

MINUTES OF MEETING

Project Name	Strategic Policy Committee Enterprise, Economic Development & Tourism	
Purpose of Meeting	Agenda Attached	
Location of Meeting	Council Chamber	Date and Time
		11.00 am 7 th September 2023
Present	Name	Representing
	Cllr. Conor Bergin Cllr Seamus McDonald Cllr Aisling Moran Pat Culleton Caroline Hofman (CH) Deirdre O`Connell-Hopkins (DH) PJ Phelan Gerry Murphy (GM), Head of Finance Brenda Earl (BE), A/Administrative Officer BSU Elaine Moore (EM), Administrative Officer Gearoid Sheridan (GS), Business Advisor, LEO	Chairperson SPC Member LCC Member LCC Dev/Construction Rep Business/Commercial Rep Trade Union Rep Community/Voluntary Rep LCC LCC LCC LCC
In attendance	Sheila Cahill (SC), Staff Officer BSU	LCC (Minute Taker)
Apologies	Cllr. Aidan Mullins Mark Clancy (MC), Business Advisor, LEO Pat Hennessy	Member LCC LCC Agriculture/Farming Rep

Item No.	Description	Action By	Date for Completion
1.	<p>Confirmation of Minutes</p> <p>Minutes of meeting of 1st June 2023 were proposed by Caroline Hofman and seconded by PJ Phelan.</p>		
2.	<p>BSU Update</p> <p>Brenda Earl (BE) provided an update regarding the current projects being carried out by the Business Support Unit (BSU) (Attached).</p> <p>Brenda advised Cllr Bergin that the Vacant Commercial Property Incentive Scheme is being rolled out to Mountrath.</p>		
3.	<p>LEO Update</p> <p>Gearoid Sheridan (GS) provided an update on behalf of Mark Clancy (MC) on the works being carried out by the Local Enterprise Office at present.</p> <p>Cllr Conor Bergin thanked Gearoid for the update and commented that TSI Flowmeters Ltd have an impressive set up in Clonminam and it's great to see them doing well.</p>		
4.	<p>Tourism Update</p> <p>Elaine Moore (EM) provided an update regarding the current projects being carried out by the Tourism Section. (Attached).</p> <p>Cllr Conor Bergin and Cllr Seamus McDonald welcomed the completion of the car park at Glenbarrow which has alleviated the parking issues there.</p> <p>PJ Phelan raised a query regarding the first concrete building-built pre-famine to ascertain if there are any walls remaining and suggested a plaque could be erected.</p>		

	<p>Elaine will contact Coillte to find out what is remaining of the building and what options are available.</p> <p>Caroline Hofman noted that the new Digital Transformation Scheme (Category 4) launched by Failte Ireland is 100% funded while the other categories are 80%. Category 2 is up to €200,000 however it is due to increase from 1st January 2024. Tourism Learning Network is also being launched.</p>		
5.	<p>Laois Chamber Alliance Update</p> <p>Caroline Hofman (CH) provided an update on the current projects being carried out by the Laois Chamber Alliance (Attached).</p> <p>Cllr Aisling Moran raised the need for infrastructure at tourist sites around the County i.e., parking, shops, cafes, and other facilities. Caroline Hofman highlighted the work carried out by Laois Tourism to date and since they merged with Laois Chamber. Cllr Conor Bergin complimented the great progress over the last 3-4 years and acknowledged that it takes time dealing with landowners, etc to develop the infrastructure.</p> <p>PJ Phelan complimented the progress LCC have made to date around tourism. Currently we are trying to grow/develop tourism in Laois. We are at a different stage than other Counties where tourism is well established. Private enterprises are driving tourism in those Counties.</p>		
6.	<p>The Cube Building Update</p> <p>Caroline Hofman (CH) provided an update on The Cube (Attached). She advised that the 1st and 2nd floors of the building are occupied by 2 companies, with the ground floor occupied by the EU Just Transition personnel. Gerry Murphy confirmed that accounts are reviewed on a quarterly basis.</p>		
7.	<p>Any Other Business</p> <p>In response to Cllr Aisling Moran Gerry Murphy advised that he expected private developers to avail of the Just Transition funding stream to provide camp sites. He</p>		

	<p>advised that a Tourism Activator role has been advertised and the expectation is that this person will be appointed in Q4 2023. He or she will be involved in the process and liaising with all interested parties.</p> <p>Gerry Murphy also advised the committee that the BSU is working with businesses to assist with the development of existing and new walking trails and tourist sites.</p> <p>This concluded the business of the meeting.</p> <p>Next meeting – 7th December 2023 at 11am</p>		
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Agenda

