



MINUTES OF MEETING

Project Name	Strategic Policy Committee Enterprise, Economic Development & Tourism	
Purpose of Meeting	Agenda Attached	
Location of Meeting	LEO Training Room	Date and Time
		11.00 am 22 nd March 2024
Present	Name	Representing
	Cllr. Conor Bergin Pat Hennessy Jackie Carroll Deirdre O'Connell-Hopkins (DH) PJ Phelan Cllr. Aidan Mullins Cllr Seamus McDonald Cllr Aisling Moran Brenda Earl (BE), A/Administrative Officer BSU Julie Bergin (JB), Financial Management Accountant Elaine Moore (EM), Administrative Officer Mark Clancy (MC), Business Advisor, LEO	Chairperson SPC Agriculture/Farming Rep Business/Commercial Rep Trade Union Rep Community/Voluntary Rep Member LCC Member LCC Member LCC LCC LCC LCC LCC LCC
In attendance	Sheila Cahill (SC), Staff Officer BSU Donal Brennan (DB), Director of Services Orla Fitzpatrick (OF), A/Senior Staff Officer Community	LCC (Minute Taker) LCC LCC
Apologies	Pat Culleton Gerry Murphy (GM), Head of Finance Evelyn Reddin (ER), Head of Enterprise Pamela Tynan, Senior Executive Officer Community Suzanne O'Connor, Senior Staff Officer Community	Dev/Construction Rep LCC LCC LCC LCC

Item No.	Description	Action By	Date for Completion
1.	<p>Confirmation of Minutes</p> <p>Minutes of meeting held on the 7th December 2023 were proposed by Elaine Moore and seconded by Jackie Carroll.</p>		
2.	<p>The Adoption of Laois Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) 2023-2028 - Framework Document and to note the Progress on the LECP Action Plan</p> <p>Orla Fitzpatrick gave a presentation on the Framework Document for the Laois Local Economic and Community Plan 2023-2028.</p> <p>PJ Phelan queried what the process is to get from the targets to achieving goals. Donal Brennan advised that the next stage of the Framework Document will address this – Stage 5 Implementation Plan.</p> <p>The Framework Document was proposed by Cllr Seamus McDonald and seconded by PJ Phelan.</p>		
3.	<p>Review of draft Tourism Brochure & Tourism Update</p> <p>Elaine Moore (EM) provided an update on the current projects being carried out by the Tourism Section. (Attached).</p> <p>Cllr Aisling Moran sought an update on the extension of the Blueway from Athy to Graiguecullen. EM advised that she is waiting on an update from Waterways Ireland regarding this. EM will make contact again with Waterways Ireland.</p> <p>Cllr Aisling Moran queried campsites development in the County. Regina Dunne is working with people applying for camp site funding under the Just Transition Fund.</p> <p>Cllr Aisling Moran queried Ha’penny School plans. It will be a Tourism Information Centre to include walking guides etc and to develop Tourism in the County.</p>		

	<p>Cllr Aisling Moran queried what costs relating to The Cube are coming out of the Just Transition Fund. EM advised that she would investigate this.</p> <p><u>Draft Tourism Brochure</u></p> <p>Elaine asked the committee if any additions are required to the Brochure. Pat Hennessy asked about including the Laois Angling Centre. EM advised that this has been added.</p>		
4.	<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>In relation to funding for walking trails, Pat Hennessy suggested that we encourage private landowners with forestry to open their land for walks. Currently about 50% of land base is owned by farmers. BE advised that the community would need to come together and meet with Coillte and all involved to discuss.</p> <p>Jackie Carroll queried if funding is available for a Sales & Marketing Co-ordinator for Laois Taste. BE advised that Leader funding was granted last year and therefore it is unlikely to receive it again this year.</p> <p>Jackie Carroll queried if there is an external agency for marketing and if there is funding available. BE advised that it is on a project-by-project basis.</p>		
5.	<p>LEO Update</p> <p>Mark Clancy (MC) provided an update on the current projects being carried out by the Local Enterprise Office (Attached).</p>		
6.	<p>Laois Chamber Alliance Update</p> <p>Jackie Carroll provided an update on the current projects being carried out by the Laois Chamber Alliance (Attached).</p>		

