

A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR TOURISM IN LAOIS 2018-2023

A Strategy
To Develop An Integrated
Tourism Destination

This report was produced with the support of



Department of Rural and
Community Development

An Roinn Forbartha
Tuaithe agus Pobail



Coiste um Fhorbairt Pobail Áitiúil Laoise
Laois Local Community Development
Committee



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Laois Tourism Company acknowledge the support of Laois County Council in the production of this report.



Vision

A collaborative approach to tourism that enables Laois to harness the potential of its built and natural heritage to become an all year-round tourism destination.



Laois Destination
Promise

Attract visitors into the heart of Ireland's story through quality authentic Irish heritage and outdoor activity experiences.



Mission

Grow tourism visitor numbers and value of tourism through the enhancement of the Laois tourism product and service base supported by the structures that contribute to the strategic development of the tourism sector across the county

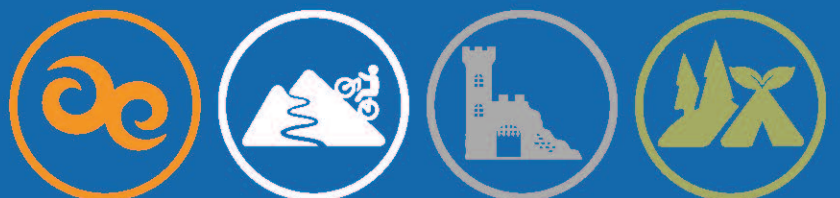


Success Factors

Tourism leadership and partnership
Increased Visitor Numbers
Increase Tourism Spend
Increased Tourism Employment
Market presence and position
Enhanced tourism product base

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INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW



1.1 Introduction & Overview

Laois Tourism Co CLG commissioned W2 Consulting to devise a strategic tourism plan for Laois for the period 2018-2023. The following strategy is based on a programme of research and consultation conducted between May – September 2017. The structure of the new tourism strategy is built on capitalising on new tourism opportunities for Laois and aligning the county with emerging tourism trends, national policy and, most significantly, an ambition throughout the county to develop tourism to become a buoyant economic sector.

The research phase included a programme of primary research with visitors to county Laois, with interviews conducted across a number of sampling points throughout the county. A tourism perception study was conducted nationally among prospective visitors to Laois to examine current views of the county as place to visit. A wider programme of consultation was undertaken among the tourism industry and the wider stakeholder base supporting tourism in the county. These included a series of in-depth interviews, tourism visioning and visitor experience workshops. A number of industry surveys were also conducted to provide an opportunity for additional input to the process.

The county has enjoyed a pattern of tourism growth over the past number of years reflecting national tourism performance. However, greater opportunity exists in terms of international and domestic tourism to build a thriving economic sector. The accessibility of the county combined with a richness of natural and built heritage must be capitalised on. Equally important, to ensure the successful implementation of the strategy, will be the creation of dedicated tourism marketing and development structures. The national tourism economy is a competitive sector. Successful destinations require dedicated resources to act as the focal point to harness the tourism industry potential of the areas and manage the destination profiling as a visitor orientated destination.

The new opportunity presented by Ireland's Ancient East must be to the forefront of future tourism development in the county. The initiative represents a springboard for so many elements of the tourism sector in Laois. Central to successfully aligning with the Ireland's Ancient East opportunity is the focus on creating local visitor experiences. Tourism is increasingly focusing on the experience economy and future national and international marketing will gravitate to destinations that offer unique and immersive experiences. The wealth of heritage in Laois and the richness of stories across the county provide a real opportunity for industry engagement. Crucially visitors seek experiences in their planning and not trips to counties. Laois possesses all the ingredients to create a diverse range of visitor experiences that will be central to the future success of tourism in the county.

1.2 Laois Tourism Situational Analysis

The programme of primary and secondary research and consultations was used as the basis to examine the tourism industry under the headings of tourism industry strengths, prospective challenges and future tourism opportunities.

Tourism in Laois - Strengths

1. Diversity of natural and built heritage asset base.
2. Accessibility of destination and key destination assets.
3. Strong portfolio of water and land based outdoor recreation options.
4. Rich pool of unique historical stories with strong relevancy to IAE strategy development.
5. National recognition of Laois of an accessible event base.
6. Current capacity to attract and cater for large scale business tourism activity.
7. Association with quality accommodation stock across the five star and four star categories.
8. Ability to attract and cater for the range of target segments within the domestic and international visitor segments.
9. Sport tourism assets to develop water and land based events.

Tourism in Laois – Prospective Challenges

1. Tourism’s current status as a credible economic sector within Laois.
2. Not associated as a national tourism destination.
3. Low levels of appreciation of tourism potential across the county.
4. Seasonal tourism focus.
5. National road infrastructure by-passing Laois as competing destinations become closer.
6. Lack of funding model to sustain visible tourism servicing structures such as TIO’s.
7. Poor historical performance in attracting state tourism funding
8. Depth of accommodation base throughout the county.
9. Evening economy / entertainment options for visitors is limited.
10. Current levels of industry collaboration and awareness of wider tourism proposition within the county.
11. Limited inter-agency engagement platforms focused on tourism industry.
12. Level of day visits to the county to outdoor amenities with no economic impact on local businesses.
13. Brexit and current reliance on UK market for largest volumes of overseas visitor traffic.

Tourism in Laois – Future Opportunities

1. Land and water based outdoor recreation innovation.
2. Heritage and IAE innovation.
3. Gateway town themes for community development focus.
4. Enhanced collaboration to develop new destination experience.
5. Sport Tourism portfolio of events across water and land based activity.
6. Development of key events to leverage off the association of Laois as a national events centre.
7. Capitalise on the meeting point of Ireland as the basis for developing high value business tourism potential.
8. Uniqueness of accommodation mix as platform for further development.
9. A central base for exploration.
10. Collaborative approach to secure capital funding for key projects across the county.

1.3 Destination Insights

The initial phases of the research focused on visitor attitudes and perceptions of Laois as a destination and the associated tourism product. The results of both the primary research conducted among visitors to Laois and prospective visitors to the county reinforced the corer characteristics of the county as a visitor destination and areas that represent the starting point for the next phase of tourism growth in Laois.

Table 1: Visitor Survey – Key Findings

Key Laois Attractions	Principal Associations with Laois
Rock of Dunamaise	Countryside
Emo Court Park	Good Food
Major Events	Leisure Activities
Slieve Blooms	Major Events

The survey conducted among visitors to county Laois highlighted the Rock of Dunamaise and Emo Court Park as the major attractions in the county. Laois’s profile as host to major events was a very significant association with the county. The Slieve Blooms and the quality of the countryside was equally important and among the key reasons why visitors would return to Laois. The county was associated with good food reflecting visitor satisfaction with the current level of provision and food also featured as an area that would encourage people to return to visit Laois.

Table 2 – Visitor Survey – Key Findings

Reason why visitors would return to Laois	Most associated with Laois as a destination
Visitor Attractions	Slieve Blooms
Attractive Countryside	Rock of Dunamaise
Outdoor Amenities	Emo Court Park
Food	
Leisure Activities	

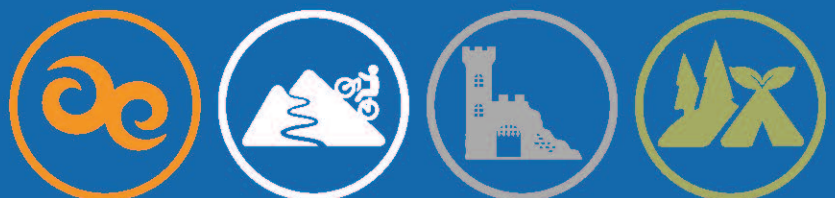
The ability to attract increased levels of visitors was focused on developing the visitor attractions, marketing the countryside access and enhancing the outdoor amenity provision. The ability to engage in the local tourism economy was reflected by visitors who highlighted the food theme and quality of leisure activities as reasons to visit Laois in the future.

Table 3: Destination perception study of Laois.

National Perception		
Key Associations	Future Attractors	Destination Awareness
Attractive Countryside	Visitor Attractions	Rock of Dunamaise
Heritage	Food	Slieve Blooms
Historic Towns & Places	Outdoor Amenities	
	Historic Towns & Places	

The review of national attitudes to Laois as a tourism destination reinforced the findings of the visitor’s research conducted within the destination. The main associations of perspective visitors are the countryside and richness of heritage and the heritage towns located throughout the county. Investment in visitor attractions as hero products for Laois combined with increased messaging around food were among the principal attractors to Laois. The enhancement of outdoor leisure amenities and examining ways of developing the historic towns stories were also highlighted. The Rock of Dunamaise and Slieve Blooms were consistently mentioned as the main attractions in Laois with no other site achieving close to the recognition they achieved during the research.

TOURISM CONTEXT



2.1 Developments in Irish Tourism Strategy 2013-2025

Tourism played a central part in the economic recovery plan for Ireland following the economic crisis of 2008. With significant interventions from government, the sector stabilized, recovered and has entered a period of sustained growth. Now, the Government's "People, Place and Policy: Growing Tourism to 2025" outlines an ambitious strategy for Ireland. The focus is to increase the economic contribution of tourism to the Irish economy, by increasing the value of tourism service exports. Its ambition is that employment in the tourism sector will grow to 250,000 by 2025 and that there will be 10 million visits to Ireland annually.

To achieve this, a number of strategic adjustments can be observed:

- a shift in focus from supply to a more consumer-driven, research-led approach.
- a greater understanding of the motivations of visitors through the development of a consumer segmentation policy.
- a drive to create and deliver experiences and memories tailored to specific segments (rather than simply supplying products and services).
- an emphasis on building brand architecture, with three national brands of scale now leading out the overseas communications campaign: Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East and Dublin Breath of Fresh Air.
- the use of the national brands to disperse visitor traffic out from the traditional hotspots and hero attractions and towards lesser known sites and experiences.
- a greater emphasis on sustainability and on working to balance the needs of landscape and community with the economic needs of the industry.

