



MINUTES OF MEETING

Project Name	Strategic Policy Committee Enterprise, Economic Development & Tourism	
Purpose of Meeting	Agenda Attached	
Location of Meeting	Council Chamber LCC	Date and Time
		11.00 am 2 nd March 2023
In attendance	Name	Representing
	Cllr. Aidan Mullins Cllr. Aisling Moran Cllr Seamus McDonald Pat Hennessy Pat Culleton P.J. Phelan Caroline Hofman (CH) Gerry Murphy (GM), Head of Finance Mark Clancy (MC), Acting Head of Enterprise, LEO Denise Rainey (DR), Administrative Officer BSU Michael Timmons (MT), Graduate BSU Deirdre O`Connell-Hopkins (DH) Pamela Tynan (PT), Senior Executive Officer, Community	Member LCC Member LCC (Chairperson) Member LCC Agriculture/Farming Rep Dev/Construction Rep Community/Voluntary Rep Business/Commercial Rep LCC LCC LCC LCC Trade Union Rep LCC
Apologies	Cllr. Conor Bergin Elaine Moore	Chairperson SPC LCC

Item No.	Description	Action By	Date for Completion
1.	<p>Confirmation of Minutes</p> <p>Minutes of meeting of 19th December 2022 were proposed by Pat Hennessy and seconded by Cllr Aidan Mullins.</p>		
2.1	<p>LEO Update – Mark Clancy</p> <p>Mark Clancy (MC) provided an update regarding the current projects being carried out by the Local Enterprise Office (LEO). (Attached).</p> <p>Caroline Hofman contribution to the Laois Chamber Alliance was acknowledged by MC, who also wished her well in her new position as manager of the CUBE.</p> <p>Cllr Aidan Mullins asked for an update in relation to the uptake of grants and the percentage of businesses that don't succeed.</p> <p>According to Mark Clancy, the number of grants now approved in 2023 stands at ten - aimed at manufacturing and export-based businesses. He went on to state that a detailed evaluation report on the Start Your Own Business Programme had been commissioned and will be included with the minutes.</p>		
2.2.	<p>BSU Update – Denise Rainey</p> <p>Denise Rainey (DR) provided an update regarding the current projects being carried out by the Business Support Unit (BSU) (Attached). She stated that the BSU had applied for funding to the Agri-food Tourism fund, and she would give an update at the next meeting.</p> <p>Caroline Hofman was congratulated by DR on her new role as CUBE manager.</p>		

	<p>DR outlined the terms of the Streetscape scheme. She explained the rationale behind the Vacant Commercial Incentive Scheme, which incorporates 11 incentives in total and attempts to meet the supporting demands of businesses beyond simply rate reductions. The scheme is now operating in Portlaoise and is being extended to Portarlington.</p> <p>Gerry Murphy added that the Business Incentive Scheme has been extended to different towns in the County recently to try and incentivize businesses to occupy vacant premises. New area being added to this scheme was Killenard. Any interest in other areas should be advised so that the scheme can be extended to these areas.</p>		
3.	<p>Tourism Update – Gerry Murphy</p> <p>Gerry Murphy (GM) provided an update regarding the current projects being carried out by the Tourism Section. (Attached).</p> <p>In addition, he noted new planning applications for camper van parks being submitted for various locations.</p> <p>Cllr Aisling Moran expressed interest in mountain biking trails in Stradbally, Timahoe, and Ballintubbert, suggesting connectivity between different trails and the prospect of funding for these activities.</p> <p>Cllr Aidan Mullins agreed, underlining more support for these pathways whilst complimenting the work done so far.</p>	EM	
4.	<p>Laois Chamber Alliance Update – Caroline Hofman</p> <p>Caroline Hofman (CH) provided an update on the current projects being carried out by the Laois Chamber Alliance (Attached).</p>		

