



## MINUTES OF MEETING

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

Item No.	Description	Action By	Date for Completion
1.	<p>Mark Clancy (MC) expressed sympathies to Mary Keogh, Portarlinton Enterprise Centre on the sad passing of her husband.</p> <p><b>Confirmation of Minutes</b></p> <p>Minutes of meeting held on the 7<sup>th</sup> September 2023 &amp; Special SPC meeting held on the 24<sup>th</sup> October 2023 were proposed by Pat Culleton and seconded by Deirdre O'Connell-Hopkins.</p>		
2.	<p><b>BSU Update</b></p> <p>Brenda Earl (BE) provided an update regarding the current projects being carried out by the Business Support Unit (BSU) (Attached).</p> <p>Observation from Mark Clancy that the 3 in a row clause in the Abbeyleix Streetscape Scheme meant a number of premises were excluded. Brenda Earl said this information went back on the return and Gerry Murphy said the Department were also advised throughout the processing of the applications for the scheme.</p> <p>In relation to digital hubs, Deirdre O'Connell-Hopkins commented that remote working had slowed up all over and that unless the framework changes the hubs will not be used by individuals.</p>		
3.	<p><b>LEO Update</b></p> <p>Mark Clancy (MC) provided an update on the current projects being carried out by the Local Enterprise Office (Attached).</p>		

<p><b>4.</b></p>	<p><b>Tourism Update</b></p> <p>Elaine Moore (EM) provided an update on the current projects being carried out by the Tourism Section. (Attached).</p> <p>Deirdre O’Connell-Hopkins questioned the 3-year contract for the Tourism Activator and asked if it was a fixed term and would it be extended after that. Gerry Murphy noted the concerns and advised that funding is from the EU Just Transition fund which is a 3-year project and noted that the person who got the job has commenced the programme.</p> <p>The draft tourism document will be reviewed and put on the agenda for the next meeting. Pat advised the members that the Glenbarrow car park is full nearly every weekend.</p> <p>Gerry Murphy advised that the car park at the Rock of Dunamase had Part 8 planning approval and that an application for funding will be made under the EU Just Transition fund to Failte Ireland.</p>		
<p><b>5.</b></p>	<p><b>Laois Chamber Alliance Update</b></p> <p>James McElwee (JMCE) provided an update on the current projects being carried out by the Laois Chamber Alliance (Attached).</p> <p>James McElwee thanked Caroline for her work in the Chamber and advised that they are in a period of transition, with a new CEO to be appointed.</p> <p>Gerry Murphy thanked Caroline for all her work undertaken as CEO of Laois Chamber Alliance.</p>		
<p><b>6.</b></p>	<p><b>The Cube Building Update</b></p> <p>Caroline Hofman (CH) provided an update on The Cube (Attached).</p>		

7.	<p><b>Any Other Business</b></p> <p>The special SPC meeting taking place on 16<sup>th</sup> January for LECP signoff following feedback from EMRA can be a remote meeting. It will include Community Department staff also.</p> <p>The draft Tourism Brochure will also be discussed at the Special SPC meeting.</p> <p>Schedule of dates for SPC meetings for 2024 to be agreed at the Special SPC meeting. It was also noted to aim for 2 SPC meetings before the elections.</p> <p>This concluded the business of the meeting.</p>		
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## **Agenda**

### **Enterprise, Economic Development & Tourism Strategic Policy Committee**

**Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> December 2023**

- 1. Confirmation of minutes of meeting held on the 7<sup>th</sup> September 2023 & Special SPC meeting held on the 24<sup>th</sup> October 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 21 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. The scheme was extended to Killenard in 2023. 5 applications received to date this year.

### **3. Town and Village Streetscape Enhancement Scheme 2022**

€100,000 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 were approved.

This Scheme is now completed all paperwork was returned to the Department.

### **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 1<sup>st</sup> June 2023. New signage on the approach is in place.

The group will commence identifying projects for 2024.