Enterprise, Economic Development & Tourism Strategic Policy Committee

Thursday 7th September 2023

- 1. Confirmation of minutes of meeting held on the 1st June 2023**
- 2. Business Support Unit Update – Brenda Earl**
- 3. LEO Update – Mark Clancy**
- 4. Tourism Update – Elaine Moore**
- 5. Update from Laois Chamber Alliance - Caroline Hofman**
- 6. Update re Cube Building – Caroline Hofman**
- 7. Any other business**

BUSINESS SUPPORT UNIT UPDATE

1. Shop-front Improvement & Accessibility Grant Scheme

This scheme is available again for 2023. A budget of €10,000 has been allocated for the scheme and it is open to businesses in all Town's/Village's Centres in the County. The BSU has made an online application facility available as well as hard copy application option. There are 19 applications being processed at present, 8 of which were approved in 2022 however an extension was given to these applicants to allow them to be processed under the 2023 scheme to allow sufficient time to carry out the works.

2. Business Incentive Schemes & Early payment Incentive Scheme

This scheme is available to businesses who open up a new business in premises which have been vacant for 6 months or more. It gives businesses a three year reduction on their rates. This Scheme has been extended to Ballylinan & Ballinakill. We are currently looking at extending it to Killenard. 5 applications received to date this year.

3. Town and Village Streetscape Enhancement Scheme 2022

€100,000 has been allocated to Abbeyleix in respect of this scheme.

The scheme aims to encourage:

- Strategic collaboration between property owners to paint buildings and/or shopfronts in vibrant colours
- Upgrade or restoration of historic / traditional shopfronts
- Provision of street planting, shrubbery, trees and flowers boxes
- Installation of canopies
- Murals/public artwork

€8,000 maximum funding per building. 80% max funding per application. 52 applications received; 32 applications approved. Completion date for the works is 31st August 2023, however, due to the poor weather conditions the BSU sought an extension to the completion date from the Department. The new completion date for works is 15th September 2023.

4. Portlaoise Town Team

The BSU are working closely with a sub-committee of the Portlaoise Town Team which comprises of representatives from the business group Downtown Portlaoise.

Work has commenced on a project entitled "Marketing Portlaoise Online" . Funding for this project is coming from Laois Partnership and Laois County Council. Working with a social media company to market Portlaoise as a place to live work and visit.

New lamp post banners are being erected on the Main Street these will be in place after 1st June 2023. New signage on the approach is in place.

The group will commence identifying projects for 2024.

5. Tourism Destination Town Project- Portlaoise

The BSU continue to work with Elaine Moore, Tourism Officer, on advancing aspects of this scheme, in particular the provision of interpretative and wayfinding signage around the laneways in Portlaoise and in the Old Fort Quarter.

The lamppost banners are to be supplied to the Council by 15th September 2023.

6. Vacant Commercial Property Incentive Scheme

This Scheme was initially launched as a pilot scheme in Portlaoise in collaboration with Laois Chamber in March 2022. The aim of the scheme is to reduce vacancy and dereliction in the town centre by offering a package of incentives to businesses who rent/lease an empty building which has been vacant for 6 months or more. 54 vacant buildings have been identified in Portlaoise Town Centre. There was a lot of interest in the scheme and several new businesses have opened in Portlaoise as a direct result of the scheme. This scheme has been extended to Portarlington. The official launch of the scheme in Portarlington took place on 9th May 2023. It is envisaged it will be extended to other towns in the County in due course.

The BSU is currently working with the Town Regeneration Officer and Laois Chamber Alliance to launch a Vacant Commercial Property Incentive Scheme in Mountrath later this year.

7. Laois TASTE group

The BSU are working with Laois Taste again in 2023 to promote Laois as a food and drinks destination. Laois Taste will be present at local events such as Electric Picnic and the National Ploughing Championships.

8. Town and Village Scheme Killeshin

The BSU are working with Killeshin Community Group on the extension of the Community Centre and remote working hub in Killeshin. The sum of €500,000 was received from the Department with the project cost totaling €691,628.73. Contracts were signed in April 2023, due to H&S requirements, and Commencement Notices works are due to commence 19th June 2023, works are well on the way with the 1st Claim due by the end of September 2023.

9. Town and Village Scheme- Digital Hubs

The BSU will be working with the digital hubs in 2023 on a marketing campaign to attract remote workers to the hubs in Laois. The sum of €50,000 was received for this project. Work is on-going and a Tender Document is currently being drafted.