2.2 Irish Tourism Performance

Worldwide, the tourism industry has been experiencing steady growth. International tourist arrivals increased from 528 million in 2005 to 1.19 billion in 2015. Figures are forecasted to exceed 1.8 billion by 2030.

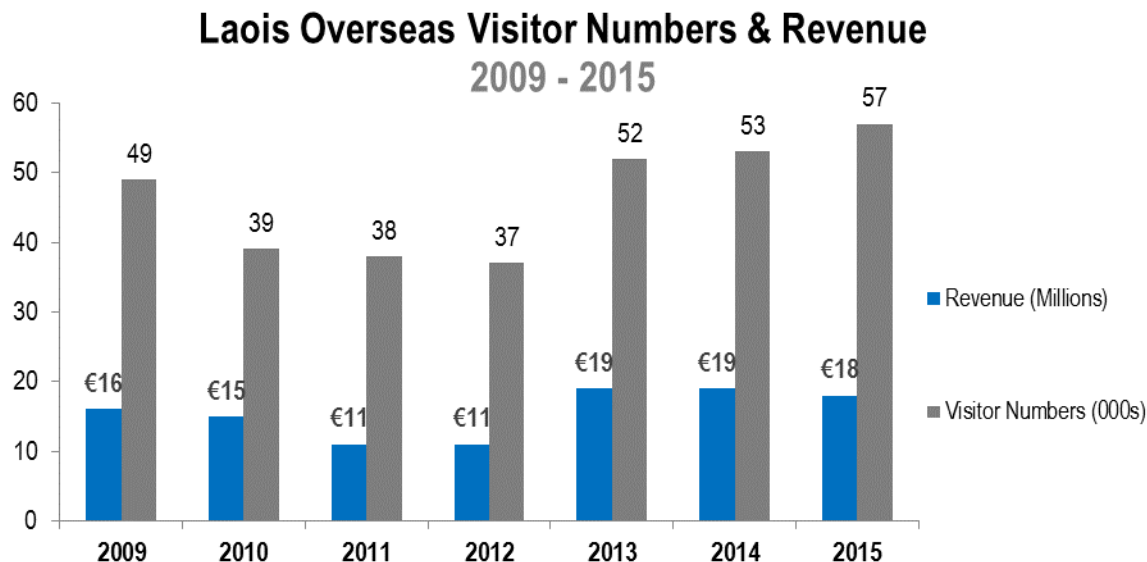
For Ireland, tourism is the largest indigenous industry, generating more than 4% of GDP and employing an estimated 225,000 people. In 2016, Ireland attracted 8.8 million overseas visitors, a growth of 8.8% on 2015, and indeed a fourth successive year of growth. The total value of the Irish tourism industry stood at €8.4 billion in 2016.

Great Britain is the largest source market for Ireland, accounting for 41.5% of all visitors. Mainland Europe accounts for 35.6% while almost 17% arrive from North America. Despite growth in emerging markets in recent years and the economic uncertainty arising from Brexit, Great Britain, USA, France and Germany are forecast to remain Ireland's strongest markets for some years to come.

2.3 Laois Tourism Performance

Performance Overview

Visitor numbers and revenue to Laois have also entered recovery and have grown steadily since 2013 reflecting the national pattern.



In 2015, Laois welcomed 57,000 overseas visitors bringing a revenue of €18 million to the county. It is estimated that 84,000 domestic visitors also travelled to Laois in 2015 and contributed €13 million in revenue to the county. The per capita spend of an overseas visitor to Laois is €316, approximately double that of the domestic visitor at €155.

2.4 Laois in the National Context

The following provides a national context to the tourism performance of Laois.

Table 4: Examination of Laois performance versus National performance

Indicator	Ireland	Laois
Employment %	11%	3% (IBEC 2017)
Overseas Visitors	8.0 million	57,000
Overseas Revenue	€4.3 billion	€18 million
Overseas Tourism Revenue per 10,000 people	€6.40 million	€2.12 million
% British Visitors	42%	54%
% North American Visitors	16%	11%
% Mainland Europe	36%	30%
Domestic Trips	7.5 million	84,000
Domestic Revenue	€1.5 billion	€13 million
Per capita spend overseas visitor	€530	€316
Per capita spend domestic visitor	€203	€155
Bed Nights	5,017 (national average)	1,226

In the context of the strategic development of tourism in Laois, a number of key points are highlighted as areas for strategic focus:

- Laois is currently one of Ireland’s least visited counties.
- Laois’ overseas revenue from tourism per 10,000 population is the third lowest in the country.
- Both domestic and overseas visitors have a lower average spend in Laois than in the rest of the country.
- A smaller percentage of the work population are employed in tourism in Laois than in the rest of Ireland.
- Laois has a relatively higher reliance on the British market now entering a period of uncertainty due to Brexit.
- Laois has the fifth lowest number of hotel beds in the country.

Employment levels in the county are strong despite not relying on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in contrast to other counties. In terms of employment, Laois has the fifth highest participation rate in the country, standing at 63.6% (the national average is 61.4%).

The absence of FDI highlights the reliance on public sector roles and the SME and micro enterprise sectors. It currently has the least number of jobs in FDI employment per 10,000 population (25 against the national average of 461). Similarly, Co. Laois is bottom of the national table in terms of Enterprise Ireland supported jobs per 10,000 population – 336 compared to a national average of 721. The economic landscape suggests the opportunity for tourism enterprise development should be key to future economic development activity.

Table 5: Tourism Economy Employment; Laois

Industry	
Taxi Operators	93
Other passenger and transport	169
Hotels & similar accommodation	633
Short –Stay Accommodation	11
Restaurants and mobile food service activities	671
Travel Agency, tour operators and other reservation service and related activities	57
Creative, Arts, and entertainment activities	52
Sports Activities and amusement and recreation activities	223
Total	1,909

Source: CSO 2016

According to most recent CSO data tourism related employment is a total of 1,909 across the county. In contrast to national averages (11% of national employment is tourism related) it remains a small percentage of the overall composition of the Laois labour market.

2.5 Accommodation in Laois

The following represents the current overview of approved accommodation stock in Laois. In addition to the current levels of approved accommodation it is important to note the non approved sector and new options for visitors to book and stay in the county. This is reflected in the level of accommodation that appears through Air BnB and Homestay particularly at peak times throughout the year to reflect the larger events hosted throughout the year in Laois.

Table 6: Laois Hotel Accommodation Stock (Failte Ireland Approved)

Type of Hotels Available	Quantity in Laois	Breakdown of Ireland's Hotel Stock (2015)	Rooms	Beds	%
1 Star	1 (10%)	2,292 (4%)	15	34	3%
2 Star	2 (20%)	8,595 (15%)	33	75	6%
3 Star	2 (20%)	24,639 (43%)	130	295	24%
4 Star	3 (30%)	19,482 (34%)	243	553	45%
5 Star	2 (30%)	2,292 (4%)	118	269	22%
Total	10 (100%)	57,300 (100%)	539	1,226	100%

Table 7: Laois Approved non Hotel Accommodation Stock

	Quantity	Rooms	Capacity (PAX)
Guest House / B&B	12	41	86
Hostel	2	19	77
Self Catering	7	19	37
Total	21	79	200

In addition to the above levels of approved accommodation stock, visitors to Laois can also avail of alternative accommodation sources through Air BnB and Homestay. An assessment of Air Bnb accommodation availability suggests an average of 60 locations across the county. However, this increases considerably around peak event periods such as Electric Picnic and the Ploughing Championships when hosted in or adjacent to Laois.

2.6 Tourism Strategy Alignment

Ireland's Ancient East

"Ireland's Ancient East" is the national brand relevant to Laois – the county is located in the very centre of the Ireland's Ancient East geography.

Ireland's Ancient East is a brand concept created in 2014 that seeks to attract visitors to the east and south of the country, much of which has, like Laois, traditionally performed relatively poorly in tourism terms. The brand seeks to build on the wealth of historical and cultural assets in the east and south of Ireland with the following strategic intentions:

- To drive growth in international visitor numbers, tourism revenue and associated tourism employment in the regions which currently underperform in these areas.
- To move Ireland's east and south from a transit and day tripping zone to a destination which attracts international overnight visitors.
- To develop a world class visitor experience, which delivers fully on the brand promise.

The goal is to make Ireland's Ancient East the most engaging, enjoyable and accessible cultural holiday experience in Europe. It aims to do this by building a brand of international quality and credibility and by creating a unique and authentic storytelling approach that sets it apart from the competition. In a crowded travel marketplace, stories and story-telling are the key to making this region stand out. The promise to visitors is "5000 years of European history told by the best storytellers in the world".

The success of the brand hinges on trade embracing the brand opportunity to create world-class visitor experiences, based on best-in-class storytelling and interpretation. To support trade in developing world-class experiences and to strengthen the touring proposition, the brand uses 9 story-telling themes. These provide a framework for leveraging the brand, categorising the tourism offering of the county and connecting experiences in Laois with winning visitor experiences elsewhere in the region.

Relevance for Laois Tourism Strategy:

- Ireland's Ancient East is a brand that is built on the very resources that Laois has in abundance – historical and cultural assets
- It is part of a long-term strategy that will form the basis of all tourism investment and development in the region for the coming 10 year period at least.
- Laois is located in the very centre of the Ireland's Ancient East geography, a strategic advantage for those who opt in to the 'touring region' visitor promise.
- The existing tourism asset base in Laois resonates strongly with 4 Ireland's Ancient East themes: Tales of Two Worlds, Ancient Ireland, Castles & Conquests and Sacred Ireland

2.7 Consumer Segmentation Framework

Segmenting consumers is not a new concept and Irish tourism has traditionally segmented by demographics and geography. However, extensive research by Fáilte Ireland has found that, from a marketing perspective, people are best differentiated by the values they hold and their individual motivations. Based on this, a consumer segmentation framework has been used since 2013 as the basis for visitor experience development throughout the country. Three segments in particular have been identified as Ireland’s best prospects for growing tourism, both domestically and in the main overseas markets.