	<p>Cllr Conor Bergin welcomed Jackie to the SPC.</p> <p>EM queried who Jackie Carroll is meeting with regarding festivals. Jackie confirmed that it is with festival groups in general.</p> <p>Cllr Aidan Mullins wished Jackie Carroll well in her new role and discussed the geographical area the Chamber covers.</p> <p>A discussion around Leader funding took place. There is a country wide delay in Leader funding this year.</p>		
7.	<p>Date of Next Meeting</p> <p>Thursday 2nd May 2024</p>		
8.	<p>Any Other Business</p> <p>None</p> <p>This concluded the business of the meeting.</p>		

Agenda

Enterprise, Economic Development & Tourism Strategic Policy Committee

Friday 22nd March 2024

- 1. Minutes**
- 2. The Adoption of Laois Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) 2023-2028 - Framework Document and to note the Progress on the LECP Action Plan**
- 3. Review of draft Tourism Brochure & Tourism Update – Elaine Moore**
- 4. Business Support Unit Update – Brenda Earl**
- 5. LEO Update – Evelyn Reddin**
- 6. Update from Laois Chamber Alliance – Jackie Carroll**
- 7. Date of next meeting to be agreed.**
- 8. Any other business**

BUSINESS SUPPORT UNIT UPDATE

1. Shop-front Improvement & Accessibility Grant Scheme

This scheme is available again for 2024. There are 10 applications being processed at present - 6 approved, 2 refused and 2 in progress. Three of the applications were approved in 2023 however an extension to the 2024 Scheme was given to allow sufficient time to carry out the works.

The BSU designed a new tri-fold pamphlet to promote the grants and services provided. The BSU worked with the Commercial Rates Department to have the pamphlet issue to all Commercial Rate Customers with the Rate Demands. We are also working with Planning to have the pamphlet issue with derelict site(s) notices etc.

2. Business Incentive Scheme

This scheme is available again this year 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.

3. Portlaoise Town Team

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

Work is continuing on the 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.

Some of the projects for 2024 will be to have signage in other languages such as Irish etc.,

A new project for 2024 is for Digital signage. Today an Expression of Interest was made under the EU Just Transition Fund. Failte Ireland have advised we will not have a decision until after the closing date of 30th June 2024. As such the BSU & Downtown have applied under the Climate Action Grant Scheme which closed on 11th March 2024.

4. Laois TASTE group

The BSU are working with Laois Taste again in 2024 to promote Laois as a food and drinks destination. An application for the Agri Food Fund was made in the sum of €25k (the maximum grant), we have received the official acceptance from the Department. The BSU will commence working on the projects with the group i.e. a new video, photography and some Gazabos.

5. 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. Works are to be completed by 31st March 2024.

6. Town and Village Scheme- Digital Hubs

The BSU are 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. Filming took place between 23rd – 25th January 2024. The video and photography element of the project is completed. The BSU will source materials to further promote the County and run an advertising campaign, this will consist of posts on social media etc.

7. Wolfhill Development Association

The BSU commenced working with the Wolfhill Development Association in 2023, the group identified a project that would benefit the area for both commercial businesses and residents alike. A walking/cycling trail in Wolfhill. A Public meeting was held in October 2023, subsequently a Trail Proposal Request Form has been completed and submitted to Coillte in January 2024. It is anticipated that an on-site meeting with Coillte will take place over the next few months. Since the public meeting in October a community shop opened.

Once more funding streams open the BSU will commence new projects with the group.

Façade Enhancement Scheme – Stradbally

The BSU has set aside a budget of €15k to provide a façade enhancement scheme in Stradbally. We identified Stradbally as being a town that would benefit from a scheme like.

Terms and conditions together with the advertisements are prepared. The scheme will be opened to both commercial and residential. There will be a cap on applications (20 applications) the maximum grant will be €750.00. the scheme will open on 9th April 2024 with a closing date for receipt of completed application forms Friday 10th May 2024, all works to be completed by 30th August 2024.