LOCAL ENTERPRISE OFFICE UPDATE

In terms of outputs so far in 2023, the following are the main outputs:

- €351,352 has been approved in grant aid to 12 businesses – 8 Priming Grants, 3 Feasibility Study Grant and 1 Priming grant.
- 1 LEO Client (TSI Flowmeters Ltd) was approved by the Enterprise Ireland Industrial Research & Commercialisation Committee (IRCC) for an Innovation Partnership Project. This Innovation Partnership project will focus on enabling the participating companies to obtain the skills and technology to design and develop power optimized cellular (Internet of Things (IoT) systems for their respective product applications through collaborative research with the Irish Manufacturing Research (IMR) Center in Mullingar.
- 29 Trading Online Voucher Scheme applications received with 19 applications fully approved.
- 83 Laois businesses have availed of 1-1 mentoring.
- 137 individuals have availed of 1-1 business advice sessions.
- 50 training courses have been delivered to date to a total of 753 participants. Training programmes have been delivered in the areas of social media, marketing, finance and Start Your Own Business courses. Courses have also been delivered on how business owners can use Chat GPT and Artificial Intelligence tools in their businesses and this has proved to be a popular course among businesses in Laois. The Autumn training schedule was recently launched on the LEO Laois website and there has been a steady uptake so far for these programmes.
- 5 businesses are currently participating in the Lean for Micro Programme. This a continuous improvement programme designed to introduce efficiencies in business. In total 10 Laois businesses have participated in the programme in 2023.
- 4 businesses are participating in the Green for Micro programme. Uptake for the programme remains strong. The programme is a practical introductory sustainability programme that gets businesses started on this journey. It lines up an independent sector specialist to come out to businesses and to draw up a plan. Many businesses look to appoint an energy engineer to look at scoping and costing PV for example but there is also the option to look at sustainable packaging, carbon footprint analysis (for food companies especially) and things like green procurement and sustainability statements. In total 15 Laois businesses have participated in the programme in 2023.
- 1 business is participating in the Digital Start programme which is supporting eligible companies to embed digitization in their business. In total 4 Laois businesses have participated in the programme in 2023.
- 9 Laois businesses have been assisted to access Micro Finance Ireland loan funding. The MFI Scheme is a government backed loan fund that offer financing to startups and early stage businesses that the mainstream banks tend not to engage with. While there is still a robust due diligence process, applications are not stress tested to the same level as would the mainstream banks. If applying through the LEO, then a reduced interest rate of 5.5% applies.
- 9 Laois business owners are taking part in the 2023 Owner Manager Development Programme which began on 4th September and are taking part in the programme. 15 weekly sessions will take place through to December. This programme is for owners-managers who have established their businesses and are planning for the next stage of their business cycle. Delivered by management consultant Blaise Brosnan of the Management Resource Institute, this Management

Development programme combines management theory, powerful peer learning, networking and action learning approaches.

- In June, the Energy Efficiency Grant was announced. This grant supports the investment in technologies and equipment identified which have been identified in a Green for Micro Report, GreenStart Report or a SEAI Energy Audit. Funding for 50% of eligible costs up to a maximum grant of €5,000 is available. To date LEO Laois has approved 1 application for the support.
- Upcoming events – National Women’s Enterprise Day is taking place on 19th October and LEO Laois are co-ordinating the Midlands Region event (Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath). The event will take place in the Castle Durrow Country House Hotel with notable speakers, panel debates and discussion with Keynote Speaker, Terry Prone (The Communications Clinic,) and guest speakers, Darina Allen (Ballymaloe Cookery School,) Anna May McHugh (National Ploughing Association MD,) Leading Light Kelly Ging (Kelly Lou Cakes) and MC, Ann Marie Kelly (Communications & Marketing Executive Midlands Ireland).
- Ciara Heuston of Bowfield Farm will represent Laois LEO at the Local Enterprise Village at the National Ploughing Championships later in the month. Green Pheasant Farm Ltd T/A Bowfield Farm operate a Vertical Hydroponic Farm where they grow microgreens which they sell as a live tray or in clamshells.
- 8 Laois LEO businesses that have been named finalists for the Blas na hEireann’s Irish Food Awards in 2023. This is a huge achievement for these businesses and bodes well for food and drink businesses in County Laois.

The 8 finalists that have been named finalists for Blas nah Eireann, The Irish Food Awards 2023 are: Ballykilcavan Farm and Brewery; The Village Dairy; Aghaboe Farm Foods; ÍON Organic Oil; Gs Gourmet Jam; Mueller & O’Connell Bakery; Temptation Chocolates; and Cocoa Couture

The LEO will support a cross section of the finalists to attend the “Eat Ireland in a Day” tent at the Blas Village in Dingle in late September.