A snapshot of these 3 segments is given in the following table:

Segment	Motivation	Demographics
Social Energisers	seek vibrant city life in new and exciting destinations and are motivated by factors which Ireland, and Dublin in particular, is strong on.	They are comparatively young visitors travelling as couples or part of adult groups.
Culturally Curious	are out to broaden their minds, expand their experience by exploring new landscapes, history and culture and look to really understand the destinations that they visit. They are independent-minded and like getting off the beaten track.	These are comparatively older visitors, who typically travel as a couple or on their own.
Great Escapers	They travel very much as a close-knit group and are on holiday to take time out, to get physical with nature where they can escape their hectic lives and focus on each other. Consequently, they are less interested in meeting others.	These are comparatively younger visitors who are often couples with children.

Relevance for Laois Tourism Strategy:

- The natural and cultural heritage resources of Co. Laois resonate strongly with the Culturally Curious and Great Escaper segments.
- New or enhanced visitor experiences for Laois must respond to the specific motivations and needs of these two segments.
- Future support for capital investment in tourism will be reserved for projects that fit not only the Ireland’s Ancient East brand architecture but also this consumer segmentation framework.

2.8 Creating & Enhancing Visitor Experiences In Laois

The strategic, policy and consumer contexts outlined in the previous sections would appear to map a clear development objective for Laois tourism:

Create segment-based experiences that align with the Ireland’s Ancient East brand promise and that leverage the existing natural and cultural assets of the county.

A suite of experiences that can appeal to potential visitors and satisfy the consumer segments will be central to the development of Laois as a visitor destination.

Segment-based Experiences

The following table highlights potential foundation stones of visitor experience development that respond to the motivations and emotional needs of key segments:

Segment	Positioning	Hero Products	Sample Visitor Experiences
Culturally Curious	Heart of Ireland’s Ancient East	Rock of Dunamase Emo Court & Gardens Heywood Gardens Monastic Trail	Guided Walks & Talks Visitor Centre Guided Tours of House Garden Trail Genealogy
Great Escapers	Accessible outdoor and activity base	Slieve Bloom Peat Bog Grand Canal / Rivers & Lakes	Cycling Routes Walking Routes Special Interest Groups Ecotourism experiences Water based activity
Business Tourism	Ireland’s Meeting Place	Portlaoise Hotels Great House Venues e.g. Stradbally House	Electric Picnic National Conferences Business Meetings
Event Organisers	A centre for national events	Electric Picnic National Ploughing Championships	Niche events hosted at Big Venues Big Events Big Venues

2.9 Alignment with Ireland’s Ancient East Themes

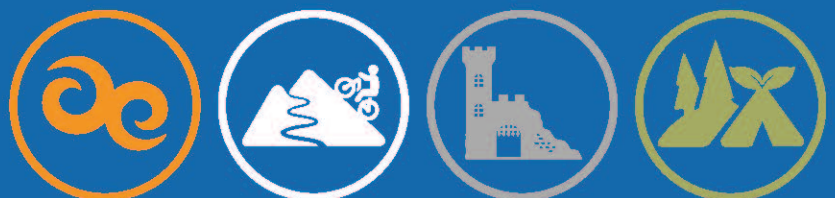
The function of the Ireland’s Ancient East brand is to attract more international visitors to Ireland. With overseas visitors spending almost twice as much as domestic visitors, attracting a greater percentage of international visitors is central to a successful tourism strategy for Laois. New and enhanced visitor experiences in Laois must be aligned to key Ireland’s Ancient East themes as shown in the following table:

Key IAE Theme	Sample Laois Offering
Tale of Two Worlds	Emo Court Roundwood House Ballyfin House Donaghmore Workhouse
Castles & Conquests	Through Rock of Dunamase and other heritage sites, link to the narrative of tourism ‘honey pots’ at Cashel, Kilkenny and Trim

Such alignment is critically important to leverage the considerable capital and capacity-building resources of Fáilte Ireland, as well as the significant national and international brand marketing campaigns. Investment in building narratives and story-telling capacity to communicate Laois visitor experiences will be central to product development.

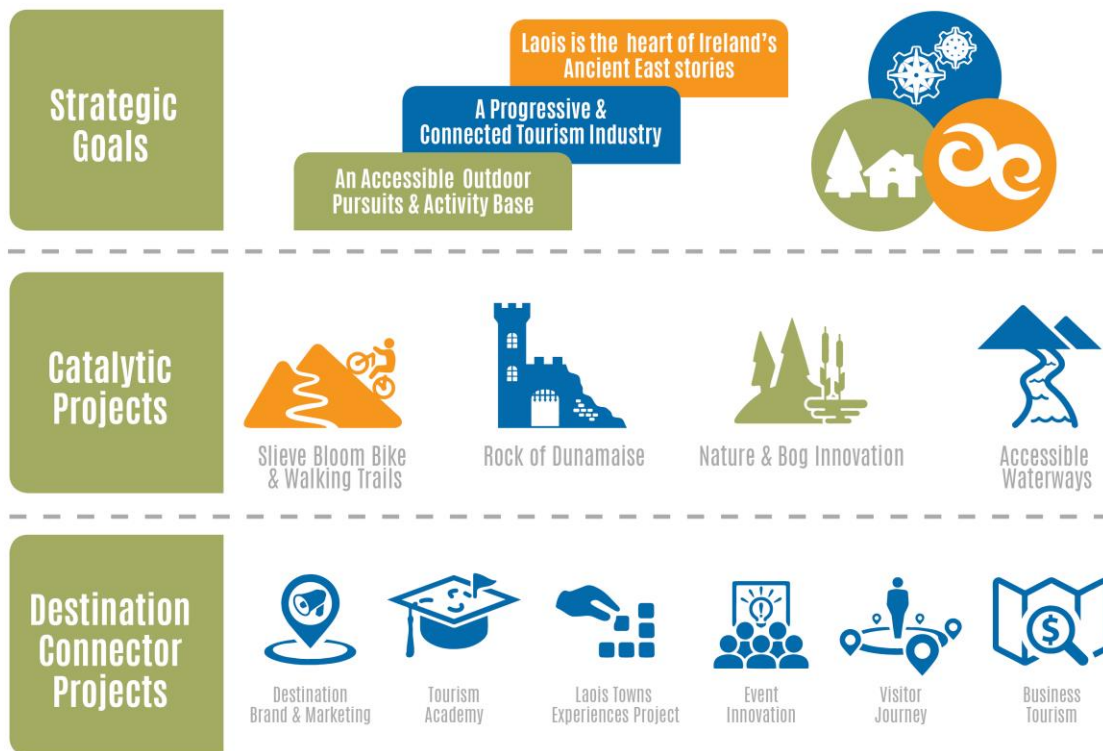
Building the capacity of the tourism trade in Co. Laois to adopt the consumer segmentation and Ireland's Ancient East frameworks for enhancing and developing their visitor experiences is important.

A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR TOURISM

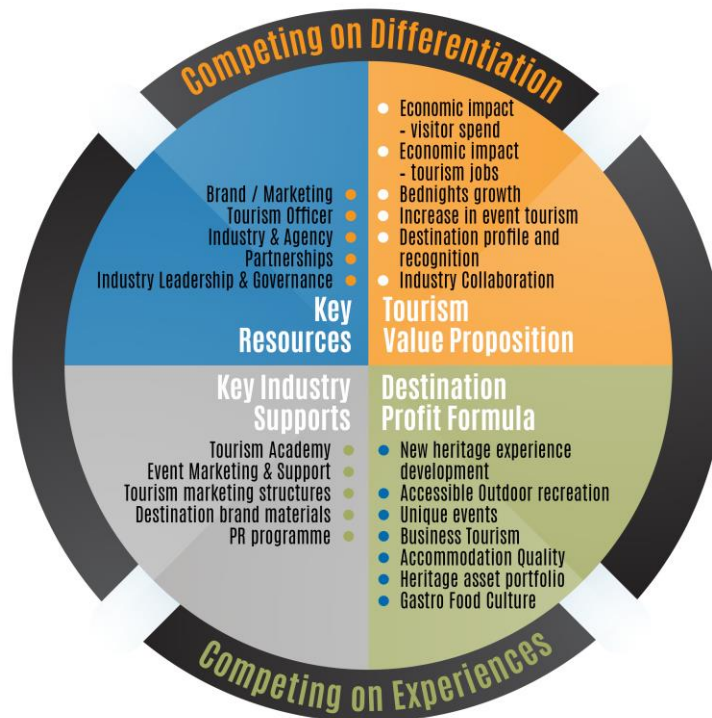


The strategic framework for developing tourism across Laois is based on a focus on three strategic pillars that will enhance the tourism operational structures and strategically develop the core strengths of the county. The proposed direction for tourism in Laois will build on the county’s inherent product strengths and capitalise on existing project momentum in the areas of outdoor pursuits and heritage. The emphasis on these strategic pillars are based on projected global tourism trends and ensuring an alignment of tourism planning for Laois with national tourism policy and the international marketing of Ireland as a global destination.

Supporting this strategic focus will be key destination projects addressing areas for product development and the creation of the governance and operational structures required to realise the strategic ambition of Laois. At the essence of the strategic model is the development of the core assets of the county and building upon existing markets and customers. This will be developed through the adoption of a range of key projects designed to foster greater connectivity within the tourism industry. These connected destination projects will prepare the industry to capitalise on the potential of the proposed transformational projects that will act as ‘hero’ projects in attracting greater volumes of international and domestic visitors to Laois.