LOCAL ENTERPRISE OFFICE UPDATE

In terms of outputs so far in 2024, the following are the main outputs:

- 38 individuals have availed of 1-1 business advice sessions.
- 40 Laois businesses have availed of 1-1 mentoring.
- 23 training courses have been delivered to date to a total of 416 participants. Training programmes have been delivered in the areas of social media, marketing, finance and Start Your Own Business courses.
- 3 Trading Online Voucher Scheme applications have been approved.
- 2 businesses have been approved for Technical Assistance for Micro Exporters (TAME) grants to develop and explore export opportunities by exhibiting at international trade fairs.
- 10 businesses are currently participating in an Export Development programme where they have been taking part in export focused workshops and have completed individual export readiness assessments to determine how they can improve and develop to successfully grow their businesses through exporting. A number of skills developments workshops have taken place and participants are now completing market outreach with the aim of setting up meetings with potential customers in their individual target export markets.
- 4 businesses are currently participating in the Lean for Business Programme. This a continuous improvement programme designed to introduce efficiencies in business.
- 14 businesses are participating in the Green for Business programme. Uptake for the programme remains strong. The support is a practical introductory sustainability programme and lines up an independent sector specialist to come out to businesses and to help them develop a sustainability plan.
- 1 business is participating in the Digital Start programme which is supporting eligible companies to embed digitisation in their business.
- 4 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.
- Local Enterprise Week took place nationwide from the 4th to 8th March this year and 12 events were organised by LEO Laois in the county. Notable events included the following;
 - Student Enterprise Awards County Final - 7 Schools participated in the Student Enterprise Programme with 54 entries across the junior, intermediate and senior cycles. Judging and awards took place in the Midlands Park Hotel on Tuesday 5th March. The National Finals are being held in the Mullingar Park Hotel on Friday 9th May.
 - “Be Brave – Take Your Business to the Next Level”, an evening seminar was delivered by Pearse Flannery, author of the no.1 bestseller business book ‘Grabbing your Oyster’ and took place in Preston House, Abbeyleix on Wednesday 6th March.
 - A special International Women’s Day event took place in Castle Durrow on Friday 8th which featured guest speakers Lorraine Keane, Television Presenter and Entrepreneur and Dr. Mary Ryan, Consultant Physician & Endocrinologist.

- Throughout the week, a diverse range of training programmes will be available to meet the needs of small businesses including “Accounts for Small Business”, “Winning Public Tenders, Understanding E-Tenders & Public Procurement” and “Branding Your Business for Success”.
- One-to-one mentoring clinics were also available for anyone thinking of starting their own business and provided opportunities to speak with experts to discuss key areas of business from financial skills, raising funds and boosting their businesses online.

TOURISM UPDATE

Tourism Grants

The Tourism Grant Scheme (Festivals and Events) 2024 has been advertised. Applications can be made through the Consultation Portal on Laois County Council’s website and by email.

Failte Ireland Marketing Funding

In November 2023 €12,300 in funding was allocated by Failte Ireland for marketing of Laois; funding was spent on a national advertising campaign which ran from December 2023 to January 2024 with the Irish Independent as follows:

Print Adds – 5

Digital Adds

105,000 audio ads

580,000 Audience targeted ads across desktop and mobile.

National Ploughing Championships 2024

The National Ploughing Championships will be held in Ratheniska from the 17th – 19th September 2024. Requests for Expressions of Interest from exhibitors will be advertised in the coming weeks.

Barrow Blueway

Works are 90% complete, Snagging will commence once the main works to road crossings are completed. An application for additional funding has been submitted under the Rural Regeneration Development Fund for the bridge in Rathangan, the additional cost of road crossings and for interpretation signage. It is hoped to have a decision on the additional funding in May.

The Rock of Dunamase

An application for funding has been submitted to Failte Ireland under the EU Just Transition Fund for parking facilities at the Rock of Dunamase and a visitor attraction centre at the Hapenny School in the Old Fort Quarter.

EU Just Transition Fund – Failte Ireland

The Tourism Activator took up her position on 2nd January 2024. There are five project categories being considered for funding under Scheme B. The following Expressions of Interest are approved by Failte Ireland;

- Category 1 – Development or Enhancement of Sustainable Visitor Experiences - 11
- Category 2 – Development of Sustainable/ Low Carbon Tourist Accommodation - 5
- Category 3 – Capital Project Planning & Design – 1
- Category 4 – Digital Transformation -15
- Category 5 – Accessibility enhancements to provide a more inclusive visitor experience – 2

These are forward to application and planning stage (phase 2):

Some projects have multiple categories. The estimated value of these is €3.3million. A further 6 Expressions of Interest have been submitted and are pending feedback or approval from Failte Ireland.

