

COMHAIRLE CHONTAE LAOISE
LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL
CORPORATE PLAN 2019 - 2024
ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT, JANUARY 2024



Principal Activities and Functions of the Council

Laois County Council is a service provider, responsible for a multiplicity of services which impact upon the lives of every citizen in the County. These services range across a broad spectrum including Housing, Roads, Water, Waste Management and Planning Control.

Laois County Council Corporate Plan 2019 - 2024

This Corporate Plan provides the framework for the implementation of a coherent strategy for the development of our County for the period 2019 – 2024.

The strategies and objectives outlined in the Plan will enable Laois County Council’s Elected Members and Employees to continue to provide leadership in the promotion and development of the social, economic and cultural life of the County.

Laois County Council’s Corporate Objectives

(1) To enhance the social, cultural and economic lives of the people of Laois

Corporate Affairs

Laois County Council continued to meet monthly during the year. In 2023, meetings were held in the Council Chamber with remote access also being made available. Monthly Management Reports continued to be provided to the Members for consideration at their monthly meetings.

The Municipal Districts - Graiguecullen-Portarlinton, Borris In Ossory-Mountmellick and Portlaoise also continued to meet on a monthly basis.

The Strategic Policy Committees, the details of which are as follows continued to meet in 2023:-

- Housing, Regeneration and Planning,
- Climate Action and Community
- Transport, Environment and Emergency Services,
- Enterprise, Economic Development and Tourism

The Annual Report for 2022 was published in line with statutory requirements.

The Audit Committee Charter & Annual Work Programme for 2024 were agreed by the Members at their meeting held on the 11th December 2023. The Internal Audit Work Programme for 2024 will proceed in accordance with the agreed programme, taking account of Management Team inputs as necessary.

Community Development Section

Laois Local Community Development Committee was established in September 2014 for the purposes of developing, co-ordinating and improving a coherent and strategic approach to Local and Community Development. The LCDC is supported by the Community Department of Laois County Council and oversees the implementation of:

- Social Inclusion Community Action Programme (SICAP). Laois LCDC continued to oversee implementation of the SICAP Programme 2018-2023 and administered the annual budget of €715,706 for 2023. In 2023, Laois also received an additional allocation of €133,687 for Ukrainian Supports under the SICAP programme with an additional €5,750 being awarded near the end of the year.
- In 2023, the new SICAP 2024+ programme went to tender with Laois Partnership Company being awarded the contract in December 2023.
- Preparation of the LECP 2023-2028 commenced in 2023 with the Framework LECP due to be considered by members in early 2024.
- LEADER Programme 2014–2020 concluded on the 31st March 2021, for which the Laois Local Action Group (LAG) approved 134 projects to the value of €5,557,492.21.
- Transitional LEADER programme and the EURI programme both commenced on the 1st of April, 2021. Both iterations of this LEADER funding concluded on the 31st December 2023, with all project approvals now complete. Project promoters must have all projects completed by the 31st March, 2024 and all funds drawdown by 30th June, 2024.
- Under the Transitional LEADER programme, Laois LAG was awarded the amount of €1,092,976, for which 51 groups were approved for funding maximising the fund with no underspend.
- Under the LEADER EURI Laois LAG received a funding allocation of €485,767 for which 14 projects were approved by the LAG with an underspend of €15,558.28

Community Support Fund

Community Support Fund – An amount of €273,997 was allocated to 138 groups (€138,456 in capital funding and €135,541 in current funding).

Community Recognition Fund 2023

Community Recognition Fund- An amount of €1,014,607 was allocated to 48 groups for capital funded projects. Payments are continuing to be made to successful applicants and Site visits are being undertaken.

Laois Connects 2023 - Promoting Positive Mental Health & Wellbeing

Laois Connects 2023 took place from the 9th to 15th October, 2023. The programme featured online, indoor and outdoor programmes and events. A new feature this year was one day of events in the Dunamais Arts Centre, which ran from 11am to 9pm. The morning was targeted particularly at students, with a movie screening and panel discussion that featured Colm Begley (Laois GAA) Ailish Dunne (Laois Paralympian) Leona McManus (Jigsaw Youth Mental Health) and was facilitated by Anne Marie Kelly. This event was very successful and was attended by 240 Transition Year Students.

The afternoon was targeted at older people, with talks by the HSE on managing anxiety, presented by Prof. Joe Tierney of Technological University of the Shannon on “*Re-imagining aging through outdoor adventure*”. There was also a cookery demonstration and Q and A with the LOETB’s Janice O Brien. In the afternoon, the HSE Integrated Care for Older People team consulted with attendees on their upcoming *Guide to Services and social supports for older people*.

Later that day at 7pm, there was a Webinar with Richard Hogan of the Parenting Institute, on the topic of “Parenting the Tech Savvy Child” and at 8pm, there was a sound meditation session.

Another headline event was a talk by European boxing champion, Eric Donovan on his redemption story.



Laois Comhairle na nÓg

On Tuesday, the 7th of November 2023, 75 young people from Secondary Schools across the county of Laois attended Laois Comhairle na nÓg's Youth Conference (AGM) at the Midlands Park Hotel, this included a workshop on Mental Health.

In 2023, Laois Comhairle members undertook a number of projects to include 'If it wasn't for.' Podcast. This Podcast proved to be very successful and was launched by the Cathlaoireach, Cllr Paschal McEvoy in October 2023. Comhairle members also took part in several consultations and events throughout the year.



Comhairle na nÓg AGM 2023

Educational Partnership

The Schools Business Partnership “World of Work” programme is aimed at 2nd year students, as this intervention has been shown to be more effective in addressing/ averting the issue of early school leavers. This programme was facilitated with Portlaoise College and involved an introductory session, a company overview, a *Day in the Life*, where students met members of Council staff with varying work and education backgrounds, a site visit and a wrap session. The programme was run by the National Schools Business Partnership and the Department of Education and Skills, in association with Laois County Council.



World of Work Programme

Youth Supports

Other supports for young people in Laois continued throughout 2023. The Council is represented on both Garda Youth Diversion Projects in Portlaoise and Portarlington and Laois/Offaly Children & Young Peoples Services Committee.

Laois Age Friendly Programme

The new Laois Age Friendly Strategy was approved by the Age Friendly Alliance and launched at the Older People's Council AGM in October, 2023 which was held in Castletown Community Centre and attended by 150 people. The strategy was launched by our Age Friendly ambassador, Mrs Anna May McHugh and Cathaoirleach Paschal McEvoy. Following the launch, a new Older Peoples Council was formed. It is envisaged that the OPC will meet 4/5 times during 2024 and that a number of projects will be identified and commenced in 2024. In 2023, the continued distribution of ICE cards resulted in 6000 cards being distributed. A new Eircode awareness campaign was also launched in November, 2023, 1000 Eircode stickers were distributed within a week of receiving them and a further 2000 were ordered. These were distributed to individuals and community groups.

In April, 2023, Laois Age Friendly collaborated with Healthy Laois to deliver the inaugural "Living Well" Expo- an event showing health, technological and social supports in Laois. We had demos, speakers and in excess of 70 exhibitors in Portlaoise College and the event proved more popular than anticipated with approx. 1000 attendees.

In December, 2023, the new Age Friendly Laois newsletter was distributed by email and by text link to older people, community groups and also in hard copy to libraries.



Laois Africa Day 2023

Laois Africa Day took place on Saturday the 3rd June, 2023 on the grounds of Laois Leisure Centre in Portlaoise. It was well attended on what was a beautiful day. It featured & showcased the sights, sounds, crafts and food of African culture and celebrated the contribution of the African community to Laois. It was very well attended, with something for all the family. Among the people who addressed the crowd on the day were Minister Sean Fleming, TD and Cathaoirleach, Cllr Thomasina Connell.