Some of the projects for 2024 will be Digital signage an Expression of Interest will be make under the EU Just Transition Fund.

The group will review the approach road signs with a view to having them reprinted in Irish.

#### **5. Vacant Commercial Property Incentive Scheme**

During 2023 the Scheme was launched in Portarlinton, Mountrath, Mountmellick and most recently in Rathdowney. The aim of the scheme is to reduce vacancy and dereliction in town centres by offering a package of incentives to businesses who rent/lease an empty building which has been vacant for 6 months or more. The BSU will continue to work with the Town Regeneration Officer and Laois Chamber Alliance to extend the scheme further.

#### **6. 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.

#### **7. 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 19<sup>th</sup> June 2023. Works are well on the way with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Claim due 8<sup>th</sup> December 2023 the group were given an extension to 30<sup>th</sup> March 2024 to complete the works.

#### **8. Town and Village Scheme- Digital Hubs**

The BSU will be working to promote the digital hubs 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, the Tender process is complete. The video and photography should be completed by April 2024.

#### **9. Christmas Market**

Laois County Council and Laois Taste will present the 10-day Christmas Market being held in December (14<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup>).

### **LOCAL ENTERPRISE OFFICE UPDATE**

Since the last update on 7<sup>th</sup> Sept 2023, the following outputs have been delivered:

- €77,000 has been approved in grant aid to 4 businesses through the business enhancement grant – projected job creation 7.5 jobs
- 1 LEO Client was approved in conjunction with Enterprise Ireland for the Gradstart programme – this is a tailored support to take on a graduate.

- 13 further Trading Online Voucher Scheme applications were approved.
- 79 additional Laois businesses have availed of 1-1 mentoring.
- It has been a busy autumn/ winter training programme with 25 training courses delivered to a total of 358 participants.

Of these - 9 Laois business owners are just about to complete the Management Development Programme which is coming to the end of a 15-week programme

- 10 Laois Businesses have also started the 1<sup>st</sup> phase of a comprehensive Export Development programme
- 1 additional business signed up for the Lean for Micro Programme and all remaining LEAN participants are currently closing out.
- 4 additional businesses signed up for the Green for Micro programme and we have tied in with communities such as Durrow who are signing up to the SEAI Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) programme. There are good synergies to be had around these community initiatives.

David Walsh Kemmis (Ballykilcavan Brewery) who has engaged very positively on the Green For Micro Programme, continues to lead the way in terms of sustainability performance. For example, in the past number of weeks he has been selected as national overall winner the best Small and Medium Business at the 2023 SEAI Energy Awards. Ballykilcavan Brewery also won the award for Small Sustainable Food Producer of the Year, while David Walsh-Kemmis personally won Environmental Farmer of the Year – this was at the FBD Better Farming Awards, held in Killenard.

2 additional Businesses signed up for the Energy Efficiency Programme which is a follow-on small capital fund for businesses that have undertaken the Green for Micro Audit element above. This provides capital funding of €5,000

- 2 additional businesses have signed up for the Digital Start programme which is supporting eligible companies to embed digitization in their business. 2 of the 6 businesses who participated in this pilot programme this year have gone on to implement significant Enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems in their business.
- 1 additional business was assisted to access Micro Finance Ireland loan funding. The MFI Scheme is a government backed loan fund that offers 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.

The National Women's Enterprise Day which took place at Durrow Castle on the 19<sup>th</sup> October was a great success with over 200 attendees. Speakers on the day included: Darina Allen, Terry Prone, Anna May McHugh and Kelly Ging.

The LEO also supported representatives from Laois Taste to attend the prestigious Blas na hÉireann Irish Food Awards which took place in Dingle in late September. The event was a great success with 7 Laois producers taking home a total 12 medals.

## **TOURISM UPDATE**

### **Tourism Grants**

53 Applications for the Tourism Grant Scheme (Festivals and Events) were received in 2023. 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, The French Connection in Portarlinton and various Christmas Festivals.

