023.
- MyPay is now administering the new Single Public Service Pension Scheme for the Local Authority Sector.

MyPay successfully maintained the ISAE 3402 standard. This is an internationally recognised standard for service organisations which must be renewed annually.

**TITLE, PURPOSE AND NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF EACH COMMITTEE AND JOINT COMMITTEE AND
THE NUMBER OF MEETINGS OF EACH COMMITTEE, JOINT COMMITTEE AND JOINT POLICING
COMMITTEE HELD DURING THE PERIOD JANUARY TO DECEMBER 2021**

Name of Committee	Members Elected	Number of Meetings
Local Community Development Committee	Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor John King Councillor Conor Bergin	11
Joint Policing Committee	Councillor Pdraig Fleming Councillor Paddy Bracken Councillor Seamus McDonald Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald Councillor James Kelly Councillor Ben Brennan Councillor Caroline Dwane Stanley Councillor John King Councillor P J Kelly Councillor Thomasina Connell Councillor Aisling Moran Councillor Conor Bergin	4
Heritage Forum	Councillor Pdraig Fleming Councillor William Aird	3
Placenames Committee	Councillor Paddy Bracken Councillor Noel Tuohy Councillor Mary Sweeney Councillor John King Councillor P J Kelly Councillor Aisling Moran	6
Audit Committee	Councillor Pdraig Fleming Councillor Aisling Moran	4
Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee	Councillor Mary Sweeney Councillor John King Councillor P J Kelly Councillor Paddy Bracken Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald Councillor James Kelly	3
Kyletalesha Monitoring Committee	Councillor Paddy Bracken Councillor Thomasina Connell Councillor Aisling Moran	0
Rural Water Monitoring Committee	Councillor Pdraig Fleming Councillor P J Kelly Councillor Conor Bergin	5

**TITLE, PURPOSE AND NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF EACH COMMITTEE AND JOINT COMMITTEE AND
THE NUMBER OF MEETINGS OF EACH COMMITTEE, JOINT COMMITTEE AND JOINT POLICING
COMMITTEE HELD DURING THE PERIOD JANUARY TO DECEMBER 2021**

Name of Committee	Members Elected	Number of Meetings
Public Events Committee	Councillor Ben Brennan Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor James Kelly Councillor Thomasina Connell Councillor Aisling Moran	0
Twinning Committee	Councillor Padraig Fleming Councillor James Kelly Councillor Conor Bergin	1

OUTSIDE BODIES—JANUARY TO DECEMBER 2021

Name of Committee	Members Elected
Association of Irish Local Government	Councillor John Joe Fennelly Councillor John King Councillor Aisling Moran
Laois & Offaly Education & Training Board	Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald Councillor Padraig Fleming Councillor Mary Sweeney Councillor Willie Aird Councillor John King Councillor Caroline Dwane Stanley
AGM of Irish Public Bodies Mutual Insurances Ltd	Councillor P J Kelly
Laois Arts Theatre Company Ltd	Councillor Mary Sweeney Councillor Thomasina Connell Councillor Noel Tuohy
Board of Abbeyleix Heritage Trust	Councillor John Joe Fennelly
Local Authority Members Association	Councillor Seamus McDonald
Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly	Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald Councillor Aisling Moran
Laois Partnership Company Ltd	Councillor Padraig Fleming Councillor P J Kelly
Portarlington Leisure Centre	Councillor Padraig Fleming (up until 27/09/2021) Councillor Aidan Mullins
Laois Leisure Limited	Councillor Aidan Mullins (since 27th September 2021) Councillor Noel Tuohy (since 27th September 2021)
Portlaoise Enterprise Centre	Councillor John Joe Fennelly Councillor William Aird Councillor Mary Sweeney
Portarlington Enterprise Centre	Councillor Aidan Mullins Councillor P J Kelly
Board of Treo Nua Limited	Councillor Noel Tuohy
Dublin Mid-Leinster Regional Forum	Councillor Padraig Fleming Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor Thomasina Connell
Midland Regional Drugs Task Force	Councillor Thomasina Connell
Portlaoise Innovation Centre	Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald (up until June 28th 2022) Councillor Conor Bergin (since June 28th 2022) Councillor Caroline Dwane Stanley (since September 27th 2021)

MEMBERS EXPENSES SUMMARY**JANUARY – DECEMBER 2021**

	€
Conferences	2,802.07
Training	9,714.83
Phones	707.21
Monthly Expenses	93,162.82
SPC Chair Allowance	24,000.00
Representational Allowance	410,286.39
Cathaoirleach's Allowance	20,237.18
Leas-Chathaoirleach's Allowance	3,832.75
Municipal District Chair Allowance	17,960.65
Municipal District Allowance	9,210.70
OVERALL	€591,914.60

TRAINING ATTENDED IN 2021 BY LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL MEMBERS

<u>Training</u>	<u>Venue</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Delegates</u>	<u>Expend</u>
AILG				
AILG – Module 1	Glendalough Sligo Ballinasloe	23rd September 2nd October 7th October	6	€1,186.86
AILG – Module 2	Ballybrit, Galway	6th November	6	€1,535.15
LAMA—Autumn	Sligo	3rd to 5th November	9	€5,339.38
Irish Planning Institute	Wexford	17th to 19th November	3	€1,653.44
Overall Total:				€9,714.83

CONFERENCES ATTENDED IN 2021 BY LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL MEMBERS

<u>Conference</u>	<u>Venue</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Delegates</u>	<u>Expend</u>
Fair Deal	Carlingford	1st to 3rd October	1	€303.41
Mental Health	Clonakilty	8th to 10th October	2	€905.95
Mental Health	Carlingford	3rd to 5th December	3	€1,342.71
CDP Course On-line	Trinity College	8th February	1	€250.00
Overall Total:				€2,802.07

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Accounts Payable, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664117
Arts Office, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664033
Cash Office, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8674308
Civil Defence HQ, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664106
Environment, Áras an Chontae	Tel : (057) 8674318
Housing, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8674304
Human Resources, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664075
Landfill Site, Kyletalesha, Portlaoise	Tel: (057) 8620653
Library Headquarters, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8594982
Motor Tax Office, Block 2, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8674305
Planning, Block 1, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664032
Register of Electors, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664105
Roads, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664086
Sports & Leisure, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664041
Water Services, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8674358