Collaborative Projects/Social Inclusion

Laois County Council partnered with stakeholders in respect of projects during 2023, to include:

- Community Coaching Programme
- Laois Sports Partnership Social Inclusion Disability Programme
- Laois Integration Network
- Laois Africa Day
- Integration supports for new communities
- CYPSC
- Make Way Day



Laois Public Participation Network (PPN)

Laois PPN was established in March 2015 and is the main link through which the Local Authority connects with the Community and Voluntary, Social Inclusion and Environmental groups within County Laois. The PPN facilitates groups to nominate PPN representatives to decision and policy making bodies in the County, such as the LCDC, SPCs and the JPC. Laois PPN completed its re-registration of Member Groups in 2023 with 640 groups currently registered.

Laois PPNs Climate Action Project 2023 was a year long calendar of events for their 640 PPN Member Groups with the aim of raising awareness, educating and inspiring positive Climate Action initiatives in our Communities.



Robbie Quinn and Mary White of Abbeyleix Tidy Towns with the Laois PPN group at Abbeyleix Heritage House. Photo: Michael Scully

The Joint Oireachtas on Environment and Climate Change requested a report on the present Climate Activities of PPNs and their member groups and the potential for them to mobilise further Climate Action. Laois PPN was selected to contribute to a workshop on this report. Laois PPNs Climate Action Project 2023 was selected as one of 3 case studies on the potential positive impact and role the PPN could play nationally on Climate Action.



Pictured at A Tree for Peace Planting Ceremony Left to Right: Paddy Buggy (Chair of Laois PPN Secretariat), Cathaoirleach Thomasina Connell, Dan Bergin (Laois PPN Co-Ordinator) pictured with members of the Midlands Ukrainian Association Photo: Denis Byrne

Laois PPN launched a “Property Marker”, for Community Groups in Laois. Laois PPN was successful in securing funding for the Property Marker through the Community Support Fund 2022. This is the first Property Marker available in County Laois. The Property Marker is a crime prevention initiative that provides a unique identifier on property that acts as a theft deterrent and assists Gardai in the recovery of stolen property. Laois PPN will make the Property Marker available to Community Groups in towns and villages across Laois over the coming months.



Property Marker Launch pictured left to right: Suzanne O'Connor (Laois County Council), Garda Graham Kavanagh (Crime Prevention Officer) Joe Thompson (LCDC Chairperson) Garda Aarran Grehan, Chief Superintendent Anthony Lonergan, Mr. John Mulholland (Chief Executive, Laois County Council) Paddy Buggy (Chair of Laois PPN Secretariat) Dan Bergin (Laois PPN Co-Ordinator) Anne Marie Kirrane (Laois County Council) Photo Denis Byrne.

Laois PPN supported PPN Member groups in 2023 through a variety of well attended training and capacity building events and was an information hub on funding opportunities and public consultations.

County Laois Joint Policing Committee (JPC)

The County Laois JPC met 4 times in 2023. Joint Policing Committee Working Group meetings per Municipal District continue to take place each quarter.

Community & Voluntary Awards

The 2023 Community & Voluntary Awards Ceremony was held on the 3rd of November 2023 in the Midlands Park Hotel, Portlaoise, hosted by Laois County Council in association with Laois PPN and sponsored by the People First Credit Union. Nominees were honoured in 6 categories for their contribution to community life in Laois, including an individual Unsung Hero Award and Junior Volunteer of the Year Award. 74 nominations were received for all categories this year.

The Awards showcase annually the great work that is being carried out locally by the community/voluntary, social inclusion and environmental sectors in County Laois.



Pride of Place

Pride of Place recognises initiatives taken by local communities to create pride in their area and celebrates the vital contribution that community groups make to society. Laois was represented in the 2023 All Island Pride of Place competition by Camross in the Population under 500 category and SVT Activity Wellness Hub in the Community Wellness Category . During the awards ceremony both Camross and SVT came away with prizes with Camross placing 2nd in their category and SVT receiving a special award to commend their work on the national scene.



Community Projects (Elected Members) Fund 2023

Over 114 community groups/projects were funded under the Community Projects (Elected Members) Fund in 2023 totalling €128,702.

Town & Village Renewal Scheme

Town and Village Renewal schemes were completed in the villages of Timahoe, Camross and Knock in addition to the towns of Stradbally and Timahoe in 2023. These schemes included public realm improvements, the provision of a men's shed, conservation works to a heritage building, and provision of additional facilities in remote working hubs. Work was also significantly advanced on the construction of an extension to a remote working hub in Killeslin village and the development of a feasibility study for Ballyroan village. Funding was acquired to allow the purchase of the old Boys National School in Ballyroan in late 2023.

Rural Regeneration Development Fund (RRDF)

Borris in Ossory Courthouse Project

Howley Hayes Cooney Architecture progressed the design of this project during 2023 and Part VIII Planning was approved at a meeting of Laois County Council on 23rd October 2023. An application for RRDF Category 1 funding will be submitted to the Department in February 2024 which if successful will allow the tendering and construction of this hub to proceed.

Durrow Community Hub

Following a successful application to the Department of Rural and Community Development, Category 1 RRDF Grant funding in the amount of €1,787,110.47 was awarded in respect of a proposed Community Enterprise Hub at Durrow, County Laois in 2023. Bluett & O'Donoghue Architects was appointed as lead designer. The design was significantly advanced in 2023 in collaboration with Durrow Development Forum. The construction of this hub will commence in 2024.

Town Centre First

Rathdowney

In accordance with the Town Centre First Policy launched by the Government, the Rathdowney Town Team was established in 2023 and they launched the Town Centre First plan for the Town in December 2023. This plan provides a vision for the ongoing and future development of the town, building buy-in from existing property owners and local communities. The TCF plan for Rathdowney contains proposals for 5no. transformative projects each of which involve improvements to the public realm in addition to a 10 year action plan to promote the economic delivery of the town for the benefit of the entire community. Sources of funding will be sought in 2024 to deliver on the objectives and actions contained in the Town Centre First Plan

Mountrath

The Town Team was re-established in Mountrath following the launch of the sustainable community plan in April 2023. The town team is comprised of representatives from all the major community groups in the town and has met regularly throughout the year. In 2023, the Town Team in association with Mountrath Tidy Towns, worked with Landscape Architects and adopted a landscape plan for the Town. They also launched the vacant Commercial Property Incentive Scheme in the town in association with Laois Chamber. They are working on several funding applications in order to deliver on the objectives and actions contained in the Town Centre First Plan.

LIBRARY SERVICES

Laois Library services continue to deliver a range of online and in person services through its networks of library branches in the County. In addition, the Library continued to support art exhibits in Abbeyleix and Mountmellick Libraries as well as a range of

presentations and events in the libraries. The Library service were delighted to welcome over 240,000 dedicated visits to our 8 libraries in the county during the year.

SPORT and LEISURE SECTION

The Sport & Leisure Section continue to deliver the following programmes and services:

- Ongoing management and maintenance of 22 play facilities, with emphasis on accessibility and biodiversity enhancement of play facilities.
- Assisted communities with the development of new play facilities in Borris in Ossory (LEADER and Sports Capital funded) and Trumera and Ballyfin (CLÁR funded).
- Preparation of grant applications to Department of Children & Youth Affairs - for playground upgrades and accessibility enhancement with €18,000 was awarded for Mountmellick Playground.
- Assisting with preparation and delivery of successful Green Flag Award for Páirc an Phobal, Portlaoise and People's Park, Portarlinton and Community Green Flag Parks
- Delivery of Healthy Ireland Programmes continued in various locations countywide with Active Parks & Playful Spaces funded €11,000 from Healthy Ireland Laois.
- Preparation of community groups, schools and clubs for Grant/Funding Applications which include the delivery of workshops and one to one consultation with over 50 organisations
- Co-ordination and delivery of national programmes and events. Funding of €23,827.61 was received from the National Transport Authority to deliver Bike Week 2023 which resulted in over 2000 people participating in 55 events countywide. €3,000 in funding was received from DECDIY to deliver National Play Day and National Recreation Week.
- Facilitation and ongoing support of SVT (Stradbally, Vicarstown and Timahoe) and Rathdowney/Errill Active Community Hubs which contributed significantly to the development of facilities and the co-funding of programmes.