- A Food Starter Training programme organised by Laois LEO will be taking place in October at the Food Kitchens in Mountmellick. This is aimed at stimulating and supporting more entrants to the growing artisan food sector in Laois.

TOURISM UPDATE

Tourism Grants

42 Applications for the Tourism Grant Scheme (Festivals and Events) 2023 have been received so far; 39 applications have been approved. Applications were made online through Laois County Council’s website and submitted by email and post. Support was provided to events such as The Scarecrow Festival in Durrow, the Gordon Bennett Classic Car Festival, the Old Fort Quarter Festival and The French Connection in Portarlinton. Grants continue to be paid to organisers.

Ras na mBan

Stage 3 of Rás na mBan - International Ladies Cycle Race, takes place tomorrow Friday 8th September. There will be a ceremonial start of over 100 cyclists from Aras an Chontae at

11.00am. This is the first time in four visits to Laois that Rás na mBan will have a town finish. The riders will cross the finish line in Mountrath and proceed to do another loop around the county. The race will pass through Stradbally, Emo, Mountmellick, Clonaslee, The Cut, Mountrath, Ballacolla and Abbeyleix before finishing in Mountrath at approximately 2pm. Laois Sports Partnership, Laois Tourism and Healthy Ireland have come together with Laois County Council to organise cycling workshops for school children in the area prior to the race finish. Highlights of the race are broadcast by RTE and Eurosport.

National Ploughing Championships 2023

Final preparations are under way for the National Ploughing Championships 2023. This year Laois County Council is providing a larger marquee which can accommodate 33 exhibitors. These include food and drink producers, craft producers, service and information providers as well as Tourism operators.

Barrow Blue Way:

Towpath works throughout Laois and for the full extent of the Blueway are complete. Outstanding works include some small areas of topsoiling and the installation of chicane gates. Road crossing works have commenced, with Fisherstown, Courtwood and Vicarstown substantially complete. The Contractor has commenced work at the M7 underpass at Killaglish, Co. Laois.

Glenbarrow Falls Carpark

Work has been completed and the car park is open. An additional 60 car parking spaces have been provided immediately adjacent to the existing 35 spaces. A press release was issued last week regarding same.

Parking Facilities at The Rock of Dunamase

At the July meeting of Laois County Council, the Elected Members approved the Part VIII. It is now intended to proceed with the development. An application for funding will be made under the EU Just Transition Fund when it is announced.

EU Just Transition Fund – Failte Ireland

On 29th August 2023, Failte Ireland launched an open call for Expressions of Interest for its Investment Grant-Aid Scheme for Private & Community SMEs. The purpose of the scheme is to deliver grant aid to private and community-based micro enterprises and SMEs to help them improve the quality of the visitor experience with the aim of attracting more visitors and securing overnight stays. Fáilte Ireland have allocated €17m to this scheme. This figure may change

depending on the demand for this scheme and from other schemes within the overall Regenerative Tourism and Placemaking 2023-2026 budget.

There are five project categories that will be considered for funding:

- Category 1 – Development or Enhancement of Sustainable Visitor Experiences
- Category 2 – Development of Sustainable/ Low Carbon Tourist Accommodation
- Category 3 – Capital Project Planning & Design
- Category 4 – Digital Transformation
- Category 5 – Accessibility enhancements to provide a more inclusive visitor experience

To apply, businesses need to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) form via [Fáilte Ireland's online self-service portal](#). Fáilte Ireland will determine if the project is eligible for this Investment Grant Scheme.

Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail

Trailhead Building - the final grant of planning issued in March 2023. A pre-qualification competition was carried out in May and contractors were shortlisted. Four contractors will be issued with an Invitation to Tender in September 2023. All going well construction will start on site in March 2024.

Trail Construction - Due to contractor shortages Coillte were unable to commence trail construction in April. However, this will commence mid-September and be finished by year end. 3km of trail will be carried out in 2023 and a further 3km of trail will be carried out in 2024.

S.P.C. Sub Committee - Promotional Tourism Brochure

A list of items to be included in the promotional brochure has been finalised. A final draft of the Promotional Paper is being prepared. This will include a QR code which will link to the Laois Tourism Website ensuring that signage is accessible to those with reading difficulties, assist with language barriers, sight impairment and accessibility. It can also be used for developing statistics and tracking tourism data. If any member of the SPC wishes to include any item, please contact me.

LAOIS CHAMBER ALLIANCE UPDATE

Events

- A Healthy Ireland roundtable event with Chambers Ireland took place on Monday 10th July in the Midlands Park Hotel.