### **Ras na mBan**

Stage 3 of Rás na mBan - International Ladies Cycle Race, took place on Friday 8<sup>th</sup> September. Following a ceremonial start of over 100 national and international cyclists from Aras an Chontae at 11.00am, the race passed through Stradbally, Emo, Mountmellick, Clonaslee, The Cut, Mountrath, Ballacolla and Abbeyleix before finishing on Patrick Street Mountrath at approximately 2pm. This was the first time in four visits to Laois that Rás na mBan had a town finish and was a great success. Laois Sports Partnership, Laois Tourism and Healthy Ireland came together with Laois County Council to organise cycling workshops for school children in the area prior to the race finish. Highlights of the race were broadcast by RTE and Eurosport.

### **National Ploughing Championships 2023**

This year Laois County Council provided a larger marquee which accommodated 33 exhibitors in comparison to 24 in 2022. These included food and drink producers, craft producers, service and information providers as well as Tourism operators.

### **Barrow Blue Way**

Road Crossing works are approximately 70% complete. Most areas in Laois are complete apart from the M7 underpass and snagging of areas. Unbound towpaths are complete in all areas. Tandem are working for the Project Partners on the design of the interpretation signage for the Barrow Blueway

### **Parking Facilities at The Rock of Dunamase**

Further Archaeological studies are currently being carried out at the request of National Monuments Service. An application for funding for this will be made under the EU Just Transition Fund



### **EU Just Transition Fund – Failte Ireland**

Following an interview process the Tourism Activator role has been filled. She will take up the position on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2024 for a 3-year term.

On 29<sup>th</sup> August 2023, Failte Ireland launched an open call for Expressions of Interest for its Investment Grant-Aid Scheme for Private & Community SMEs.

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

- 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. The closing date is 30<sup>th</sup> June 2024 except Category 4 Digital Transformation which closes on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2024.

### **Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail**

**Trailhead Building** - the design drawings have been completed and are almost finalised. It is hoped to go to tender early in Q1 2024. All going well construction will start on site in March 2024.

**Trail Construction** - Phase 4 commenced in September. 2km of black trails have been completed and there is a further 1km to do before year end. In 2024 there will be construction on a further 1.5km of which designs are currently being finalised.

At our last SPC Meeting a query was raised regarding the first concrete building that was built pre-famine at Baunreagh, to see if there are any walls remaining of same at the site. Coillte has advised there is nothing remaining of this building.

### **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. A further draft layout of the brochure will be brought to the members of the SPC before same is finalised.

## **LAOIS CHAMBER ALLIANCE UPDATE**

### **Events**

- Laois Chamber AGM 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2023 at Solas Portarlington, Co. Laois where Yvonne McKeown stood down as president and Ashleigh Doyle stood down as committee member. James McElwee was appointed as president with Fiona Hyland as vice president and treasurer and Julian Reidy of Penhouse Design and Dr. Michelle Byrne were appointed as new board members. Caroline Hoffman CEO announced her resignation from her role as CEO.
- 17<sup>th</sup> October 2023 Caroline Hoffman has taken up the role as managing director of the Cube Portlaoise which role she has been in for the past nine months and was carrying on the CEO role on a voluntary basis.
- 17<sup>th</sup> October 2023 Regina Dunne has handed in her notice as tourism development executive and will be taking up the role but will be taking up a role with Laois County Council in Just Transition Funding a role which she carried out to some degree with the Chamber.
- James McElwee attended various vacant commercial property incentive scheme launches in Mountrath and Mountmellick in November.
- We are currently in the process of planning an awards ceremony in November 2024.
- No other events have been scheduled until a new CEO has been appointed.

### **Initiatives and Updates**

- Advertisements have been issued and first phase interviews were held on the 4<sup>th</sup> of December 2023 for a new CEO with a view to appointing somebody to start the role in January 2024.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

  
Cllr Conor Bergin  
Chairperson

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

  
Gerry Murphy  
Head of Finance