(2) To foster and promote sustainable environmental initiatives and practices in the County/Region

Continuing on the excellent partnership with elected representatives, local communities, schools and agencies, we arranged the following supports, initiatives and Projects:

- **Biodiversity Demonstration Garden:** Laois Education Centre's garden, funded with €34,000 from LBAF, will serve as a regional learning hub for biodiversity, with a planned grand opening in Late Spring 2024.
- **Climate Action Resources for Teachers:** Laois County Council distributed a comprehensive Climate Action Resource to all 80 primary schools, featuring lesson plans, videos, and interactive content to enhance climate education.
- **Antarctica Series:** Laois County Council worked with the Antarctic Workshop Series led by Dr. Shaw, engaging over 30 classes weekly, with a culmination in a school competition on Climate Action to be showcased in February at Laois Education Centre.

- **A Playful City Study:** Laois County Council initiated a Playful Active School Zone project in Portlaoise, fostering active travel through co-creation workshops and community engagement. A report with suggested interventions was presented to the Roads Department.
- **Climate Action Video Series:** The Climate Action Team produced a 14-part video series, showcasing Laois County Council's sustainability efforts in areas such as pollinators, housing retrofit, active travel, Green Public Procurement, and Information Technology.
- **Greening of Durrow Scarecrow Festival:** Laois County Council's Climate Action Section funded initiatives at the Durrow Scarecrow Festival, promoting waste separation and prevention, including sponsorship for a climate action-themed theatre production and children's workshop.
- **Green Hub Portarlington:** Portarlington's Green Hub Project, funded with €10,000 from the Eastern Midlands Regional Waste Management Office, included events like "Sit, Sip and Stitch" to raise awareness about textile waste and disposable coffee cups. Another element of the project involved "dumpster dives" to audit waste, produced reports for 12 businesses, and showcased "Gragoyles" made from waste in an exhibition symbolizing waste reduction.
- **Climate Literacy Courses for Transition Year:** This 8 week action based learning course was delivered to secondary schools in County Laois.
- Laois County Council actively backs Sustainable Energy Communities, with noteworthy milestones achieved: Durrow SEC successfully launched their Energy Master Plan in December, Portlaoise 2040 SEC has concluded comprehensive Energy Audits, and Portarlington Business Association SEC is currently in the process of developing their Energy Master Plans (EMP) in collaboration with SEAI.

Applications for funding support were invited from interested bodies, groups, committees and organisations who intended to engage in environmental/amenity works. These included:

Community Grant Scheme (Environmental)

Grants were awarded to groups based on amenity works which included landscaping, development of open spaces (planting trees & shrubs, flowerbeds etc) and/or purchase of equipment to maintain/improve/clean up areas/open spaces. 94 groups countywide received funding of €30,463 in 2023.

ARTS SECTION

Laois County Council Arts Service is committed to developing sustainable and progressive arts programmes that are supportive of artistic ambition. Key pillars of the arts programme include: - Youth Arts, Visual arts, the Laois Arthouse Stradbally, the Literary Arts, the Dunamais Arts Centre, The Creative Ireland Laois Programme, Public Art and supports for music education and development through our partnerships with the LOETB, and networking with artists and communities to develop the sector.

The aim is to create an environment which supports the artist and artistic ambition and increase socially inclusive participation in all artistic programmes, and to support and

develop artistic infrastructure, including the Laois Arthouse, Dunamaise Arts Centre, Laois Music Centre and other artistic facilities in the County.

Socially inclusive activities and events hosted included:

Laois Arthouse, Stradbally – The Laois Arthouse Cruinniú na nÓg events were very well received.

- ▶ Print Making workshop by Adelle Hickey;
- ▶ The City of the Dreams, a workshop creating a model city using geometric shapes by Evgeny Chubatyy and Sustainable Textile Art by Niamh Bakker.
- ▶ In the library writer John Whelan read from his book ‘The Last Beekeeper’.

Assistance given to Treo Nua, FRC and Rathdowney on programming. The Music Generation events were very successful and I attended them also.



Creative Writing Course

Eileen Casey's Creative Writing Course for adults was held in the Laois Arthouse as part of Bealtaine Festival, with another course held in November/December.



Programme and Exhibitions

- ‘We Are Artists’ St Colemans NSArt
- Spontaneous People/Spontaneous People; Diane Chambers and Seamus Morton, Service users of KCat Kilkenny and Erkina House, Rathdowney
- Looking/Seeing/Making/BOGLANDS Bridget Flannery
- ‘Local Material, My Vision’ Evgeny Chubatyy
- Dúlra by Stradbally Senior Art Group

Summer Series of professional art workshops - An array of creative arts, drama and architectural workshops were hosted in the county as part of Laois Arts Office Summer Arts Programme in July and August. Summer Art Workshops were held in Rathdowney, Rosenallis, Stradbally, Portarlinton were held for young and old alike.





Summer Arts at the Malthouse



Laois Culture Night – Culture night was held on the 22 September 2023. Events were held in a number of locations and were well attended in Stradbally, Portarlinton and Emo. The visitor numbers to each event were up significantly owing to reachout and support of Arts Office.

The Arts Office hosted the launch of 'Fragments of Time and Space', sculpture by David Beattie at the Portlaoise Library.

In addition the Arts Office curated an evening of events in Stradbally; Viewing of Áille na Háille, Stone Sculpture by Benedict Byrne at Mc Keon Stone LTD.

"Local Materials, My Vison" an Exhibition by Evgeny Chubatyy was held in The Gallery, Laois Arthouse Stradbally

Night Creatures Parade. This outdoor parade with illuminations involved 250 participants in Court Square, Stradbally. The events concluded with a concert by Contry and Western legend Hank Wangford and the Messages in association with Music Generation Laois.

Other events supported by the Laois Arts Office took place at the Abbeyleix Heritage Centre, The Centre, Borris in Ossory, The Balcony Theatre Mountmellick, The Library Mountmellick, The Library, Portlaoise, The Dunamaise Arts Centre, Shanahoe Community Centre, Spink Commuinty Centre, Mountrath Youth Theatre, Market Square Portarlinton, Mount Henry Art Studio, Killenard and Emo Court.





Culture Night Stradbally

Percent for Arts

A Sculpture piece “Resonance” by David Beattie was unveiled in September 2023 outside the new library on Main Street, Portlaoise. David Beattie worked with nationally acclaimed Laois writer Pat Boran who provided a couplet that he wrote about the Main Street which is the street he grew up on. The couplet is about looking up the street in early morning. ‘Listen: the street still dreaming us. And look: the buildings open like the covers of a book.’



Dunamaise Arts Centre - Laois County Council continues to support the Dunamaise Arts Centre as one of the main arts venues in Laois. The Laois Arts Office worked collaboratively with the Dunamaise Arts Centre on numerous programmes during the year.

The Artists in Schools Scheme - 10 schools participated in this scheme in 2023. The scheme allows students to have an in-depth experience with the professional artist and gives them the opportunity to experience different art mediums. Below are the successfully awarded artists and schools.

Abbeyleix South National School, Abbeyleix	Drumming project
Arles National School, Ballickmoyler	Theatre based project
Holy Family Junior School, Portlaoise	Multicultural travel themed art
Paddock National School, Mountrath	Exploring the flora & fauna in the Slieve Blooms
Portlaoise Educate Together, National School, Portlaoise	Reflections on belief systems of pupils & exhibition
St Fergal's College, Rathdowney	Wall piece addressing diversity, inclusion & equality
St Francis School, Portlaoise	Ceramic art for wellbeing
St Joseph's GNS, Abbeyleix	Art project exploring students' identity through portrait drawing, painting & mixed media
St Colmcille's National School, Errill	Botanical painting workshops
Wolfhill National School	Visual arts, poetry, ecological project

Leaves Festival of Literature - The Leaves Festival ran from the 8-11 November 2023. Aingeala Flannery, the award-winning author of 'The Amusements,' was the festival writer in residence. Aingeala's novel, not only a critical success, has also garnered the prestigious John McGahern Prize and the Kerry Group Novel of the Year Award.