- Night time economy event with Professor Terry Stevens to be held in a few weeks' time by Midlands Ireland and the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan aimed at those involved in the hospitality and tourism industry.
- Our most recent Lunch & Learn event in collaboration with Local Enterprise Office Laois took place on 15th June 2023. The next event is planned to take place at the end of September.
- The European Parliament of Enterprises is taking place this year in Brussels on Tuesday, the 14th of November. Laois Chamber Alliance will be represented at this event, and this will be followed by engagements with the European Commission.
The European Parliament of Enterprises (EPE) is the largest event at EU level giving the floor directly to entrepreneurs. It brings together over 700 business representatives, coming from 43 European countries, who get a chance to 'become' Members of the European Parliament for one day, debating and voting on some of the most crucial topics currently at the heart of the political debate.
- Our next networking event takes place on Thursday 28th September in the Dunamais Arts Centre, Portlaoise.
- We are currently in the process of planning a Budget 2024 Breakfast Briefing. Budget Day is 10th October 2023.

Initiatives and Updates

- A new destination marketing company for Laois Tourism was awarded the contract through the eTenders process, and they commenced their contract on 23rd June 2023.
- We recently produced an excellent Visit Laois video, which features locations such as the Rock of Dunamais, Heywood Gardens and Emo Court. We would encourage you to share this on social media.

Lobbying and Policy

- Energy Policy Mission to the EU Institutions in Brussels. Key topics:
 - Energy Resilience, including Security of Supply, Storage, and Roadmap to 2050
 - Regulatory Certainty - Interconnections and Export
 - Planning and Capacity (Grid)
 - Sustainable fuels policy – Hydrogen, Biomethane & Biomass
 - Skills Shortage across a number of sectors
- Submission made to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) regarding an update to the Critical Skills Occupation List on 14th August 2023.

THE CUBE BUILDING UPDATE

Building

External signage is now on the front of the building, guiding guests and event attendees to the building. We also have imagery of Portlaoise and Laois at the front reception area which is eye catching and visible from outside at street level.

Events

- Two EU Just Transition Fund and Bioeconomy Demonstration Initiative events were held in The CUBE on 4th July with large demand. A total of 60 attendees over the two sessions. This event

was held in partnership with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine with representatives from the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly also in attendance. Great representation of attendees from the Midlands region, and as far as Waterford and Dublin.

- Portlaoise Energy Master Plan event held in the Midlands Park Hotel on 22nd June, presentation provided on the role of The CUBE and Portlaoise's designation as Ireland's first low carbon town.
- Director of The CUBE was part of the delegation for the Energy Policy Mission to the EU Institutions in Brussels from 27th to 29th June. Great opportunity to promote The CUBE at a European level and discuss issues and upcoming developments in the area of energy and renewables policy.
- The RTE Six One News on Friday, 14th July 2023, broadcast live from The CUBE.

Initiatives

- MoU signed for The CUBE and the SmartAgriHubs Initiative. We are waiting for a fifth Hub in our regional cluster (UK and Ireland) to sign this MoU before the initiative goes live. Meeting in early September to discuss next steps.

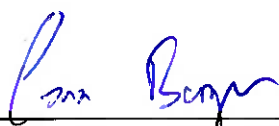
SmartAgriHubs is a €20 million EU project under the Horizon 2020 instrument, and brings together a consortium of well over 164 partners in the European agri-food sector. The project aims to realise the digitisation of European agriculture by fostering an agricultural innovation ecosystem dedicated to excellence, sustainability and success.

- Discussions underway with the Innovation Exchange to develop a presence in the Midlands region in The CUBE. This should be launched by Q4 2023. There is already a presence in Galway Technology Centre and RDI Hub in Kerry. The Innovation Exchange is where businesses facing digital transformation challenges are connected with innovative solutions providers with the talent to help them achieve their ambitions. Large corporates get access to Ireland's most talented solutions providers and to collaborations that accelerate digital transformation. Scaling technology companies get an instant sales pipeline as well as access to key decision makers, market intelligence and the capability to sell to large corporates.

Upcoming Events

- The CUBE will be exhibiting at the National Ploughing Championships from 19th to 21st September 2023 in the Laois marquee. A great opportunity to promote The CUBE to Laois and beyond, I will also take the time to engage with other relevant stands and larger areas such as Government Departments and the Enterprise Ireland innovation tent.
- Pop-up Clinics are taking place with the SEAI in The CUBE, Portlaoise on 26th, 28th and 29th September for home owners, farmers, business and community groups looking to avail of SEAI grants to retrofit homes or premises. A lot of interest in this from home owners and businesses, with some limited places remaining.

Signed:



Cllr Conor Bergin
Chairperson

Signed:



Gerry Murphy
Head of Finance