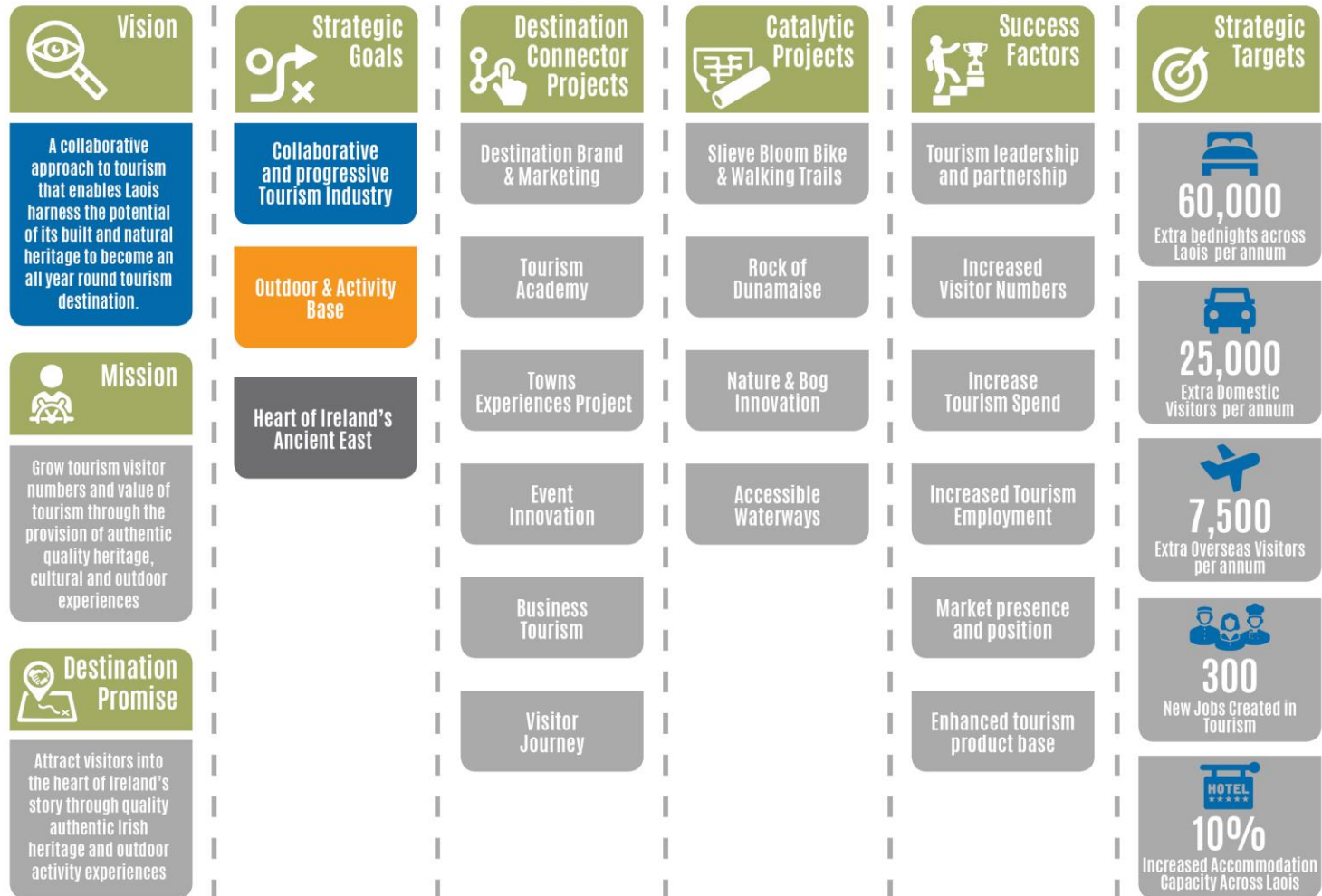
The framework identifies a number of key strategic projects as immediate areas for investment to deliver tourism products of scale with the capacity to be transformational and become tourism catalysts for Laois. In addition to a destination product and visitor experience led approach, the strategic framework also recognises the requirement for a collaborative tourism industry focus. This collective industry approach must subsequently adopt a more ambitious marketing strategy aligning all stakeholders within the tourism sector to the Laois destination promise and the long-term tourism vision for the county.



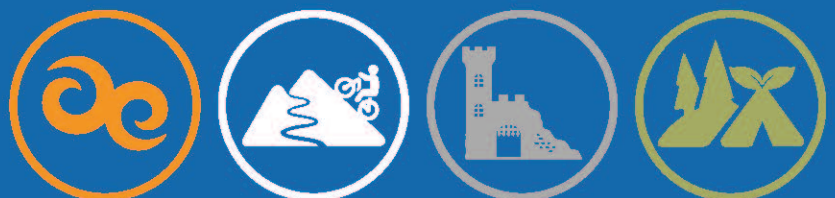
The objectives for the strategic framework are based on the following in achieving sustained success for the tourism sector in Laois.

1. Develop a competitive tourism industry base across the county that becomes attractive to overseas and domestic visitors
2. Develop a coherent tourism network for Laois that works collectively to achieve greater a greater economic dividend for the county.
3. Create the governance and operational structures required to establish Laois as a strong performing tourism county led by the industry and working closely with all relevant agencies.
4. Establish tourism as a credible industry and economic sector within Laois that fosters increased levels of tourism entrepreneurship, enterprise and job creation.
5. Develop the Laois tourism product base to deliver excellent visitor experiences and signature products.
6. Leverage off the immediate international opportunity presented by Ireland's Ancient East.
7. Capitalise on the outdoor pursuits potential of Laois and proximity of land and water amenities to large urban areas.
8. Develop a coherent Laois tourism consumer brand that will be adopted as the central marketing proposition for all tourism stakeholders.
9. Ensure future investment programmes are aligned with immediate tourism opportunities and the ability to stimulate additional tourism enterprise.
10. Create areas of standout and unique appeal within Ireland's Ancient East based on the rich story potential of the county.
11. Extend the tourism experience focus to work with micro-enterprise businesses across Laois in areas such as food and crafts.

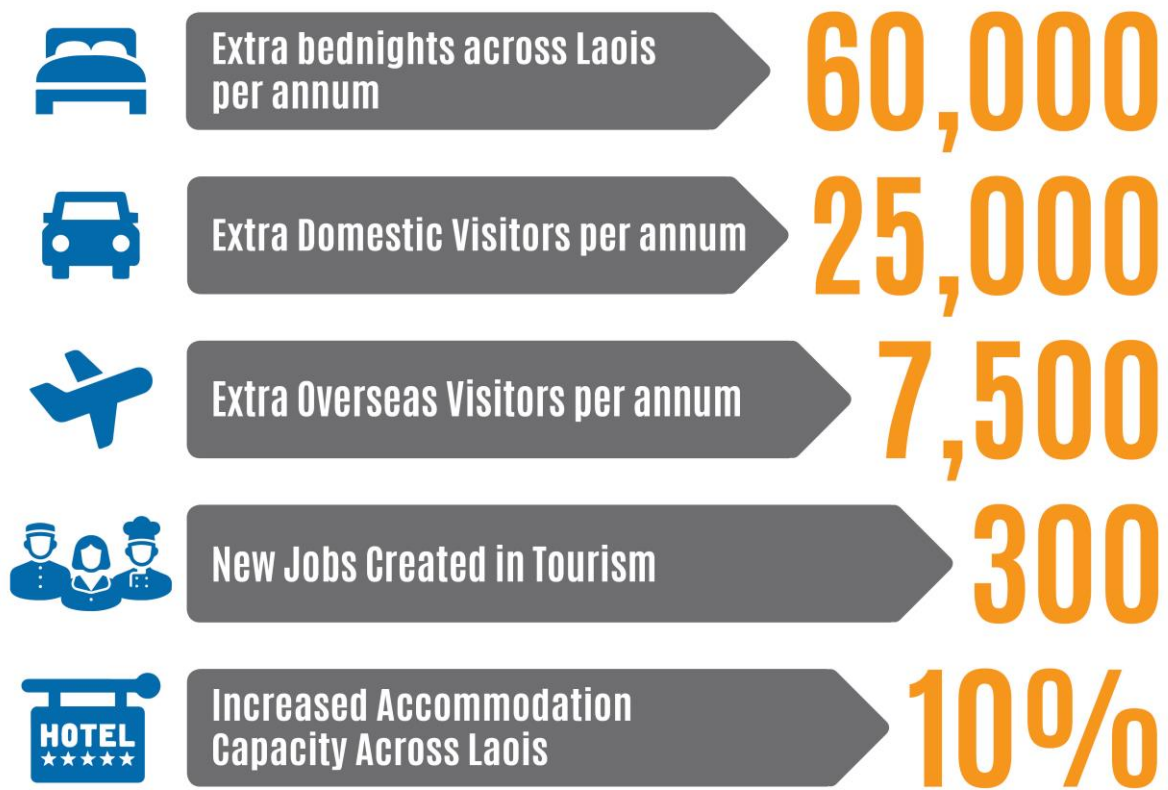
Tourism Strategy Framework



STRATEGIC TOURISM GOALS



STRATEGIC AMBITION - FIVE INDUSTRY TARGETS 2023



The key targets set for delivery by the strategic plan are based on achieving annual growth over the next five years to reach the destination targets by 2023.

A combined growth of domestic and overseas visitors of 32,500 additional visitors per annum by 2023 is projected to achieve 60,000 extra bed nights (approved accommodation) for Laois per annum.

This level of additional bed nights will be achieved through combined growth of all visitor segments across activity, heritage and business tourism.

The following represents the strategic goals and objectives identified to achieve the success measurements defined for Laois in terms of the growth in economic value it will bring to the county.