As part of the festival, 'The Amusements' was chosen for the One-County-One-Book initiative, aiming to connect readers across Laois. Aingeala conducted conversations with inmates at Portlaoise Prison who are students of literature. Aingeala held two conversations with senior cycle students, in Mountmellick Library and the Dunamaise Arts Centre. These were moderated by our own Ann Marie Kelly and journalist and novelist Orla Barry.

Aingeala held two adult writing workshops. There was an evening entitled 'Telling Stories', in the Dunamaise Arts Centre, moderated by acclaimed journalist Alex Clark. Man Booker award winner Anne Enright and Aingeala Flannery and music by Molly Donnery and Cathal Crowley.

Folk singers Ultan Conlon and Sabrina performed a café concert in the Hares Corner, The Mill, Mountmellick, for the service users at the Link Centre, St Fintan's Hospital and in the Portlaoise library. Ultan joined Donal Ryan for an evening of writing and music in the Portlaoise Library.

Other events included a conversation with author Emily Hourican, author of 'An Invitation to the Kennedys'. This was moderated by Thomas Carolan, Heritage Officer.

Library events took place in Portarlinton and Portlaoise, including a comic book workshop with Colin O Mahoney and an event with members of the LOETB creative writing classes.

The festival's richness is further enhanced by a crime writing evening featuring Andrea Carter Henrietta Mc Kervey and harp music by Michelle Mulcahy and moderated by John

Drennan in the atmospheric setting of St. Peter's Church of Ireland in Portlaoise, a special evening with Donal Ryan and Ultan Conlon, and an appearance by the bestselling novelist Emily Hourican, with her latest work 'An Invitation to the Kennedys.'

In addition to the literary events, there was performances at various venues with by Ultan Conlon, Cathal Crowley, Molly Donnery, and Michelle Mulcahy. The festival introduced an innovative comic book writing workshop with Colin O'Mahony across two events and a spoken word and music event celebrated the theme of 'Stand By Me', hosted by local Ann Marie Kelly.



Other projects in 2023 were Bealtaine, festival for older people, Laois Youth Theatre and a programme of visual art for member of the Ukrainian community.

Collaborations

Sightless Cinema

Collaborations with Local Authorities and funding from the Arts Council included, Sightless Cinema, a drama/theatre programme held in Co Laois for members of the county visually impaired community in association with Dublin South and Meath local authorities. The programme concluded with a public performance in the Dunamase Arts Centre. The initiative is funded by the Arts Council's Invitation to Collaboration Scheme

POP

The POP commenced. It is part of the partnership initiative Planning for Outdoor Performance (POP). POP is delivered by 5 Local Authority Arts Offices (including Roscommon - lead partner, Cork City, Kerry, Laois and Tipperary), in partnership with the National Resource Organisations ISACS, Poetry Ireland, Music Network and Theatre Forum. It is supported by Promenade, who help artists and communities to create incredible new arts experiences in Ireland's public places and unusual spaces. The initiative is funded by the Arts Council's Invitation to Collaboration Scheme with additional local authority support. Online training took place for artists interested in working in the outdoors. The outdoor events will take place in 2024.

The POP Arts Events series includes:

- Market Square, Portarlinton, Co. Laois, Thursday 1 February 2024 - St Brigid's Day
- Isle of Geese, Tralee, Co. Kerry, Saturday 2 March 2024 - Youth Mental Health Awareness Day
- Somers Park, Castlerea, Co. Roscommon, Saturday 20 April 2024 - World Circus Day
- Elizabeth Fort, Cork City, Sunday 28 April 2024 - Cork World Book Festival
- National Drawing Day, Tipperary Town, Co. Tipperary, Saturday 18 May 2024

Film Bursary

Under the Creative Ireland fund we are very pleased with the outcomes of the Film Bursary. The recipients for 2023 are Aisling Conroy and Dr Yvonne Hennessy for *Thresholds*, a documentary about birth and death and the people who assist us on both journeys.

The winning film in 2022 was screened in the Dunamase Arts Centre in December. Entitled 'The Light Within', it is a gothic style film based on Quakers in the county and was very warmly received.

HERITAGE

Under the LCC Corporate Plan, the aims of the Heritage Office are:

- To work in partnership with key stakeholders to deliver a high-quality heritage service for the people of County Laois.
- To identify, preserve and conserve the built, natural and cultural heritage.

In 2023, this was achieved through actions to:

- 1. Implement the Actions of the County Heritage Plan.**
- 2. Establish and promote Best Practice in Heritage Management and Conservation.**
- 3. Manage & Deliver Conservation Grants from the Dept of Housing, Local Government and Heritage**

Implement the Actions of the County Heritage Plan

The following projects from the Laois Heritage Plan were undertaken with the support of the Heritage Council during 2023.

Heritage Awareness:

- The Heritage Offices of Laois, Offaly, and Westmeath County Councils continued to support the BirdWatch Ireland podcast “In Your Nature” about birds and other wildlife.
- **Biodiversity Week and Heritage Week:** Events were organised and publicised by the Laois Heritage Office.
- **Heritage week:** The Laois Heritage Week 2023 Events Guide was published by the Heritage Office and distributed to libraries around the county (with an interactive version available online).
- **Photography:** Alf Harvey was commissioned to capture images of events throughout the year, which were shared on social media and in Laois publications.
- **The Annual Laois Heritage Seminar:** this was held on 2nd December in the Midlands Park Hotel. With talks on a variety of topics, approximately 50 people attended.



Connecting Communities

The “Connecting Communities” programme continued in 2023, focusing on Timahoe, primarily management of vegetation and trees at the Timahoe early Christian site, in accordance with the aims of the Timahoe Conservation Plan. Also supporting the ‘Big Dig’ to take place during the Timahoe Heritage Festival in June.

Publications

Publications for 2023 included:

Gardening for Biodiversity Booklet: In 2023 there was a reprint (2000 copies) of this very popular booklet, which was distributed to libraries around the county.

Laois Heritage & Biodiversity Strategy 2021 – 2026: Although the text was prepared, the publication of this strategy was delayed due to Covid. The official launch took place at the Laois Heritage Seminar in December.

Cloppook Church & Graveyard – Conservation Management Plan: As part of the Just Transition Project – Conservation & Pollination, all the six sites had conservation management plans completed. It is intended that all plans will be published when the project is complete. A small number of copies of the Cloppook plan were completed for an information event held in Luggacurren about the work done under the Just Transition project.

Establis and Promote Best Practice in Heritage Management and Conservation

Biodiversity and Climate Change Funding & Projects

Approved Budget €50,000 (€83,035 from NPWS/Dept of Housing, Local Government and Heritage)

Funding was granted to Laois County Council for five projects (listed below) in 2023. Four of the five projects were completed due to the capacity of the Heritage Officer only being appointed to the post at the end of April 2023.

Project	2023 LBAF Grant (85%)	Final Grant
Pollinator Awareness Radio Ads	€6,375	€6,375
Biodiversity Awareness on the Portlaoise Orbital Route.	€24,089	€22,758
Invasive Alien Species Treatment at Abbeyleix Bog.	€10,071	€10,071
Biodiversity Enhancement at Laois Education Centre.	€34,000	€34,000
Biodiversity Training for Laois CoCo staff & Laois Chamber.	€8,500	€0
TOTAL	€83,035	€83,204

Just Transition Fund

This major project linking conservation of medieval heritage and biodiversity continued in Laois and Offaly County Councils. The three year project has been awarded €748,000 under the Governments Just Transition Fund which aims to support innovative projects that contribute to the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the Midlands and which have employment and enterprise potential. The total budget for the project is €880,000.

