



MINUTES OF MEETING

Project Name	Strategic Policy Committee Enterprise, Economic Development & Tourism	
Purpose of Meeting		
Location of Meeting	Council Chamber	Date and Time
		11.00 am 19 th December 2022
In attendance	Name	Representing
	Cllr. Conor Bergin Cllr. Aidan Mullins Cllr. Aisling Moran Cllr Seamus McDonald Caroline Hofman Deirdre O’Connell-Hopkins Pat Hennessy P.J. Phelan Julie Bergin (JB), Financial/Management Accountant, Finance Evelyn Reddin (ER), Head of LEO Denise Rainey (DR), Administrative Officer, BSU Elaine Moore (EM), Administrative Officer Niamh Bright (NB), Staff Officer, Finance	Chairperson SPC Member LCC Member LCC Member LCC Business/Commercial Rep Trade Union Rep Agriculture/Farming Rep Community/Voluntary Rep LCC LCC LCC LCC
Apologies	Pat Culleton Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance Sheila Cahill, Staff Officer BSU	Dev/Construction Rep LCC LCC

Item No.	Description	Action By	Date for Completion
1.	<p>Confirmation of minutes Minutes of meeting of 1st September 2022 were proposed by Cllr Aidan Mullins and seconded by Caroline Hofman.</p>		
2.	<p>LEO Update</p> <p>Evelyn Reddin (ER) provided an update on the works being carried out by the Local Enterprise Office (see Appendix 1).</p> <p>BSU Update</p> <p>Denise Rainey (DR) provided an update on the current projects being carried out by the Business Support Unit (BSU) (see Appendix 2).</p> <p>Laois TASTE Group – in 2023 a Coordinator will be recruited for a 12-month period to promote the Laois Taste brand on a local and national basis.</p> <p>Laois County Council was awarded €50,000 funding in respect of a marketing campaign to attract remote workers to Digital Hubs in Laois under the Town & Village Renewal Scheme. Cllr Mullins queried whether the hubs were being used. DR confirmed that while the Portlaoise hubs are fully occupied, there is availability in the remaining hubs. Cllr Moran commented that she felt that the hubs were not as popular as a result of blended working arrangements that a lot of organisations / companies had introduced. Cllr Mullins proposed that the use of digital hubs should be targeted at Ukrainian refugees, who are trying to run their businesses from Ireland.</p> <p>Deirdre O’Connell-Hopkins advised that a review of blended working arrangements is to take place in Quarter 1 of 2023.</p>		

	<p>DR will arrange for the subcommittee on remote working to meet at the end of January 2023 to discuss same.</p> <p>Cllr Moran requested that the Vacant Commercial Property Incentive Scheme be extended to include Ballylinan. Cllr Moran indicated that there are very few businesses in the town, as it mostly consists of residential units.</p> <p>There was a discussion around the benefits of a 'health check' for the different towns in Co. Laois.</p> <p>DR confirmed that each local authority will be recruiting a Town Regeneration Officer, and this may be part of their brief. Cllr Mullins requested that the Town Regeneration Officer focus on the smaller towns, such as Borris-in-Ossory, Ballylinan, etc rather than focusing on the larger towns in the County.</p>		
<p>3.</p>	<p>Tourism Update – Elaine Moore</p> <p>Elaine Moore (EM) provided an update on Tourism (see Appendix 3).</p> <p>EM gave two presentations at the meeting. The first presentation highlighted the festivals which took place in 2022 and which received financial support from the Council. The second presentation focussed on Christmas markets and events, which received financial support from the Council and the BSU in 2022.</p> <p>EM thanked Caroline Hofman for her help in preparing the presentations.</p> <p>Cllr Bergin noted that it is very positive that the issue of car parking at Glenbarrow and The Rock of Dunamase is progressing. Cllr Moran queried what the delay is in signing the contracts and requested that a timeline be put in place to ensure the contracts are signed in a timely fashion.</p>		

	<p>Cllr Bergin praised the breadth of festivals which took place throughout the County and had been supported by Laois County Council. Deirdre O’Connell-Hopkins commented that out of all the festivals highlighted in the presentation, she was only aware of 4 of them and feels that more promotion is required as it would increase footfall in the County. EM advised that the Promotional Tourism Brochure will contain a QR code, which will link directly to all event details. A draft version of the brochure will be brought to SPC in the New Year.</p> <p>Cllr Moran queried how much financial support was provided by Laois County Council to the National Ploughing Association for the Ploughing Championships, which took place in September. EM confirmed that LCC paid for a marquee, which provided stalls for Laois businesses and organisations. This cost €20,000. She was unaware of any other funding being provided by LCC.</p> <p>Cllr Moran noted that a feasibility study was carried out in relation to camp sites in the County but that nothing has happened in this area to date. She feels this should be prioritised as it would encourage people to stay in Laois and promote tourism.</p>		
<p>4.</p>	<p>Laois Chamber Alliance – Caroline Hofman</p> <p>Caroline Hofman provided an update on the activities of Laois Chamber Alliance (see Appendix 4).</p> <p>EU Just Transition Tourism Funding in the amount of €68 million was announced in December and will be available to the 8 midland counties. Fáilte Ireland will administer the funding. It is unclear how much of the funding will be available for Laois.</p>		