<p>5.</p>	<p>LECP 2023-2028 (Draft High-Level Goals) – Pamela Tynan</p> <p>Pamela Tynan (PT) provided an update on the Laois Local Economic and Community Development Plan 2023 – 2028 (Attached).</p> <p>Cllr Aidan Mullins enquired if the figures from Ukrainians and other migrants in direct provisions centres are being factored into the development of this plan.</p> <p>PT said this is something that they are aware of and would take account of this.</p> <p>On the proposal of Cllr Seamus McDonald, seconded by Caroline Hofman it was agreed to adopt the Draft High Level Goals and move to the Next Steps – Stage 2.</p>		
<p>6</p>	<p>Any Other Business</p> <p>Cllr Aidan Mullins raised concerns regarding the companies who were taking up residence in the CUBE. He questioned their credentials towards being Low Carbon companies.</p> <p>Gerry Murphy responded, stating that a report on the companies operating in the Cube would be available at the next meeting. He added that there will be other initiatives taking place in the CUBE, all based on the low carbon agenda.</p> <p>Caroline Hofman stated that in her role as Director of the CUBE she would be doing a lot of work with companies to promote the low carbon agenda She emphasised the numerous jobs that will be created, which is a big positive for the area.</p> <p>Denise Rainey stated that the building was vacant for a considerable length of time prior to the renovations and that it is now better equipped to support businesses going forward.</p> <p>This concluded the business of the meeting.</p> <p>Next meeting – 1st June 11am.</p>		

Enterprise, Economic Development & Tourism Strategic Policy Committee

Thursday 2nd March 2023

- 1. Confirmation of minutes of meeting held on the 19th December 2022**
- 2. Business Support Unit Update- Mark Clancy/Denise Rainey**
- 3. Tourism Update – Elaine Moore**
- 4. Update from Laois Chamber Alliance - Caroline Hofman**
- 5. LECP 2023-2028 – Draft High Level Goals**
- 6. Any other business**

LOCAL ENTERPRISE OFFICE UPDATE

LEO Update to SPC – January - Feb 2023

Back around to start again and we have been busy tendering and setting up fresh 2 to 3 year panels of trainers and consultants for various programmes. New panels have been procured and established for our training programmes and for our LEAN / Green and Digital programmes. We are also ready to publish for our mentoring panel and also for an export development programme.

On the ground we are seeing businesses continuing to consider investment and expansion but we are seeing the impact of rising energy costs in particular. Despite the flattening out of international interest rates the effects on the ground appeared to be most marked in the run up to Christmas and in early new year and many businesses were locked into price agreements prior to that.

IN terms of outputs so far this year, the following are the main outputs:

- We help a funding evaluation meeting in January where €99,950 was approved in grant aid to 3 businesses with potential to create 8 new jobs. We have at least another 4 applications underway which will be brought forward in March.**
- 7 Trading online voucher application received with 2 fully approved.**
- 38 Laois businesses availed of 1-1 mentoring**
- 7 training courses were delivered to date to a total of 82 participants. We also held a seminar on the TBESS energy scheme (to talk businesses through the Revenue energy rebate scheme) and held a lunch and learn event with the Chamber to explore Lean and**

Green options. I would like to acknowledge the hard work of Caroline and the Chamber Committee in organising another successful Jobs fair and we were delighted to participate and exhibit there again on the 20th Feb.