STRATEGIC GOALS & OBJECTIVES



AIM: A Progressive & Connected Tourism Industry

Goal: Build the organisational structures and industry capabilities to develop tourism as significant economic sector for Laois through partnership and a shared ambition for tourism growth.

Rationale - The creation of structures that facilitate all tourism stakeholders working together to realise the county's tourism potential. The growth potential of the county will be achieved through a greater industry understanding of local tourism activity and recognising future areas for collaboration. The tourism ambition for Laois will only be achieved through the development of this connected industry approach working to establish Laois as a recognisable quality visitor destination.

Objectives:

1. Develop the governance and leadership structures for Laois Tourism that is industry led and supported by public sector agencies.
2. Create an inter-agency tourism working group that aligns all future tourism development activity with the Laois Tourism strategy.
3. Develop a sustainable financial model through a membership based organisation that supports the employment of a dedicated Tourism Marketing & Development Officer to manage the strategic development of tourism in Laois
4. Support the development of a Laois Tourism Academy that becomes the focal point for tourism industry networking, collaboration, tourism entrepreneurship and training supported by the relevant agencies.
5. Examine the potential of a Slieve Bloom promotion and development group working under one brand that is aligned with the tourism strategy of Laois and Offaly.
6. Development of a new county tourism brand and marketing communications strategy for adoption by all tourism stakeholders.



AIM: An Accessible Outdoor Pursuits & Activity Base

Goal: Develop the portfolio of land and water based assets in Laois to become key tourism attractors to the county with particular focus on the outdoor recreation potential of Slieve Blooms.

Rationale - The portfolio of outdoor assets throughout the county will be harnessed to create an outdoor recreation focussed destination. The accessibility of the land and water based amenities to large urban areas provide an immediate competitive advantage. Further investment plans and building on existing facilities to target international and domestic visitors will have catalytic impact on the entire county. All future investment activity must recognise this potential and work towards the development of quality amenity provision that will mark Laois out as the quality outdoor destination.

Objectives:

1. Prioritise the continued development of the Mountain Bike (MTB) and walking trails for Slieve Blooms and associated support amenities that can cater for all outdoor pursuits.
2. Position Laois as an accessible cycling destination through the development a Laois cycling strategy that harnesses the potential of MTB, road cycling, local forest cycleways and vintage cycling.
3. Develop the potential of the Barrow Blueways project supported by the creation of a water based activity county wide portfolio for visitors adopting existing activity on the rivers, lakes and canals.
4. Support the development of new tourism enterprise that will contribute to the provision of services and amenities to position Laois as a quality outdoor activity destination.
5. Adopt a green activities industry marketing approach to develop special interest tourism activity around the theme of eco-tourism supported by a sustained programme to establish Laois as a green outdoor pursuits destination.
6. Create and support a portfolio of land and water based events aligned to the establishment of Laois as a leading outdoor activity destination.
7. Support and develop accessible waterways projects that communicate the level of accessible water resource experiences throughout Laois



AIM: Laois is the heart of Ireland's Ancient East stories.

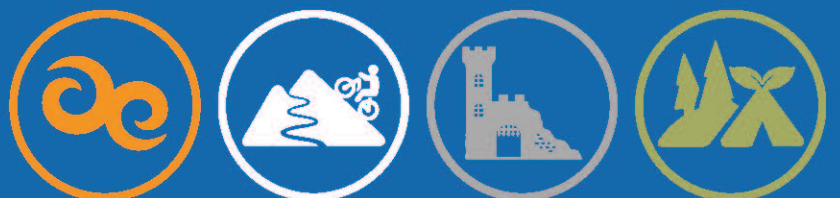
Goal: Establish Laois as one of the leading destinations within Ireland's Ancient East building on the rich and diverse heritage and story base that exists across the county.

Rationale - The strategic focus on Ireland's Ancient East provides Laois with an international marketing opportunity through the uniqueness of the county's heritage and associated stories. The international marketing focus around Ireland's Ancient East provides the industry with a visitor experience development focus that can provide immediate differentiation through the adoption of key story themes throughout the county, supported by the enhancement of the built heritage assets. The Ireland's Ancient East opportunity is aligned to all sectors within the tourism industry providing a platform for significant innovation and wider industry collaboration.

Objectives:

1. Work with Failte Ireland to develop quality product and visitor experiences that will create a focal point for the development of the Laois tourism industry.
2. Develop a 'Laois Towns Experience Project' for key towns providing one core theme that acts as a stimulus for product, visitor experience and marketing development of towns and communities across Laois.
3. Prioritise the development of the Rock of Dunamaise through enhanced visitor facilities and site interpretation to become a leading visitor attraction within Ireland's Ancient East.
4. Build on the uniqueness of Laois' culture and heritage to develop new industry stories to support emerging sectors such as food to develop the national Gastro Pub destination harnessing the heritage of public houses across the country working with local food and drink suppliers.
5. Support the expansion of key events that are aligned with the stories of Laois and supporting the development of Ireland's Ancient East under the existing themes of Tales of Two Worlds and Castles & Conquests.
6. Focus future capital investment into product development that enhances that product mix that contributes to the ambition of realising the potential of Ireland's Ancient East for Laois.
7. Develop a programme in partnership with the OPW to highlight and develop key Laois heritage assets such as Emo Court and Heywood Gardens.
8. Examine the development of the Maryborough Fort in Portlaoise as a tourism stimulus project for Portlaoise to position the town as an engine for tourism growth across the county.

CONNECTING THE TOURISM DESTINATION



The strategic development of tourism as a vibrant economic sector in Laois will focus on a number of key destination projects designed to ‘connect’ the tourism industry and leverage off the county’s inherent strengths. The following represent destination connector projects that will be actioned in the immediate to longer term time frame of the Strategic Plan. Each connector project is designed to foster increased levels of collaboration and adopt a coherent approach to tourism development across the county.

DESTINATION CONNECTOR PROJECTS





A new destination brand and marketing communications approach will be created for tourism in Laois. The brand approach is proposed to bring all industry stakeholders together under one identity. The market place is competitive and will require a co-ordinated marketing strategy to support the evolution of the new brand to establish the county as a key tourism destination in Ireland's Ancient East.

The new tourism brand should focus on a "Visit Laois" consumer proposition supported through online and print collateral. The branding strategy should reflect a dynamic tourism destination with a multitude of visitor experiences across the outdoor and heritage visitor propositions.

The development of supporting brand messages should be applied to reflect the diversity of experiences in Laois such as "*A heritage of adventure*". The brand must be adopted by all stakeholders and feature in all industry communications and event activity to reinforce the Laois destination message. The implementation of the brand programme must include a strong focus on industry adoption of the new identity and foster industry pride in the collective tourism approach for Laois.

Key Actions

- Develop a destination visual identity under a "Visit Laois" brand development programme to be applied to all destination marketing activity to create one identity for the Laois tourism industry.
- Create an industry portal to share brand materials to ensure adoption of the new tourism identity among all tourism stakeholders.
- Develop a suite of destination marketing materials based on the new Visit Laois brand identity to include website development, print and digital marketing platforms.
- Devise a brand management structure through Destination Laois Limited to manage the implementation of the brand programme and maintain brand standards around brand usage.



The absence of a strong tourism network will be addressed through the creation of a collaboration project called the Tourism Academy. The development of a Tourism Academy is designed to become a focal point for industry networking, collaboration and training. The suggested operational model is designed to create an internal stakeholder engagement platform facilitating a cross pollination of ideas and act as an outlet for industry education and training. The overarching theme is promoting collaboration among all stakeholders with a direct and indirect involvement in the tourism sector.

The natural development of the Tourism Academy should evolve to act as a stimulus for enterprise development through its role in becoming a dedicated sector network providing an accessible network for relevant agencies to work with existing and prospective tourism entrepreneurs.

The development of a more visitor experience led destination will require increased collaboration among the industry while simultaneously having a focussed approach to training. The success of a Tourism Academy will be contingent on all stakeholders adopting the Tourism Academy as a focal point for collaboration. The initiative should be developed on a phased basis with initial networking at the core of its activity. This should then evolve to focus on tourism enterprise and training supports in partnership with the relevant delivery agencies and examination of cross sector engagement e.g. food sector to promote extended rounds of industry networking.

Key Actions

- Devise a networking schedule for Laois tourism industry based on a calendar of networking events distributed throughout the county.
- Create a tourism industry training schedule with local and national training and tourism development agencies to address key skill deficits within the industry.
- Align key training programming with the marketing development of tourism in Laois.
- Examine the extension of training and networking opportunities through wider sector inclusion that contributes to the Laois tourism experience e.g. Food, crafts, activities.
- Develop an enterprise platform to promote tourism entrepreneurship in partnership with enterprise development agencies.



The county of Laois is rich with heritage and stories. The promotion of these core stories through a Laois Towns Experience Project approach is designed to devise a central story / historic theme that designated areas employ as the basis for visitor experience development. The creation of this themed approach for key tourism gateway towns across Laois will expand the experience development potential throughout the county. It will also create the critical mass required to develop strongly themed destination towns throughout Laois building on the heritage stories and create a platform for experience development innovation for local communities. The ability to market the county based on these expanded experience themes will create points of differentiation and a platform for community and industry engagement to build on the tourism opportunity it will present.

The suggested development of the Laois Towns Experience Project concept is based on a phased roll out of the proposal with two towns selected for an initial pilot programme. The project will require the identification of a strong theme built on a rich bank of heritage and stories associated with the towns. The subsequent phases will focus on engaging the local tourism industry and communities to build on the opportunity it can present.

The development of the Laois Towns Experience Project will require industry training and a focus around local visitor experience development. The proposed Tourism Academy should harness the collective agency support structures to implement the training and visitor experience identification process.