<p>5.</p>	<p>AOB</p> <p>Cllr Bergin extended thoughts and well wishes on behalf of the SPC members to Pat Culleton and his family.</p> <p>Dates for 2023 Meetings</p> <p>The dates were set for the 2023 SPC meetings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Thursday, 2nd March 2023 @ 11:00am - Thursday, 1st June 2023 @ 11:00am - Thursday, 7th September 2023 @ 11:00am - Thursday, 7th December 2023 @ 11:00am 		
<p>7.</p>	<p>Date of next meeting:</p> <p>Thursday, 2nd March 2023 @ 11:00am</p>		

Appendix 1 - LEO UPDATE

Demand continued to be high for supports through LEO from businesses across all sectors. Businesses from all sectors, regardless of size, continue to engage and are presenting with similar challenges, the main ones being recruitment/retention of staff and high energy costs.

2022 was a very productive year for LEO, some highlights include:

- €319,514 approved in grant aid to 14 businesses with potential to create 51 new jobs. Under our current remit we can only support businesses in the manufacturing/internationally traded services sectors employing up to 10 employees. From January 2023 the Local Enterprise Offices will be able to financially support businesses who are manufacturing/internationally traded services, employing more than 10 fulltime employees and are strongly focused on internationalising their products or services.
- €14,054 approved in TAME grants to support business to develop their export journey
- 34 Trading online approved to the value of €€71,870. The trading online voucher is an initiative which aims to support small businesses to enhance their online trading presence. Vouchers to the value of €2,500 (50% of eligible costs up to the maximum of €2,500) continue to be available through LEO.
- LEO continued to offer complimentary mentoring in any aspect of business, from HR to Finance, for all businesses in Co. Laois regardless of sector and size. This mentoring support is currently being delivered remotely via zoom, teams etc. To-date over 260 businesses have availed of mentoring with ongoing enquiries re same. Aside from our mentoring, over 300 one-to-one business advice sessions were delivered by LEO Staff throughout the year.
- LEO continued to offer a range of online interactive training programmes to support businesses. The courses are currently free to clients and are delivered online with plans to deliver a mix of both inhouse and online training from January 2023. 85 training courses were delivered with 979 participants of which 135 potential start-ups participated in Start Your Own Business Courses
- Supported 10 Laois companies in making loan applications to Micro Finance Ireland. These are primarily companies that are unable to secure funding from banks and other lending institutions.
- 8 companies participated in the Lean for Micro Programme (The Lean for Micro is designed to encourage clients to adopt lean business principles in their organisations to increase competitiveness. The programme is aimed at owners/managers, across a variety of sectors to gain an introduction to lean concepts as well as a practical understanding of lean by undertaking a short, focused in-company assignment with expert consultancy support and guidance.
- 10 Laois Companies took part in Midlands Management Development Programme along with 8 businesses from Offaly.
- 11 Laois businesses took part in a six week Grow your business programme
- 31 companies took part in the Green for Micro programme (The aim of this programme is to assist businesses in lowering their carbon footprint, reducing costs and improving the

environmental profile of the business in the marketplace). We also facilitated all of the Laois Co Working Hubs to take part in the programme.

- We are continuing to roll out the Digital Start digitization programme. This programme has been designed to assist LEO clients in the Micro sector to prepare and implement a plan for the adoption of digital tools and techniques across the business. This programme which was previously only available to Enterprise Ireland clients is now been made available to LEO clients with a manufacturing and/ or export focus. Two Laois businesses have taken part in this programme to-date and we will continue to promote it in the New Year.
- The Student Enterprise Programme is an important remit of the LEO to promote entrepreneurship and to encourage new young entrepreneurs in Laois. 7 secondary schools in Laois have signed up for the programme and are currently taking part in enterprise workshops which will culminate with a county final in March of 2023. The aim of the programme is to give participants an insight into what it's like to run a small business.
- Local Enterprise Week took place in March 2022. Over 100 Laois business attended events both online and in person throughout the week. We are currently preparing the schedule for the 2023 event which will host a networking lunch for women in business in collaboration with Laois Chamber.
- LEO continued to support the Engenuity Midlands Engineering Network which is a member led engineering cluster based in the Midlands. The Engenuity Engineering Network has been going since 2017 and is steadily growing with 9 Laois members now on board. The cluster focuses on bringing solutions to industry challenges for engineering firms in the Midlands using peer learning and leveraging existing Government supports.
- **LEO continued to support Laois Taste in collaboration with the Business Support Unit.**
- LEO continued to work with the co-working hubs to develop collaborations. We hosted a number of training programmes in the hubs with a view to increasing awareness of the facilities and driving more traffic there.