The Conservation and Pollination project started in 2021 with the appointment of the Conservation team led by Howley Hayes Cooney Architects. Conservation plans for all 6 graveyard sites were completed with masonry conservation, and management for pollinators will commencing shortly afterwards. Conservation works on all six sites almost complete with a projected finish date at the end Q1 2024.



Works carried out under the Just Transition Programme in Clopook Graveyard

Community

Monuments

Fund

Initial Budget €153,040, fully funded by Dept of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
 In 2023 Laois received funding for four projects from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage under the CMF (Community Monuments Fund). All projects were completed successfully with only a minor difference in the final grant funding awarded.

Site	Initial Grant	Final Grant
Dysart Enos Church	€60,300	€60,300
Baunaghra Church	€43,241	€43,241
Clonkeen Church	€21,710	€19,702
Ballyadden Church	€27,789	€27,786
TOTAL:	€153,040	€147,908

Manage and Deliver Conservation Grants

The Historic Structures Fund (HSF) and Built Heritage Investment Scheme (BHIS) continued to provide grand funding in 2023 for conservation of heritage structures in Laois.

Historic Structures Fund (HSF)

Initial Budget €107,100 fully funded by Dept of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

The Historic Structures fund is for larger scale projects and buildings of community importance. Four projects received funding in 2023 and all were successfully completed for the full amount of grants awarded.

Property	Initial Grant	Final Grant
Donaghmore	€37,500	€37,500
Dooary VS Stream	€10,000	€10,000
Roundwood House	€37,000	€37,000
Old Vicarstown's National School	€22,600	€22,600
TOTAL:	€107,100	€107,100



Donaghmore – completed works to the Roof of the Bakehouse

Built Heritage Investment Scheme (BHIS)

Initial Budget €94,450, fully funded by Dept of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

The Built Heritage Investment Scheme is for smaller scale, labour intensive projects to conserve and maintain protected structures. A total of 8 projects were awarded funding but three of those could not proceed due to difficulty in sourcing suitable conservation professionals.

Property	Initial Grant	Final Grant
Newtown Mill	€15,000	€0
Portrane House	€15,000	€15,000
Preston House	€15,000	€15,000
Rathmakelly	€4,750.00	€0
RIC Barracks Clonaslee	€15,000	15,37.49
Fisherman's Inn, Fisherstown	€7,500.00	€0
Cuffsborough House Clough	€11,100	€15,000
Former Goods Shed, Abbeyleix	€11,100	€15,000
TOTAL:	€94,450	€61,537

(3) To foster and promote sustainable environmental initiatives and practices in the County/Region

Tidy Towns Grant Scheme

Applications for funding support were invited from Tidy Town groups. During 2023, €27,700 was allocated in grants to 22 groups under this scheme.

The Laois Federation of Tidy Towns, established in 1998 with 33 registered groups, serves as a crucial resource supporting community collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and environmental enhancement. In 2023, the Federation was supported by Laois County Council and actively engaged in impactful activities, including:

- **Annual General Meeting & Seminar:**
 - Convened at Durrow Castle Arms hotel in February with 46 attendees from 26 Tidy Towns groups.
 - Appointed a new chairperson, treasurer, and committee.
 - Received bee boxes from Portlaoise Mens Shed and materials for Clean Up Week Laois.
- **LFTT Seminar in Camross:**
 - Held on June 19th, bringing together community groups, environmental enthusiasts, and local organisations.
 - Included a tour of Camross led by Johanna McDonald Steenkist, showcasing the village's beauty and environmental projects.
- **Tidy Towns One-to-One Consultations:**
 - Experienced adjudicators, Billy Flynn and Sharon Eastwood, conducted two days of one-to-one advisory clinics in April.
 - Involved a desk review of 2022 submissions, providing personalized feedback and recommendations.
 - Ann O'Leary conducted walkabouts and offered feedback to Abbeyleix and Portlaoise Tidy Towns, both National Competition medal winners in 2022.
- **Laois Federation of Tidy Towns Awards 2023:**
 - Recognized outstanding achievements in seven subcategories, with Clough Tidy Towns and Portlaoise Tidy Towns winning the main prizes for Overall Impression Village and Overall Impression Town, respectively presented at the Community and Voluntary Awards on November 3rd.

Climate Change

In 2023, Climate change initiatives focused on the preparation of the Local Authority Climate Action Plan and the groundwork for the opening of the Community Climate Action Fund.

Local Authority Climate Action Plan (LACAP):

- In response to a Ministerial Direction in February 2023, Laois County Council embarked on developing the LACAP within one year.
- The preparation phase involved the development of evidence-based reports, including a Climate Change Risk Assessment and Baseline Emission Inventory Analysis, conducted by external consultants.

- Training sessions, spanning from February to May, comprised Sectoral Workshops, Online Webinars, and in-person training sessions, with active participation from LCC staff.
- Four facilitated workshops in May engaged over 60 internal staff, tailoring actions for different sections of the LACAP.
- Public consultation workshops, held from May 16th to 25th, coincided with consultations on the County Laois Local Development Strategy and Laois Local Economic and Community Plan, ensuring alignment across plans.
- A comprehensive consultation process included in-person and online sessions, supported by visual recording to enhance feedback.
- The draft Laois Climate Action Plan underwent rigorous assessments, including a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Appropriate Assessment (AA).
- The LACAP is listed for presentation and adoption at the Council Meeting in January 2024.

During 2023, a wide variety of projects were undertaken, in pursuance of Energy Efficiency improvements. Key initiatives include:

- Laois County Council, leading the Midlands Energy Agency (MEA), played a key role in the establishment of SEAI Pathfinder project for the five MEA local authorities, with signed Service Level Agreements securing 50% funding for building retrofit and consultancy costs.
- Comprehensive Gap to Target report identified 29 MEA buildings for inclusion, with 8 buildings in Laois.
- In preparation for SEAI Pathfinder, the Energy Officer organized a two-day, in-person Energy Management Action Plan (MAP) for MEA local authorities.
- All MEA local authorities, including Laois County Council, actively participated in SEAI Engaging People Programme.
- Laois County Council received €16k for a year-long "Positive Energy" campaign, celebrating achievements in energy conservation and climate action.
- The Positive Energy campaign featured monthly internal communication releases and was presented as a case study at the national Reduce Your Use Campaign launch in October.
- Pending official SEAI Public Sector performance results for 2022, Laois County Council's scorecard indicates an impressive 47.7% improvement in energy efficiency compared to the baseline.

(4) To facilitate and promote sustainable development of the Council including the delivery of key infrastructural projects subject to compliance with good environmental standards and practice

In 2023, the Roads Department received road grants and budget funding of nearly €28 million for the year and additional funds have been received over and above what was

adopted in the roadworks scheme bringing the figure to €32m. The 2023 Roadworks Programme was progressed across all three Municipal Districts and is complete.

Significant additional funding was received this year from August onwards from the Department of Rural and Cultural Development under Local Improvements Scheme. Works were completed on the schemes in October 2023.

Road Design report

Laois County Council completed a large number of maintenance and improvement schemes in 2023 which included the substantial completion of the N77 Abbeyleix Road Improvement Scheme and the N80 Kyletalesha to Mountmellick Phase 2 Pavement Asset Repair and Renewal Scheme. In addition to the above, works were also completed on enhancements to signage, line markings, capital pavement works together with installation of bollards, public lighting, and junction improvement works. The following outlines the works completed and associated funding.

N77 Abbeyleix Road Rehabilitation and Enhancement Scheme – Expenditure €3.87 million

This scheme incorporates a reduction in road width, removal of hard shoulder, pavement rehabilitation and the provision and improvement of footpaths and cycle lanes on both sides of the N77 Abbeyleix Road in Portlaoise. The overall scheme length is approximately 2.0km.