Among the proposed a Laois Towns Experience Project themes for initial consideration for the pilot programme include Mountmellick (Quakers), Portarlinton (French Huguenots), Mountrath (Slieve Bloom) and Stradbally (Arts).

Key Actions

- Agree phased roll out plan for a Laois Towns Experience Project commencing with pilot programme.
- Implement a pilot programme with two towns to test and learn from the process and apply in subsequent phases.
- Implement a training and experience development programme to develop the a Laois Towns Experience Project theme that will engage all tourism providers, local enterprises and communities that will provide the support experiences e.g. Food, activities.



Laois has a long association with large scale events hosted in the county. The ability to capitalise on this positioning of the county as a national event centre will produce strong economic dividends particularly in the tourism shoulder seasons. The county also possesses a calendar of unique local community events that offer scalability with strong alignment with the outdoors and Ireland's Ancient East themes.

A strategic approach to event development is required from an investment prospective and increasing the profile of Laois events through the proposed new brand and marketing platforms. An increased focus must be put on events that have strong destination strategy alignment and offer scalability through the uniqueness of their core theme e.g. Scarecrow Festival, Gordon Bennett Rally, Bulfin Heritage Cycle Rally.

The county is host to a mix of sport tourism events. This segment can be grown significantly with a focus on the natural resources that support cycling, walking and angling events. The quality of golf courses in Laois and the existing Laois International Golf Challenge offer further event scaling opportunities through international marketing and golf tour operator alliances. The creation of the Ireland's Ancient East Golf Trophy should be considered as part of an enhancement of current activity and establish a unique event proposition that builds on this international brand. This Ireland's Ancient East Trophy event based approach has further application to other sport tourism events.

A focus on Slieve Bloom event activity is key and the enhancement of the existing walking festival activity to incorporate more evening economy options to encourage longer stays in the area. An increased marketing focus is required to position Slieve Bloom events particularly in stronger activity segments such as walking and cycling.

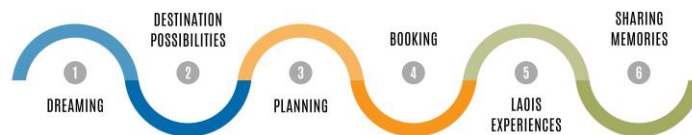
A niche event focus is required to showcase the diversity of the natural and built heritage assets throughout the county. The quality of the built heritage of the county offers unique settings for specialist events that incorporate the arts and culture potential of the county. This unique space should be developed as a niche event theme for the county to showcase existing sites. Further examination of built heritage based events that build on the 'Big House Big Venue' theme across Laois is recommended particularly in the areas of music and the arts.

Key Actions

- Conduct an event audit to identify local events with scalability and international appeal to support through existing funding structures.
- Examine the existing funding model for larger festivals and events with a strategic focus on the enhancement of events that contribute additional bed nights to the county.
- Develop the concept of "Big Events" that represent niche cultural events hosted in unique settings e.g. Emo House, Stradbally Hall, Roundwood House.
- Examine the re-creation of the jazz festival for Portlaoise combined with a craft, food and drink theme that builds on the county's association with other major events marketed as Jazz Picnic with the objective of becoming a national event in the shoulder season.
- Devise a programme of sport tourism activity that is focussed on enhanced walking, cycling and angling events to market the land and water based assets of the county.



The visitor journey starts with planning and examination of destination possibilities. The absence of a strong online destination presence through to the delivery of a quality visitor experience throughout the county must be at the forefront of future tourism development. The recommended marketing programme should address the online strategy required to develop the destination profile and develop the market profile of Laois as a viable tourism destination.



The Visitor Journey experience catering for international and domestic visitors in the destination will require training and product education across the industry. The ability of the tourism trade to cross sell or promote Laois tourism products will be enhanced through the proposed Tourism Academy collaboration model. An annual product and experience education programme is required for front of house personnel and any individuals dealing with visitors e.g. TIO office personnel.

An annual product education programme will channel more focus on Laois based activity and promote visitor experience across the county. Equally important will be the education of key influencers in neighbouring counties to include TIO's and front of house staff.

Key Actions

- Address online information gaps through the implementation of the recommended marketing programme.
- Address all six stages of the Visitor Journey through industry training programme to ensure all elements are delivered to meet visitor expectations and create social media benefits for Laois.
- Commit to annual industry product and experience education programmes to constantly ensure key influencers are updated on all elements of the Laois tourism product.
- Enhance the existing level of TIO provision through a corporate / membership funding approach to develop the current levels of provision in collaboration with the tourism industry.



The potential for Business Tourism in Laois is significant. The existence of quality meeting and conference facilities combined with local transport infrastructure gives the county a strong competitive advantage in business tourism. The aspiration for Laois as “Ireland’s meeting place” will be achieved through industry collaboration to market the county as the ‘Meeting and Conference Centre of Ireland’.

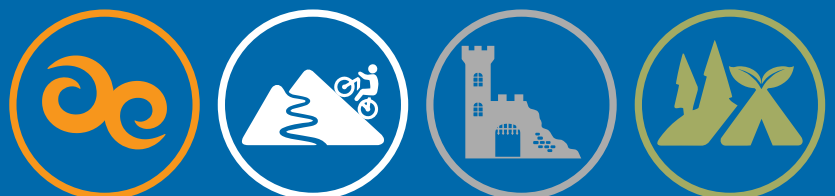
The development of a destination business tourism focus is required to develop the positioning of the county as a specialist business tourism hub. Emerging from the “hub” approach will be the opportunity for the extended tourism industry to benefit from increased volumes of visitors through this focused sector approach. A hub working group should be formed among key business tourism venues for joint marketing while also applying the wider Laois destination tourism branding.

The creation of unique Laois outdoor and heritage experiences for delegates and partners/spouses enhances the appeal of the destination for both national and international business tourism events. The development of a comprehensive business tourism marketing and industry collaboration approach is required to offer an accessible alternative to Dublin. The network will extend beyond the meeting and conference facilities to incorporate unique Laois experiences that will have the propensity to extend visitor dwell time and extend delegate programmes. Further innovation is required to create packages to attract business tourism back to the destination through return visit incentives devised among industry partners.

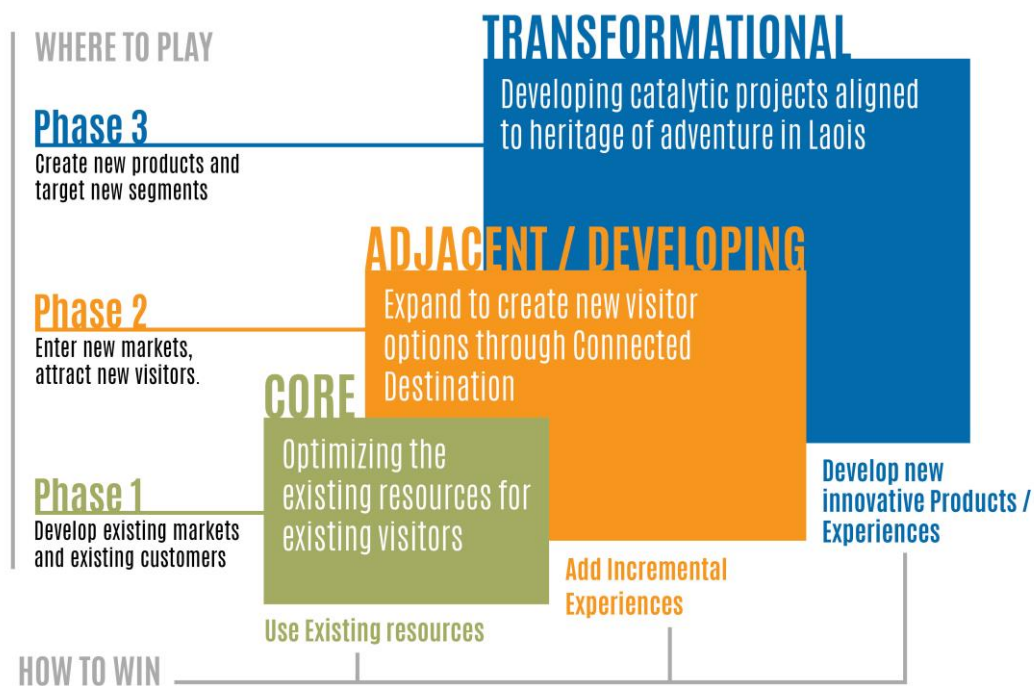
Key Actions

- Formation of the Hub - Business Tourism Marketing Alliance across Laois.
- Development of the Laois business tourist experience to sell to conference organisers as part of the Laois Business Tourism Destination proposition.
- Development of Business Tourism Hub approach that facilitates engagement with local experience providers to supply Laois visitor experiences to business delegates.
- Development of a Visit Laois incentive to encourage return visits for business delegates in collaboration with the Hub - Business Tourism Marketing Alliance group.

CATALYTIC PROJECTS



The implementation of the Strategic Plan is based on establishing the destination fundamentals to support the tourism ambition for the county. Laois possesses a rich portfolio of natural and built assets that provide opportunities for immediate scalability. The implementation phase of the Strategic Plan is based on establishing the platform for sector growth. This is developed further through progressing the destination connector projects that are designed to achieve short to medium term growth through enhanced industry collaboration. The final phase is the support for a series of destination projects that have the potential to deliver a transformational impact on tourism across the county.



The projects proposed within the strategy are focused on building on the existing momentum behind a number of projects. This significance of these projects should be viewed in the context of the wider economic dividend which they can generate for the Laois economy rather than viewed as isolated tourism projects.

Each project has the ability to incorporate a mix of experiences, visitor packages and promote further enterprise development. The investment in these catalytic projects has the potential to transform them to “hero” tourism projects for the county and become the stimulus for further tourism activity, as evident in comparable destinations.