Ukraine Enterprise Crisis Scheme

Under this new scheme there will be funding available to assist viable but vulnerable firms of all sizes in the manufacturing and internationally traded services sectors.

Stream 1 will assist firms suffering liquidity problems with aid of up to €500,000 available.

Stream 2 of the Scheme is for “energy-intensive businesses” (where energy costs were at least 3% of turnover prior to the crisis) with aid of up to €2m available.

The Local Enterprise Offices will have a role to play in supporting companies access Stream 1 of the Scheme. LEO applicants for direct grant assistance of €20,000 will be processed through the LEO office. Applications for awards of €40,000 or greater will require the LEO to undertake the commercial appraisal but will then be approved through the Enterprise Ireland Investment Committee. The LEO's are only required to signpost businesses to Stream 2 of the Scheme.

2023 Focus:

Going forward our focus will be:

- Developing Export Markets
- Innovation and competitiveness
- The Green Agenda
- Digital economy
- Management Development
- Supporting Local

Appendix 2 - 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 all towns in the County. The BSU has made an online application facility available this year also. 17 applications received to date.

2. Business Incentive Schemes & Early payment Incentive Scheme

This scheme is available to businesses who open 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 & Ballinakill.

3. Town and Village Streetscape Enhancement Scheme 2022

€100,000 has been allocated to Abbeylisk 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.

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.

Two applications were submitted by Downtown Portlaoise Laois Partnership which were successful in acquiring funding:

- Christmas Festival 2022
- Marketing Portlaoise online

5. Portarlington Façade Enhancement Scheme

The Portarlington Façade Enhancement scheme was launched in 2021. There has been great interest in the scheme. 47 applications were processed in 2021. The scheme is open to both residential and commercial properties in French Church Street, Market Square and Main Street. The grant available is 75% of the cost of the works subject to a maximum grant of €750. The scheme has been extended to new areas for 2022- Spa Street and Park Avenue/Lane. 19 applications received to date - 15 of which have been approved.

6. Portlaoise Façade Enhancement Scheme – Phase 3

Phase 3 of the Portlaoise Façade Enhancement Scheme was launched at the beginning of 2022 and this scheme has also generated a lot of interest. The scheme has been extended to Hynds Square, Church Street, Church Avenue and Railway Street. 21 applications received to date 17 of which have been approved. This scheme is funded from Failte Ireland's Tourism Destination Town Fund.

7. 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 in the first quarter of 2023. The signs will be erected by LCC area office staff.

8. 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 another town in 2022

9. Laois TASTE group

The BSU have just completed a very successful project with Laois Taste. The BSU received funding of €10,780 from the Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine in respect of various initiatives designed to re-boot Laois Taste post the COVID pandemic. Laois County Council provided match funding to the project. Four different elements to the scheme:

- Re-Launch of the Provenance Scheme
- Update of the Laois Taste Directory
- Support of Laois Taste at a number of high-profile events
- New website for Laois Taste

10. 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 contract with the successful tenderer will be signed in early January.

11. 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.

Appendix 3 – TOURISM UPDATE

Portlaoise Destination Town:

CLS Signage, Armagh, has been appointed to manufacture the directional signage / informative and interpretation panels. These will be delivered by the end of January 2023 and installed thereafter.

Barrow Blue Way:

A meeting of the Barrow Blue Way Steering Group took place in Kildare County Council on 8th September 2022. Items discussed included an update on groundworks, environmental compliance, and design considerations. A budget update was provided. Groundwork 43km route will be completed by Spring 2023. The Laois section is complete. There will be an official launch at the end of 2023.

Consultants have been commissioned to prepare a 'Placemaking Plan' to provide consistency in terms of a wayfinding approach to facilities, amenities and access. Funding of €150,000 is being provided by Kildare Leader. The consultants met with the Steering Group in November to present what is envisaged.