Following the approval of the Part VIII in 2022, Arkil Ltd were awarded the construction contract in March 2023 and construction commenced in late April 2023. Substantial Completion of the Project was reached in December 2023. The outstanding works include landscaping and accommodation works.

N80 Kyletalesha to Derrycloney Phase 2 – € 2.51 million

2023 saw the completion of Phase 2 of the N80 Kyletalesha to Mountmellick Pavement Asset Repair and Renewal scheme. This contract was awarded to Roadstone Ltd following the tendering process. The design required the planning out of in excess of 400mm of the existing pavement, the pavement was then reinstated to the existing levels in combination with the laying of a geogrid. The scheme was 5.2km in length. The works began in June 2023 and concluded in October 2023. The N80 was closed for six weeks during the summer to expediate the construction of the scheme.

N78 Ballylehane Lower to Farnans Pavement Improvement Scheme - €600,000

The above scheme comprises 5.6km of road surfacing and strengthening. Designed by the Kildare National Roads Design Office on behalf of Laois County Council, following approval of the PARR by TII, the scheme was tendered under the new “Kildare Framework Agreement for Pavement and Minor Works for National Roads 2023”. Following the tender process Plazamont T/A Dan Morrissey was awarded the contract. One third of the scheme was completed in 2023. The remainder of the scheme is due to be completed in early 2024.

N77 Course to Dunmore Pavement Improvement Scheme

The above scheme comprises 25,000 square metres of Hot Rolled Asphalt pavement renewal along the N77 between Abbeyleix and Durrow. This scheme was awarded to Roadstone Ltd. The project was due to start in November 2023, however due to low temperatures Roadstone Ltd were unable to commence the scheme. The scheme will be completed in early 2024.

N77 Deer Pilot Scheme

Following the completion of vegetation clearance work in 2022, new solar powered vehicle actuated signage was erected at two separate locations south of Abbeyleix on the N77 in August 2023. The work carried out at this location was due to the high level of deer crossing.

N77 Tinweir Drainage – Expenditure €50,000

Following a flooding incident on the N77 in early 2023 at the Tinweir junction during a period of intense rainfall, drainage works were carried out to prevent a further reoccurrence of such an incident.

Public Lighting

There is a total of 9,345 public lights in Laois with 69% of the lights upgraded to LED in the county.

Meelick Road – Strategic Improvement Grants Expenditure €150,000

Laois County Council submitted an application to DTTaS and funding of €150,000 was allocated for safety improvement works along the Meelick Road. After completion of a Road Safety Inspection report by an external consultant, it was decided that ramps and junction tightening be implemented as part the intervention measures. To date the ramps and associated public lighting have been installed.



N78 Ballylehane lower to Farnans PIS

Winter Maintenance

Call-out operations were carried out on 60 occasions during the 2022/2023 winter season treating 458km of the rostered salted network in Laois. So far there has been 40 callouts during the 2023/2024 winter season.

Portlaoise Municipal District (Central Area)

Parks, Landscape & Climate Action

The Municipal District Office works closely with Tidy Towns groups in Portlaoise, Abbeyleix, Ballyroan and Ballinakill on several initiatives including

- Upgrade of public spaces and roundabouts to include landscaping, sculptural features and lighting (as appropriate).
- Increase the area for biodiversity on public lands.
- Reduce, and move towards elimination, of herbicide use for weed control.
- To provide high quality parks and green spaces that achieve the requirements of The Green Flag Award scheme.
- Continue the “10,000 Trees for Portlaoise Project” in conjunction with Trees on the Land, Tidy Towns and Climate Action.
- To implement a public awareness programme in respect of biodiversity & promotion of “Portlaoise - A town in a garden”.



Perennial planting scheme and colourful hanging baskets in Lyster Square Portlaoise.



Market Square Abbeyleix pollinator friendly planting scheme



Abbeyleix National Award Winner SuperValu Tidy Towns Competition, Irelands Tidiest Town 2023



Portlaoise SuperValu Tidy Towns Competition Gold Medal Winner County Laois 2023

Local Biodiversity Action Fund

In 2023 the Portlaoise MD Office in conjunction with Portlaoise Tidy Towns secured funding for a multi-annual programme to upgrade 9 roundabouts to pollinator friendly planting areas. Rockdale Roundabout Mountrath Road, Ballyfin Road Roundabout, O'Lalor Roundabout Aughnaharna were upgraded in 2023 under Phase 1 of this programme.



Ballyfin Road Roundabout pollinator friendly planting scheme

Grass & Meadow Management

The Portlaoise Municipal District Office manage 36,000m² of annual cut and short cut meadows and grass areas in Portlaoise town environs.

Tree Planting and Management

The 10,000 Trees for Portlaoise Project in conjunction with Trees on the Land, Portlaoise Tidy Towns and Climate Action Plan was progressed in 2023. Planting locations for over 3,000 new whips & trees were identified in 2022 and were planted in spring 2023.

The Portlaoise Municipal District Office manages the existing stock of tree in public spaces.



Tree management works in St Brigid's Place Portlaoise

Outdoor Dining & Street Cleaning

The Portlaoise Municipal District Office provide and maintain a number of outdoor dining areas all year round.



2023 IBAL Anti-Litter League

Portlaoise achieved 20th place out of 40 towns that were assessed as part of the Irish Business Against Litter League (Round 1). Portlaoise achieved the status of “Clean to European Norms”.

Green flag Award

The Green Flag Award scheme recognises and rewards well managed parks and green spaces, setting the benchmark standard for the management of recreational outdoor spaces across Europe and around the world.

Pairc an Phobail Portlaoise was awarded a green flag again in 2023.

Road Restoration Works

In the Central Area, a total road length of 7.4km was improved under Restoration Improvement Works (Strengthening) Schemes.

A total road length of 5.7km was resealed and had skid resistance improved under Restoration Maintenance Works (Surface Dressing) Schemes.



Restoration Improvement Works (Strengthening) on the L-27781 at Cloncullane Ballyroan

Footpath Programme

Over €227,000 of footpath works were carried in the towns of Portlaoise, Abbeyleix and Ballyroan and Ballinacill in 2023.



Footpath Replacement works in Woodgrove Portlaoise

Community Involvement Schemes

Road surfacing, footpaths and drainage works were carried out in St. Brigid's Place Portlaoise and Hillview Drive Portlaoise to the value of €120,000.



Road surfacing St. Brigid's Place Portlaoise

Road Drainage Works programme

Drainage works were carried out at the following locations:

- R425 Main Street Ballyroan near the Community Centre
- R425 Crubeen Ballyroan
- R425 Ballyruin Ballyroan
- N77 Abbeyleix Rd. Portlaoise
- R426 Timahoe Rd. Portlaoise
- L-6693 Roskelton Clonadacasey
- L-81108-0 Pallas Little
- L-77974 Heywood Demesne
- L-56582 Bartles Bridge Cromoge
- N77 Clonad Portlaoise
- L-5679 Coole Raheen



Drainage, resurfacing, and footpath works Main Street Ballyroan

Climate Change Adaptation Schemes & Drainage programme

Drainage works were carried out at the following locations:

- Blackhills Abbeyleix
- Kilminchy Portlaoise
- Tonduff Abbeyleix
- Monaclear Ballinakill
- Ironmills Ballinakill
- Abbeyleix Rd Ballinakill

The type of works involved replacing undersized drains with new culverts, high quality soak aways and open water courses and improving the road drainage network.

Road Safety Schemes & Junction Improvement Works

Works to enhance road safety to enhance visibility and driver safety were carried out at

- Crookedwood Cross Abbeyleix
- Ballyroan Road Abbeyleix (near cemetery)



Improvement of sightlines on the Ballyroan Road Abbeyleix

Local Improvement Schemes

Road improvement works were carried out at the following locations;

- Rahavannagh, Ballyroan
- Heywood Ballinakill

Bridge Rehabilitation Works

Bridge reinforcement works were completed at Clohogue Ballinakill.