The following represent the projects identified as contributing to the strategic destination positioning of Laois and possess the characteristics to be catalysts for tourism in Laois.



The Rock of Dunamaisé represents an iconic site within the context of Laois and also Ireland's Ancient East. The current level of interpretation and visitor experience does not reflect the significance and potential of the site as a tourism attractor. The opportunity to build on the heritage and location value of the site requires investment to position the Rock of Dunamaisé as a visitor attraction of national significance.

The ability to connect the site with other castles and comparable sites across Ireland's Ancient East is significant. However, at a minimum, the Rock of Dunamaisé site must deliver a visitor experience comparable to other sites across Ireland's Ancient East. A level of outdoor interpretation and innovation is required which should be designed to suit the stories of the site.

The suggested outdoor interpretation approach can be developed outside the boundary of the castle, ensuring that the integrity of the site is not compromised. The existing outdoor interpretation scheme employed at the Derrygimlagh (Connemara) signature discovery point on the Wild Atlantic Way represents an innovative approach to interpretation. The opportunity to incorporate this "off site" interpretation combined with the required tourism infrastructure such as parking has the potential to be transformational for Laois Tourism and the development of a new iconic attraction in Ireland's Ancient East.

Key Actions

- Review of outdoor interpretation installations that would be appropriate for the Rock of Dunamaisé.
- Site development to support increased visitor numbers.
- Development of site interpretation to align with Ireland's Ancient East Castles and Conquests theme.
- Examination of local guide training and development to enhance the visitor experience at the Rock of Dunamaisé at peak times.



Slieve Bloom Bike & Walking Trails

The plans for the Slieve Bloom Bike and Walking Trail represent a project of national significance in the context of outdoor recreation. The creation of a 73km bike and walking trail will be hugely significant for the tourism industry in advancing the profile of Slieve Bloom as an outdoor recreation destination. The growth in demand for off road cycling is very significant with a number of regional destinations are competing in this activity category.

The accessibility of the Slieve Blooms provides an immediate competitive advantage. However, consideration must be given to creating points of differentiation for the bike and walking trails. The core product must be of national standard to attract and retain visitors to the area. The quality of supporting amenities and infrastructure will be important to realise the full potential of the trail investment. Consideration should be given to a multi purpose amenity that will cater for the requirements of cyclists and walkers/hikers. The ability to cater for a range of outdoor pursuits should be central to future facility development. This should be examined in the context of both social or private enterprise delivery of facilities and services.

The tourism dividend from the bike and walking trails will be yielded from the ability of the Laois tourism industry to create packages that create over night stays in the area and use the trails over a number of days. In the absence of a wider industry effort to package the Slieve Bloom Bike Trail Experience, the flow of visitors could revolve around day visits which would have negligible economic impact.

The incorporation of technology to foster a unique trail experience needs examination, as employed by the Seven Stanes in Scotland. The adaption of new technology to enhance the bike experience needs review to create additional differentiation for the Slieve Bloom Bike Trail. The adaption of technology should also incorporate integration with the walking/hiking segment in addition to being relevant to more casual visitors and families to the area. The review of this proposed technology programme should also examine road cycling and contribute to the development of Laois as a multi discipline cycling destination. This would be developed through the creation of marked Strava segments across the Slieve Blooms.

Key Actions

- Develop industry engagement programme to create destination packages with accommodation providers.
- Examine the feasibility of a multi activity amenity resource that will support the requirements of cyclists, walkers and hikers.
- Review technology incorporation options to create trails differentiation across the Slieve Blooms.
- Examine the development of a collaborative Slieve Blooms marketing brand between Laois and Offaly County Councils.



The outdoor experience theme will require innovation in its implementation to establish key points of differentiation for Laois. The opportunity to create differentiated Laois visitor experiences through its natural heritage asset base will contribute to the overarching themes of heritage and the outdoors. The endeavours of local community initiatives such as the Abbeyleix Bog Project combined with the nature and bog resources throughout the county offer an asset base for future consideration to develop a unique visitor experience adopting eco-tourism and wellbeing as central themes.

The global demand for alternative accommodation bases and increased demand for wellness experiences suggest an area for further consideration. The existence of nationally distributed family centric park based around bog resources suggests an alternative innovative product mix is required. The creation of “international bog wellness retreat” incorporating glamping or alternative accommodation options combined with bog/outdoor wellness experiences delivered in an eco friendly, green themed environment is worthy of exploration.

The bog resources and the richness of their history and stories provide a unique setting for developing new visitor experiences. The opportunity to build on the heritage of these natural assets and contribute to the outdoor activity marketing proposition for Laois while also addressing the issues of accommodation capacity is considerable.

The enhancement of the amenities to develop a wellness park and focus on the emerging global health and wellbeing trends will represent an area of differentiation. This theme can be further developed across the outdoor resource base of Laois to develop the county as an immersive wellbeing destination, supported by unique outdoor experiences.

Key Actions

- Undertake a feasibility analysis of the international wellness retreat concept with alternative accommodation central to the product mix.
- Identify appropriate sites and partnerships with key stakeholders.
- Examination of international eco-themed wellness models and global best practice.
- Undertake concept environmental impact appraisal based on potential sites.



The fulfilment of the wider strategic goals of Laois becoming ones of Ireland's most accessible outdoor pursuits and activity base will require a dedicated focus on enhancing the water based product proposition. The proposed investment in the Slieve Blooms Bike and Walking Trails will create the basis for a strong initial activity marketing proposition for the destination.

The county possesses a wealth of water assets from canals to rivers and lakes. There is no formal 'productization' of any of the water assets outside of a dedicated angling base focus around Coolrain. The development of the Barrow Blueway remains a project that would have a significant economic and social impact with the ability to contribute to both the tourism and enterprise development goals of Laois. It will require ongoing investment in time to progress with the project.

The development of the Erkina River Blueway provides an immediate option for consideration offering an opportunity to also incorporate cycling and walking trails. The lack of a current focal point for water based active pursuits in Laois would be addressed in the short time with this project. The longer term ambition should be the development of an expanded series of Laois Blueway Trails that communicate the accessibility of the destination for all outdoor pursuits.

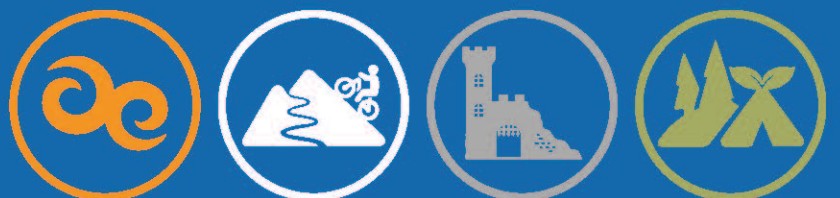
The niche product proposition of the Barrow Navigation and existing products such as barge cruising provide visitors with access to a unique water based experience that can be readily integrated with water pursuits and heritage / cultural experiences. The development of the barge experience provides visitor experiences that have international appeal. It provides the platform for further tourism provider collaboration while also contributing to enhanced outdoor activity profiling.

The Barrow Navigation is a unique visitor experience opportunity linking with other Ireland Ancient East destinations. The ability to build the Laois story around Vicarstown and create more experience led opportunities for Laois visitors must be considered in order to ensure the area builds and retains a position around the evolving Barrow Navigation experience.

Key Actions

- Work with key agencies to examine the progression of the Erkina River Blueway to deliver the first Blueway proposition for Laois.
- Work with relevant agencies to progress the Barrow Blueway in a socially and economically appropriate manner.
- Devise a training programme around the development of experiences to engage with local providers to build on the opportunity of the Barrow Navigation for international visitors.
- Develop a water activity working group to develop the water based activities proposition that will be used for future marketing development of the county.

PLAN IMPLEMENTATION



Short-term – 2017-2018 (ST)

Medium-term – 2019-2020 (MT)

Long Term – 2021-2022 (LT)

1. A Progressive & Connected Tourism Industry

Goal: Build the organisational structures and industry capabilities to develop tourism as significant economic sector for Laois through partnership and a shared ambition for tourism growth.

		Delivery Milestones	Timeframe
1.1	Develop the governance and leadership structures for Laois Tourism that is industry led and supported by public sector agencies.	<p>Create a new strategy implementation working group that is comprised of tourism industry leaders and key public sector agency representatives.</p> <p>Examine the composition of Laois Tourism group to ensure industry representation across all sectors and key public sector agencies under a wide county tourism forum.</p> <p>Examine the formation of a new company limited by guarantee to support the employment of dedicated tourism personnel. This company becomes the implementer of the tourism strategy activity and projects merging from Laois Tourism.</p>	<p>ST</p> <p>ST</p> <p>ST</p>
1.2	Create an inter-agency tourism working group that aligns all future tourism development activity with the Laois Tourism strategy.	<p>Identify all relevant agencies with a direct and indirect involvement in tourism to form a tourism industry working group that will meet twice a year.</p> <p>Establish the terms of reference for an inter agency working group that will focus on how the collective group can support the implementation of the new strategy and grow tourism in Laois.</p>	<p>ST</p> <p>ST</p>
1.3	Develop a sustainable financial model through a membership based organisation that supports the employment of a dedicated Tourism Marketing & Development Officer to manage the strategic development of tourism in Laois	<p>Create a membership based organisation to support tourism in Laois.</p> <p>Create the company structures to employ dedicated tourism personnel.</p>	<p>ST</p> <p>ST</p>
1.4	Support the development of a Laois Tourism Academy that becomes the focal point for tourism industry networking, collaboration, tourism entrepreneurship and training supported by the relevant agencies.	<p>Create the Tourism Academy model with the schedule of planned activity.</p> <p>Secure multi agency buy-in into the Academy to take ownership of key elements of the project delivery.</p>	<p>ST</p> <p>ST</p> <p>ST – LT</p>