Visitor monitoring counters have been installed in 5 locations at Lowtown (Robertstown), Rathangan, Monasterevin, Vicarstown and Athy. The following information was reported for the period 1st Jan – 7th September 2022:

Period 1 January 2022 → 7 September 2022										
Month	Lowtown Pedestrian	Lowtown Cyclist	Rathangan Pedestrian	Rathangan Cyclist	Monasterevin Pedestrian	Monasterevin Cyclist	Vicarstown Pedestrian	Vicarstown Cyclist	Athy Pedestrian	Athy Cyclist
January			3411	600	1561	92	6987	416	2691	145
February	632	85	2228	208	1077	54	4513	176	1997	81
March	1738	357	3412	559	1806	157	7031	508	2823	201
April	1942	377	2604	496	1801	102	6709	434	2950	286
May	1844	448	3547	800	1706	225	7671	1125	3363	469
June	1498	474	2996	705	2954	128	4104	627	3692	338
July	1394	531	2940	856	1664	190	4086	804	3853	462
August	1759	701	3137	936	2016	173	4326	1016	3729	388
September	316	123	591	116	410	31	595	79	602	60
	11123	3096	24866	5276	14995	1152	46022	5185	25700	2430

A 'return trip' correction factor should be taken into consideration when viewing these figures. Early usage numbers are positive – this is without any promotion. Vicarstown has the highest number of pedestrians. These figures are affected by the weekly Vicarstown Parkrun on a Saturday and Junior Parkrun on a Sunday morning. Car parking remains an issue at all locations. Courtwood GAA in Ballybrittas has received €20,000 through ORIS funding to develop carparking, Access to tie in with the Blueway has been facilitated.

Glenbarrow Carpark

Agreement has been reached in principle with landowner to Lease site next to existing carpark. Final Lease is currently being completed, following which it is proposed to complete works to provide carparking in the area for up to 70 spaces.

Car Parking at The Rock of Dunamase

Laois County Council has reached agreement regarding the purchase of a site adjacent to the Rock of Dunamase. The agreement is subject to the works being approved for planning (Part VIII). Preliminary meetings regarding the Part VIII have been held with the consultants appointed. A Road Safety Audit and a Traffic Impact Assessment will be carried out in early 2023. It is hoped to complete all by the end of the first quarter of 2023.

Timahoe Heritage Centre:

Tenders were received for the Conservation and upgrading of the Community-run Heritage Centre in the former Church of Ireland in Timahoe. The Tender Documents have been evaluated and it is proposed to award the contract for these works in early January 2023. The works include repairs to the vestry roof, repairs to external doors, painting, new kitchenette and reception area, heating system, floor coverings.

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

The SPC sub-committee is comprised of Cllr. Aisling Moran, P.J. Phelan, Caroline Moran and myself. We held our first meeting on Wednesday 16th November and discussed items to be included in the promotional brochure, its format and funding. The next meeting of the Committee will be held in early 2023. If any member of the SPC wishes to include any item, please contact me. A draft brochure, when finalised, will be brought before a meeting of the S.P.C.

Tourism Grant Scheme 2022

Laois County Council has provided financial support for festivals and events in the County in 2022 in the sum of approximately €78,000. The following presentation highlights some of the events that took place in the County in 2022. - *Presentation*

A number of Christmas Markets and events have also received financial support from Laois County Council and the Business Support Unit - *Presentation*

Appendix 4 – LAOIS CHAMBER ALLIANCE UPDATE

Merger

Following Laois Chamber's AGM in September, Laois Chamber and Laois Tourism have officially merged to form Laois Chamber Alliance.

Laois Chamber Alliance is now an umbrella body for both Laois Chamber and Laois Tourism. We are currently recruiting for a Tourism Development Executive who will be responsible for developing tourism in Laois and work closely with members in the tourism industry.

Events

Laois Business Awards 2022: The inaugural Laois Business Awards held by Laois Chamber Alliance were held on Friday, 4th November in The Heritage, Killenard. This was a hugely successful event, with nearly 300 tickets sold and 11 award category winners announced on the night. Midland Steel were the overall winner of the "Laois Business of the Year" category.

A big thank you to our main sponsors, Local Enterprise Office Laois, Laois County Council, and Gas Networks Ireland for supporting this event.

3rd Annual Laois Jobs Fair - 2023: We are very grateful to Laois Partnership for their support, and to LEO Laois and LOETB for sponsoring the 2023 event taking place on Monday, 20th February 2023 from 12pm to 7pm in the Midlands Park Hotel, Portlaoise.

Investment in Laois

Laois Chamber Alliance leads the Invest in Laois committee, which looks at marketing and attracting Laois as a key destination for domestic and foreign direct investment.

Invest in Laois, together with Directors from Laois Chamber Alliance and myself, have met with our Oireachtas representatives and subsequently with An Tánaiste, Leo Varadkar, in Government Buildings in Dublin together with the IDA and Enterprise Ireland.

We have highlighted the lack of IDA supported jobs in Laois at a local, regional, and national level. The next steps are to see the development in a timely manner of the recently acquired 45 acres by the IDA adjacent to their existing Business and Technology Park on the Mountrath Road.

I recently visited Brussels where I met the Head of Regions, Teresa Lennon. The level of EU funding available is high, and it would be great if we could tap into this. It goes beyond Just Transition funding, is there any way to tap into this?