Additional reinforcement beams installed at Clohogue bridges Ballinakill

Graigecullen - Portarlington Municipal District (Eastern Area)

In the Eastern Area, restoration improvement and strengthening works were carried out on a total road length of 13.82 km in 2023.

Restoration maintenance (surface dressing) works were also carried out on a total road length of 13.83 km in 2023.

Completed road strengthening works at Garrymaddock L-3817-25



Bridge Rehabilitation Works

Bridge rehabilitation works were carried out on several bridges in 2023, most notably at **Kilfeacle Bridge** (located on road L3857-0 across a tributary of the Douglas River). Structural repair works were completed on the scoured western abutments both at the midpoint under the arch and at the upstream face plus re-pointing of the full arch soffit and reconstruction of a section of the parapet wall at road level with selected stone masonry.

Location of Kilfeacle Bridge on L-3857 (old railway bridge overhead in background)



Before and after: Re-pointing of Arch soffit/barrell under Kilfeacle Bridge





Reconstruction of Bridge Wall in traditional stone masonry



Castletown Bridge, located on road L7972-0 across the Douglas River. Installation of new foundation/plinth and re-construction of a section of the parapet wall at road level with selected stone masonry.



Safety Improvement Works

These works were completed on the R445 (Old Dublin Road) at The Heath and works involved the resurfacing of c.500m length of the R445. The works carried out were adjacent to Treacy's pub/restaurant, where the road and hard shoulder had previously been in very poor condition.

The works were also carried out at Killenard Railway Bridge. These works involved the installation of a new crash barrier at the sharp bend adjacent to the bridge, installation of a solar powered warning sign. The reconstruction of a new boundary wall behind the crash barrier and new road markings on the approach to the bridge.

More safety works were completed at Mullens Cross, Vicarstown with the realignment of the field boundary at the crossroads to greatly improve the sightlines at the junction and on new fencing at Alley Cross on the R419.

Installation of two speed radars at Pound Cross near Ballybrittas, and one on the N80 near the Rock of Dunamais travelling towards Stradbally, and one on the R430, at The Mall.

Local Improvement Scheme (LIS)

Under the LIS the following lengths of roadway were surfaced:

Round 1	Round 2
Moyanna, Vicarstown	Farnans, Wolfhill
Kilmurray, Stradbally	Park Lower, Stradbally
	Moorefield, Cappanrogue
	Kilmullen, Portarlington
	Cloeland, Ballybrittas
	Shanganaghmore, Barrowhouse
	Ballybeg, Ballylinan

Community Involvement Scheme (CIS)

Under the CIS, road surfacing works were carried out at the following locations in 2023:

- L-39522-0 Ross, Vicarstown
- L-78901-0 Ashfield, Ballickmoyler

Drainage Works

Significant road drainage works were carried out across the Municipal District in 2023 as follows:

- Coolnabacca: On the L-3838, Stradbally to Timahoe Road drainage works were carried out to resolve flooding issue.
- Ballycarroll: At the road verge on the L-7830 to resolve flooding on road near the Rock of Dunamaise.
- Ballyadding, Ballybrittas: 58m of drainage pipework along with road gullies and manholes were constructed in advance of road surfacing works.
- Mayo: Road drainage works were carried out on the R431 at Mayo – 60m of 225mm pipeline, road gulleys and manholes installed.
- Shanragh: At Shanragh – 25m of open drain piped with 150mm twin wall pipe and backfilled with drainage stone.
- The Swan: On the R426 Clough Road, The Swan drainage works were carried out to resolve flooding issue.
- Portarlinton: On the R419 Portlaoise Road - 215m of drainage pipework along with road gullies and manholes were installed in advance of road surfacing works.
- Timahoe: At the Pike Road, 30m of 300mm dia. pipe was installed.
- Ballybeg/Ballinagar: Installation of road gullies and 65m of 150mm drainage pipeworks, with the construction of new soakaway.
- Cappalug: At Joe's Road, 60m of open drain piped with 225mm twin wall pipes, backfilled with 75mm stone and full re-instatement.
- Killeen: Installation of precast concrete channel kerbing, alongside the R429 in advance of road strengthening works.
- Mayo: At Mayo Church (on L-7898) the damaged pipeline was replaced with 65m of 300mm dia. pipe, road gullies and inspection chamber. Additional drainage works also included the installation of 15m of 150mm dia. pipe, new road gulleys and connected into the newly laid 300mm pipeline.

Outdoor Recreation Improvement Scheme (ORIS)

Under the ORIS, a new footpath along with public lighting and a handrail was constructed in Portarlinton, from the entrance to the Derryounce lakes and trails amenity area to the county boundary where Offaly County Council are continuing with the provision of a footpath to Botley Lane:

New ORIS Footpath Constructed at Droughill L-7178, leading to Derryounce lakes and trails amenity area.



Traffic Calming and Road Safety

A range of traffic calming and road safety measures were also installed across the municipal district in 2023. These included:

- Installation of speed radars, pedestrian crossings, new parking spaces, new wheelchair parking spaces, new pedestrian crossings, roadside drainage works, roadside passing bays, junction fencing works (improving sightlines), localised road surfacing repair works, road signage, road markings, emptying of litter bins, street sweeping, hedge cutting and a range of landscaping works in the public realm.

River Maintenance Works

In 2023, the following river maintenance works were completed under the Barrow drainage works programme:

- River Crompaun: Vegetation removal and silt removal above water level either side of the R429 bridge in Killeen village was completed in September 2023.

Before and After: River Crompaun – completed maintenance works



- Stradbally River: At the N80 Bridge on the Main Street in Stradbally, vacuum silt removal works were carried out following approval to proceed from An Bord Pleanala. The works commenced in September 2023 and silt removal works continued until heavy rainfall prevented any further works. It is planned to continue with these works in the 2024 season.
- Stradbally River – Vacuum excavation for silt removal



Stradbally River – excavator feeding silt to suction pipework



Footpath Repair and Construction Works

Footpath repair and construction works were completed across the Graiguecullen/Portarlington Municipal District in 2023. These are some of the larger footpath projects:

- Portarlington Main Street (both sides) from Bank of Ireland to Market Square:

Following the removal of the ESB poles and overhead lines, the Eircom poles and overhead Eircom lines were removed and all footpath paving works were completed.

Stradbally (Carlow Road): New footpath and public lighting works were completed at Stradbally Ladders on the N80.

Graigucullen (Oakley Park): New footpath constructed at the front of the estate.

- Graigucullen (Northern Relief Road): Footpath repairs completed on the N80 between Duggans Bridge and the Sleaty Road roundabout.
- Newtown (Miners Walk): Footpath and kerbing repairs carried out throughout the estate.
- The Swan: Footpath and kerbing repairs carried out at The Swan village alongside the R430.
- Killeen: Footpath repairs and new kerbing installed on the R429 at Killeen Bridge.

Borris in Ossory/Mountmellick Municipal District (Western Area)

Road Maintenance

- In the Western Area, a total road surfacing length of 25km was completed by Restoration Improvements Works (Strengthening). A total road surfacing length of 30km was completed by Restoration Maintenance Works (Surface Dressing).