- 4 companies are participating in the Lean for Micro Programme. This a continuous improvement programme designed to introduce efficiencies in business. Work smarter not harder if you will. It is one of the cornerstones of the EI approach and is well funded so again we are promoting that.
- 4 companies are participating in the Green for Micro programme and we are looking to focus more on promoting that programme over the next quarter. Our uptake was among the highest in the country last year and we would like to keep that up. Just as a reminder the Green for Micro Prog 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. There was an announcement in the budget that there will be a follow up capital grant to help fund the actual deliver of recommended items on these GFM exercises. Detail to still to come on that but another good argument to get the plan done sooner rather than later in advance of this. As a reminder – you need to be a in business and defined as a microenterprise to apply.
- 1 Business is participating in the Digital Start programme which is supporting eligible companies to embed digitization in their business.
- 2 Laois were assisted to access Micro Finance Ireland loan funding. Again as a reminder 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 coming through the LEO then a standard interest rate of 4.5% applies.
- 7 Schools are currently participating in the Student Enterprise Programme and students have just submitted their entries. Closing date for entries to the County final is 28th February with judging and awards taking place in the Midlands Park on Tuesday 14th March. National Finals being held in Croke Park on Friday 5th May
- Enterprise Week this year is scheduled to run all of next week from 6th of March to 10th March. The week long programme will include 5 national “Spotlight” events as well as a full schedule of local events including training, mentoring clinics and other public talks with industry experts.
- Events to watch out for include:
Blaise Brosnan – speaking at Bloom HQ on Tuesday evening
International Women’s Day Event with Dr Diane Cooper in the Midlands Park on Wednesday morning
A LEAN in the food industry event with Balthnaid Bergin in the Maldron on Thursday afternoon

BUSINESS SUPPORT UNIT UPDATE

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 all towns in the County. The BSU has made an online application facility available this year also.

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. 9 applications received to date this year. This Scheme has been extended to Ballylinan we are currently looking at extending it to Killenard.

Town and Village Streetscape Enhancement Scheme 2022/2023

€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- currently being processed.

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. New signage on the approach roads.

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 contract has been awarded for the manufacture and supply of the signs. These signs will be supplied at the end of March and will be erected shortly after. The signs will be erected by LCC area office staff.

Vacant Commercial Property Incentive Scheme

This is a pilot scheme which was launched in collaboration with Laois Chamber in Portlaoise in March 2022. It is envisaged it will be extended to other towns in the County if successful. 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 is a lot of interest in the scheme and a new shop has opened on the Main Street as a direct result of the scheme. This scheme is being extended to Portarlinton in 2023.

Laois TASTE group

The BSU are working with Laois Taste again in 2023 to promote Laois as a food and drinks destination. A coordinator has been appointed to work with the group this year. She is focusing on :

- expanding membership
- raising brand awareness
- supporting them at festivals and events

I have submitted a funding application to the Dept. of Agriculture to further support these activities in 2023.

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 totalling €560,823.00. The construction element of the contract was advertised in September 2022 and the appointment of the successful contractor is imminent with construction due to start in April 2023.

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.

Official Opening of the CUBE

Cube will be officially opened on 30th March.

Remote working strategy group

First meeting took place on 27th February.

TOURISM UPDATE

Tourism Grants

Applications for Tourism Grants 2023 have been advertised. Applications can be made online through Laois County Council's Website and by email. The closing date is Friday 31st March 2023.

Barrow Blue Way:

Groundwork on the 43km route will be completed by quarter 2, 2023 except for road crossings. There will be an official launch at the end of 2023. The Laois section is complete except for road crossings. The Tender for Road Crossing Work has been completed and the successful tenderer has been identified. Kildare County Council is working with Waterways Ireland to obtain a temporary works licence which will permit the Contractor to carry out the works. It is hoped to appoint the Contractor this week with works to commence mid-March. The Placemaking Plan is being finalised and will be available for public viewing in the coming weeks.

Glenbarrow Carpark

A lease for the proposed car park development is currently being finalised and it is envisaged that we will have this completed by early next week. The works have been tendered.

Car Parking at The Rock of Dunamase

Laois County Council has contracted JBA Consulting (Limerick) who are working on all the necessary reports/drawings etc for the Part VIII for the proposed carpark. These reports will include a Heritage Impact Assessment, Visual Impact Assessment and proposed car park layout. Together with the above, Roadplan Consulting (Kilkenny), has been contracted to carry out a Road Safety Audit and a Traffic Impact Assessment.

When these reports/assessments have been completed, the proposed development will then be advertised and will go on public display for a four-week period following which submissions **or observations** with respect to the proposed development may be made online or in writing for another two weeks. The matter will then go before the elected members for their consideration.