The Tourism activator is also working with a further 15 potential applicants, a mixture of Accommodation and Experiences or Capital project planning, with a view to submitting Expressions of Interest in March.

A number of public information events/meetings have been held in various locations in the last few months across the County, with more planned over the coming months.

Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail

Trailhead Building - the design drawings have been completed and pre-tender estimates are being finalised. Tender is now likely to be issued in Q2 with construction starting on site in either Q2 or Q3.

Trail Construction - Phase 4 was completed in February 2024. Phase 5 (1.1km) has been awarded and construction is scheduled to take place between August and September (*this is due to hen harrier nesting season Mar to Aug*). *This will complete the trail construction.*

LAOIS CHAMBER ALLIANCE UPDATE

Introduction

Jackie Carroll introduced herself as the new CEO Laois Chamber Alliance and gave a little on her background as a management consultant and her role as Animator of the Laois Tourism Strategy. This report covers the time period from early February to the end March. It was an extremely busy period with continuing engagement with members and getting settled in the role.

Stakeholder Engagement

In the 2 months in the role Jackie has had several meetings with the wider stakeholder group and members approximately 75 to date.

With LEO and the BSU we have initiated a discussion to produce a Business Supports document, it would be a copy of the newly released Waterford document (Waterford have given permission for us to use). [Waterford Business Support Doc](#). We have had several discussions to increase collaboration, identify training initiatives and how we can work together.

Membership

Laois Chamber Alliance is in a stage where we are reinvigorating the Chamber and demonstrating to current and past members that there is real value in joining the chamber. Momentum was lost in engagement, but this is on increase. This is being initiated through member meetings and networking events.

Events Calendar

Please see below the networking calendar for the year ahead. We believe that this calendar of events will demonstrate to members real value in supporting the chamber. We have held two networking events and have had over 40 people attend. The open door policy in the office is also leading itself to more meetings and discussions.

Type Date Details

Networking January 31st Coffee Morning
Networking March 15th Chambers After Dark
Networking April 19th Lunch and Learn
Networking May 16th Auto Enrolment
Networking June 21st Chambers After Dark
Networking July 19th Lunch and Learn
Networking August 16th Breakfast Briefing
Networking Sept 20th Chambers After Dark
Networking Oct 18th Lunch and Learn
Networking Nov 25th Breakfast Briefing
Networking Dec 20th Chambers After Dark

Digital Marketing

Laois Tourism's website and digital presence will be updated through a yearlong programme through Just Transition Fund. This will require 4 days per month as the programme is extremely detailed. It is valued at approx. €25,000 of 100% funding.

On a daily basis we primarily focus on LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram for LCA, with the core messaging that the Chamber is back, that Laois is open for business and visitors. In Laois Tourism there has been a significant increase in reach and engagement on all platforms, up by 660% since February. Invest in Laois new website is in discussion with LEO and Laois County council. The project to update Laois Chambers website is on hold due to budget requirements.

Training Initiatives

We are in discussions with LEO about running "Increasing sales and leads course". Treacy's have requested a basic hospitality training and this may be provided by LEO or LOETB. Magister a new member have delivered a lunch and learn around the WRC and current cases.

Business Council

The business council was at the networking event in Midlands Park on Friday 15th March. This initiative is to give members a greater say in their chamber. This is a great initiative to get businesses involved in the shaping of the Chambers future. What do they want from the Chamber and how can we support their businesses.

The Commuter Club

The Commuter Club will be mentioned at the Networking event in Midlands Park on Friday 15th. Since discussing this, we have learned that Grow Remote have social club in Portlaoise. We are looking into developing this further with Grow Remote.

Invest in Laois

This group are due to meet in the coming weeks. The purpose will be to devise a plan of how we dedicate resource and identify opportunities to increase the attraction of businesses to Laois.

Funding and Events

1. Business Awards – 24th November 2024
2. Shine – Postponed to 2025
3. Jobs Fair – Postponed to 2025

As Leader funding is unavailable at present the Chambers will be postponing paid marketing and delivery of large events. This is only a postponement.

Signed:


Cllr Conor Bergin
Chairperson

Signed:


Julie Bergin
Financial Management Accountant