		<p>Host annual networking events under the auspices of the Tourism Academy.</p> <p>Devise an industry training programme around experience development and marketing delivered through the Tourism Academy in partnership with the relevant agencies such as Laois ETB.</p>	ST - LT
1.5	Examine the potential of a Slieve Bloom promotion and development group working under one brand that is aligned with the tourism strategy of Laois and Offaly.	<p>Appoint a Slieve Bloom working group to review the development of one brand aligned with the tourism strategies of Laois and Offaly.</p> <p>Examine the Slieve Bloom bike and walking trails as a working case study on mutually developing the Slieve Bloom brand.</p> <p>Examine the Slieve Bloom Walking Festival that can be mutually developed to enhance the Slieve Bloom brand.</p> <p>Develop a joint marketing plan for the Slieve Bloom brand supported by the appropriate ownership structures and project implementation team.</p>	<p>ST - MT</p> <p>ST – MT</p> <p>ST – MT</p> <p>ST - MT</p>
1.6	Development of a new county tourism brand and marketing communications strategy for adoption by all tourism stakeholders	<p>Appoint a brand development agency to devise a consumer orientated tourism brand for Laois.</p> <p>Redevelop all key marketing communications from online to print to reflect the new brand and desired positioning.</p> <p>Create an annual marketing action plan to promote tourism in Laois.</p> <p>Create and implement an annual PR plan for tourism and associated events in Laois.</p>	<p>ST</p> <p>ST</p> <p>ST – LT</p> <p>ST – LT</p>

Short-term – 2017-2018 (ST)

Medium-term – 2019-2020 (MT)

Long Term – 2021-2022 (LT)

AIM: An Accessible Outdoor Pursuits & Activity Base

Goal: Develop the portfolio of land and water based assets in Laois to become key tourism attractors to the county with particular focus on the outdoor recreation potential of Slieve Blooms.

		Delivery Milestones	Timeframe
2.1	Prioritise the continued development of the Mountain Bike (MTB) and walking trails for Slieve Blooms and associated support amenities that can cater for all outdoor pursuits.	<p>Undertake a feasibility study to examine the incorporation of technology to create a differentiated biking / walking experience on Slieve Bloom bike trails.</p> <p>Examine the feasibility of the creation of an on site amenity centre that will cater for biking / walking and other outdoor pursuits.</p> <p>Commence the engagement with the local tourism enterprises to become market ready for the opportunities that the bike trails will present for the local tourism economy.</p>	<p>ST- MT</p> <p>MT – LT</p> <p>ST</p>
2.2	Position Laois as an accessible cycling destination through the development a Laois cycling strategy that harnesses the potential of MTB, road cycling, local forest cycleways and vintage cycling.	<p>Develop a cycling marketing programme for Laois with the Slieve Bloom’s Bike Trail at the core of the messaging, positioning Laois as the cycling centre of Ireland.</p> <p>Create a calendar of events to highlight the unique cycling events in Laois from vintage cycling, road cycling to mountain biking and off road activity.</p> <p>Promote the packaging of cycling breaks with local accommodation providers.</p> <p>Examine the feasibility of creating additional destination greenway routes across Laois to further enhance the positioning of Laois as a cycling centre.</p>	<p>MT – LT</p> <p>ST</p> <p>ST</p> <p>MT</p>
2.3	Develop the potential of the Barrow Blueways project supported by the creation of a water based activity county wide portfolio for visitors adopting existing activity on the rivers, lakes and canals.	<p>Host regular progress meetings with relevant agencies to advance the Blueway opportunity for Tourism in Laois.</p> <p>Develop a water based activity marketing schedule to communicate range of water</p>	<p>ST</p> <p>ST</p>

		based amenities and activities throughout Laois.	
2.4	Support the development of new tourism enterprise that will contribute to the provision of services and amenities to position Laois as a quality outdoor activity destination	<p>Develop a tourism enterprise supports programme with the relevant agencies to support outdoor based activity enterprise.</p> <p>Devise an industry training programme that supports enterprise skills development across the tourism sector focussed on outdoor pursuits.</p> <p>Work with Laois ETB to develop and tourism industry programme of supports to support the training needs of all tourism product segments e.g. hospitality, outdoor pursuits.</p>	<p>ST – LT</p> <p>ST – LT</p> <p>ST – LT</p>
2.5	Adopt a green activities industry marketing approach to develop special interest tourism activity around the theme of eco-tourism supported by a sustained programme to establish Laois as a green outdoor pursuits destination.	<p>Create an eco adventure destination focus through all marketing activity.</p> <p>Devise a niche national positioning of Laois garden trails as a key product focus for special interest tourism.</p> <p>Review and apply for Green destination international status awards that will support the outdoor pursuits destination theme for Laois e.g. EDEN.</p>	<p>ST</p> <p>ST</p> <p>MT</p>
2.6	Create and support a portfolio of events aligned to the establishment of Laois as a leading outdoor activity destination.	<p>Establish a sport tourism sub committee to develop the outdoor activity event potential of Laois.</p> <p>Examine the creation of the Ireland’s Ancient East trophy series hosted in Laois that creates a series of events across the product areas of golf, angling, trail running and other outdoor pursuits.</p> <p>Create two events of national status around cycling and walking.</p> <p>Examine the hosting options for Laois of large scale international participation events using the natural resource base.</p> <p>Develop an online portal to communicate the annual calendar of outdoor events hosted in Laois.</p>	<p>MT</p> <p>ST – MT</p> <p>ST – MT</p> <p>ST – LT</p> <p>ST - MT</p>

2.7	Support and develop accessible waterways projects that communicate the level of accessible water resource experiences throughout Laois	<p>Create a water experience working group to develop the unique water access projects that will contribute to the outdoor pursuits marketing of Laois</p> <p>Review the feasibility of the Erkina Blueway and associated walking and bike trails to create an immediately accessible land and water blueway proposition for Laois.</p> <p>Promote the existence of existing water based experiences around the Barrow Navigation and examine methods of enhancing the visitor experience combining water and land based activities e.g. barge trips combined with land based cultural experiences</p>	<p>ST</p> <p>ST</p> <p>ST-MT</p>
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Short-term – 2017-2018 (ST)

Medium-term – 2019-2020 (MT)

Long Term – 2021-2022 (LT)

AIM: Laois is the heart of Ireland’s Ancient East stories.

Goal: Establish Laois as one of the leading destinations within Ireland’s Ancient East building on the rich and diverse heritage and story base that exists across the county.

		Delivery Milestones	Timeframe
3.1	Work with Failte Ireland to develop quality product and visitor experiences that will create a focal point for the development of the Laois tourism industry.	<p>Develop a bi-annual series of meetings with Failte Ireland to examine local product and experience development possibilities.</p> <p>Build on Failte Ireland training programmes under the Tourism Academy to develop Laois experiences and stories.</p>	<p>ST</p> <p>ST - MT</p>
3.2	Develop a 'Laois Towns Experience' story for key towns providing one core theme that acts as a stimulus for product, visitor experience and marketing development of towns and communities across Laois.	<p>Identify two Laois Experience Town themes for pilot programme implementation.</p> <p>Create a community and industry training programme around experience development to identify local experiences and stories under the Town themes.</p> <p>Review the pilot implementation to learn of key successes and areas for attention for the Phase Two roll out across additional Laois Experience Towns.</p>	<p>ST – MT</p> <p>ST – MT</p> <p>MT</p>
3.3	Prioritise the development of the Rock of Dunamais through enhanced visitor facilities and site interpretation to become a leading visitor attraction within Ireland’s Ancient East.	<p>Engage all key stakeholders through the formation of a Working Group.</p> <p>Develop a Master Plan designed around the development of an integrated visitor experience.</p> <p>Review outdoor national interpretation projects for the development of an outdoor interpretation plan for the Rock of Dunamais.</p> <p>Develop an outdoor interpretation plan that would represent the initial phase of site</p>	<p>ST</p> <p>ST – MT</p> <p>ST</p> <p>MT</p>

		development Secure funding for Ireland's Ancient East capital funds when released.	
3.4	Build on the uniqueness of Laois' culture and heritage to develop new industry stories to support emerging sectors such as food to develop the national Gastro Pub destination harnessing the heritage of public houses across the country working with local food and drink suppliers.	Develop a Laois gastro pub network building on the food and pub heritage themes of Laois. Create a food industry group to work in conjunction with participating pubs in the gastro pub network. Develop a Laois gastro pub network branding and marketing and PR schedule. Develop a themed food programme to market Laois dishes e.g. smoked peat produce, speciality local produce.	ST ST ST – MT ST – MT
3.5	Support the expansion of key events that are aligned with the stories of Laois and supporting the development of Ireland's Ancient East under the existing themes of Tales of Two Worlds, Castles & Conquests.	Create an events funding programme to support key events in Laois aligned with Ireland's Ancient East themes that have the potential to attract international visitors. Undertake an evaluation of all events funded to ensure events contribute to the strategic objectives of Laois Tourism.	MT MT
3.6	Focus future capital investment into product development that enhances that product mix that contributes to the ambition of realising the potential of Ireland's Ancient East for Laois.	Develop a capital expenditure priority programme aligned with the key catalytic projects identified for the strategic development of tourism in Laois. Work with the inter agency group to align future expenditure with meeting the strategic tourism objectives through available capital funds.	ST – LT ST
3.7	Develop a programme in partnership with the OPW to highlight and develop key Laois heritage assets such as Emo Court and Heywood Gardens.	Establish a working group with OPW to examine annual programming of key venues throughout Laois	ST-LT
3.8	Examine the development of the Maryborough Fort in Portlaoise as a tourism stimulus project for Portlaoise to position the town as an engine for tourism growth across the county.	Undertake a feasibility / scoping report to examine the development potential of Maryborough Fort Develop a town working group to stimulate tourism event and marketing activity building on existing events for Portlaoise.	MT MT