Timahoe Heritage Centre:

Tenders were received for the Conservation and upgrading of the Heritage Centre in the former Church of Ireland in Timahoe. The works to be carried out include repairs to the vestry roof and external doors, painting, new kitchenette and reception area, heating system and floor coverings. Breamar Construction Ltd T/A Terry Higgins Builders were appointed as the contractors. Works commenced in January 2023. It is envisaged that these works should be completed by May 2023.

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

The second meeting of the Promotional Tourism Brochure sub-committee was held on Tuesday 14th February 2023. A list of items to be included in the promotional brochure were circulated and discussed. A draft Promotional Paper, to include a QR code, is to be prepared for consideration at the next sub-committee meeting. If any member of the SPC wishes to include any item, please contact Elaine. A draft brochure, when finalised, will be brought before a meeting of the S.P.C.

Just Transition Fund

The Just Transition Fund of €169 million will be managed by the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government. Failte Ireland have secured funding in the sum of €68 million to deliver a Regenerative Tourism Scheme which will be divided into 4 strands.

Strand 1 €30 million allocated for a connected Midlands Trail Network/Midlands Recreational Trail on former cutaway bogs, with emphasis on cycling, walking and ebiking and the re-wilding of the bogs themselves.

Strand 2 €25 million – will provide support for amenities and SME's. There will be a range of grant schemes for SME's / Tourism businesses to apply for funding.

Strand 3 €3 million – low carbon accommodation

Strand 4 €10 million – smart solutions including the digitisation of the tourism industry.

This scheme will run for 3 years 2023 - 2026. Failte Ireland is still working on the exact details which should be announced in early quarter 2 of 2023.

Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail

Planning permission was granted in February 2023 for a new single storey National Mountain Bike Trail Head Building consisting of a café, bike hire facility, toilets and ancillary spaces at Baunreagh, Mountrath. The final grant of planning will be issued circa 09/03/23 if there are no

objections to the development. It is expected that construction on the Trail Head Building will commence in quarter 3 of this year.

A further 6K of trail construction will commence in April and finish in October. This will complete all trails in Baunreagh.

Update – Laois Chamber Alliance from Caroline Hofman, CEO

2023 Laois Jobs Fair – 20th February 2023

- 43 stands in total, ranging from local employers, to apprenticeship and traineeships, and third-level opportunities.
- Excellent coverage in the Irish Times!
- UnLaois your Full Potential Stage

- **Shine in Emo 2023**

Moved to Saturday, 27th May 2023.

- **International Women’s Day Lunch in collaboration with LEO Laois – Wednesday 8th March 2023**

Our guest speaker for this event is Dr. Diane Cooper. The event is taking place in the Midlands Park Hotel, Portlaoise.

- **Lunch and Learn Events**

Working closely with LEO Laois to develop a schedule of Lunch and Learn Events held every two months for members of Laois Chamber Alliance and the wider business community. The topics will include marketing, sales, introduction to LEAN and GREEN principles, all benefiting members from all sectors, including tourism.

- **2023 National Ploughing Championships in Ratheniska**

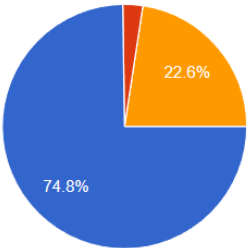
Spoke with Elaine Moore who is organising the ‘Laois Tent’ again this year. I suggested a shared stand for LEO Laois, Laois Chamber Alliance, and The Cube (all business supports and investment related, with a separate stand for Laois Tourism which was extremely popular last year.

Invest in Laois

- Laois Skills Survey launched in advance of the 2023 Laois Jobs Fair. Nearly 1,000 responses so far; I hope to isolate the data and have the findings ready at the end of March.

If you are currently commuting outside of Laois, if a job opportunity was available matching your qualifications and skills, would you work here in county Laois?

987 responses



- Yes
- No
- Not Applicable - I currently work in Laois