Redcastle Junction, Mountrath



Pavement reconstruction Chapel Street, Durrow



Surface Dressing at Portnahinch, Mountmellick

Community Involvement Schemes

Road surfacing, footpaths and drainage works were carried out at:

- Acragar, Mountmellick
- Ballaghmore
- Bunlacken Spa Quarter

Local Improvement Schemes

Road surfacing and drainage works were carried out at:

- Garronbawn, Camross
- Borroughan, Errill
- Ballaghmore Lower, Borris in Ossory
- Rapla, Rathdowney
- Grantstown, Ballacolla
- Knockardgannon, Errill

River Drainage

River maintenance works were completed at the following locations:

- Vegetation removal from the Whitehorse River, immediately downstream of Mountrath Town (Phase 1)
- Drainage maintenance on the water courses in Mountmellick Town
- Removal of gravel bars beneath Irishtown and Convent Bridges in Mountmellick.
- Drinagh Mill Race embankment repair
- Derryduff to Kildrinagh
- Embankment collapse Summergrove, Mountmellick



Drinagh Mill Race embankment repair



Embankment collapse Summergrove, Mountmellick

Bridge Rehabilitation Works

- Wooden Bridge
- Brittas Bridge
- Knockmullin Bridge
- Cuffsborough Bridge
- Forest Bridge Mountrath
- Clonburren Bridge, Errill
- Castletown, Donaghmore



Clonburren Bridge, Errill



Forest Bridge, Castletown



Brittas Bridge, Clonaslee



Castletown bridge, Donaghmore

Drainage Programme

Drainage Schemes were delivered at several locations around the Municipal District in 2023 including replacing undersized drains with new culverts, high quality soakaways and open water courses all with the intention of keeping the road network clear of surface water.



Soakaway installation

Climate Change Adaptation Grant

The following schemes were funded under the Climate Change Adaptation Grant:

- Drainage improvement works at Cloncannon, Mountmellick.
- Augment drainage infrastructure at Tinweir, Durrow.

Glenbarrow Carpark

The Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Team funded the construction of an overflow carpark at Glenbarrow, Rosenallis. The objective of the project was to create a safe and accessible parking facilities at the Glenbarrow Trailhead.

Glenbarrow Carpark



Footpath Works

Footpath improvement works were undertaken during 2023 at the following locations:

- Borris-in-Ossory Road, Rathdowney
- Errill Road, Rathdowney
- The Swan, Durrow
- Forest, Mountrath
- Shanboe, Borris-in-Ossory
- Cork Road, Durrow
- Wolf Tone Street, Mountmellick
- St. Patrick's Terrace, Borris-in-Ossory

Forest footpath, Mountrath



Borris-in-Ossory Road, Rathdowney - Footpath Scheme



Mountmellick Christmas Tree Removal

The Mountmellick Christmas tree structure which stood over 65ft tall in O'Connell Square, was taken down and removed in June 2024.



Active Travel - National Transport Authority (NTA) Projects

Laos County Council received an allocation of €3.3m from the NTA for the delivery of active travel projects. Active travel is travelling for a purpose using your own energy such as walking, cycling or scooting. Delivery of active travel projects is mainly around walking and cycling improvements.

In 2023 the Council delivered several active travel projects:

Safe Routes to Schools Programme (SRTS)

Led by An Taisce, the SRTS Programme was developed in response to ongoing issues of safety and congestion at the school gate and on routes to school. The aim of the programme is to support active travel to school (walking and cycling). Plans to carry out improvements to the front of school locations were advanced in 2022, in conjunction with An Taisce and the NTA.

The following three schemes were completed in 2023:

SRTS – Maryborough NS & Portlaoise Southern Circular Road Active Travel Scheme

This scheme saw the upgrading of Lismard and O’Dowling roundabouts on the Portlaoise Southern Circular Road through the introduction of raised zebra crossings on three arms of each roundabout. This has facilitated safer crossing points for pupils attending the various primary schools in the area. It also links in with the commencement of the Triogue Way and entrance to the People’s Park.





SRTS – Scoil Mhuire NS, Ballyroan Road, Abbeyleix

This scheme removed car parking on the footpath to the front of the school and providing a safe route to school on the Ballyroan Road. This was achieved through the introduction of the following measures:

- Creation of a ‘School Zone’ to the front of the school
- Installation of pencil bollards
- Delivery of two new zebra crossings
- Speed ramps
- Junction tightening works at Abbey Crescent, Fairways and Laburnum Court estates.



SRTS – Scoil Phadraig Naofa, Davitt Road, Mountmellick

This scheme removed parked cars on the footpaths to the front of the school and provided a safe route to school along Davitt Road. This was achieved through the introduction of the following measures:

- Creation of a 'School Zone' to the front of the school
- Installation of pencil bollards
- Delivery of a new zebra crossing on Davitt Road and two at Davitt road and Connolly street roundabouts
- Upgrade of existing zebra crossing
- Speed ramps
- Junction tightening works at Davitt Court, Brock View and Willow Grove estates.



Footpath Scheme – Carlow Road, Stradbally

A new footpath was installed at Kylebeg, Stradbally as far as the cemetery. The works comprised of the following:

- New footpath 300m length and average width of 3m
- Extension of public lighting network
- New pelican crossing installed

N80 Kylebeg, Stradbally



Junction Tightening Works/Pedestrian Crossings

Junction tightening schemes involve the narrowing of wide crossing points at estate entrances or other minor roads and see reductions in crossing widths from 20m down to 7m. Crossing points are also reconstructed as raised crossings. These measures bring about a safer environment for all road users, particularly pedestrians and those with mobility or visual impairments.

In 2023 junction tightening works took place at:

- Rossmore View, Graiguecullen
- Shanboe, Borris in Ossory

In addition, two new raised pedestrian crossings were installed in Rathdowney at St. Fergal's School and the R435 Johnstown Road. These have facilitated safer crossing points for students and pedestrians generally.

St. Fergal's School



R435 Johnstown Road



Portlaoise Local Transport Plan (LTP)

The preparation of Portlaoise LTP commenced in 2022 following the appointment of engineering consultants.

Portlaoise LTP is a short to medium-term plan that sets out the town's transport strategy for the period to 2030 and will coincide with the period of the Portlaoise Local Area Plan (LAP) 2024 - 2030. It will also consider longer term proposals as contained in documents such as 'Portlaoise 2040 and Beyond'.

The LTP will be required to examine all transport modes and how they interact both in the town centre and throughout its environs.

The draft LTP will go on display with the Portlaoise Local Area Plan in early 2024. In consideration of all submissions received, the final LTP and LAP will be adopted by the elected members.

Bus Shelter Enabling Works

The NTA funded the installation of new bus shelters at Ballybrittas and Kilminchy in 2023.

The two-bay shelter at Ballybrittas required no electrical connection and is solar powered. It arrived on site fully assembled with no requirement for significant ground works.

Ballybrittas (two photos)





Kilminchy saw the installation of a three-bay shelter.

Further bus shelters are planned for installation in 2024 at the following locations:

- Kilminchy (opposite side)
- Mountrath
- Ballylinan
- Stradbally

Kilminchy



Environment Department: Corporate Plan 2019-2024

Environment

Area of Activity	Objectives	2023 Progress Update
Environmental Protection	<p>To improve, protect, enhance and promote the natural and built environment in the interests of present and future generations.</p> <p>Improve water status in all water bodies.</p> <p>To protect public health and to improve & maintain air quality and to protect against noise pollution.</p> <p>To provide a healthy and safe working Environment.</p>	<p>In 2023, The Environmental Protection Team:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigated complaints (57) and water quality issues referred by members of the public, EPA and LAWPRO/Inland Fisheries Ireland. • Carried out farm inspections (farmyard & farmland) in the Douglas catchment area. • Reviewed, inspected and enforced Discharge Licenses. • Assisted LAWPRO in referrals from Prioritised Areas for Action. • Carried out investigation and sampling for the Kilminchy Area Project. • Investigated air quality (41) and noise complaints (34). • Carried out inspections on domestic wastewater treatment systems under the EPA'S National Inspection Plan. • Carried out environmental protection inspections in line with the Council's 2023 RMCEI Plan. • Carried out assessments, inspections and reports on planning applications.
Waste Management & Enforcement	<p>To improve, protect, enhance and promote the natural and built environment in the interests of present and future generations.</p> <p>The protection of human health and the environment against harmful effects that may be caused by the generation, collection, transport, treatment, storage</p>	<p>Throughout 2023, the Environment Section:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigation of waste complaints (534) referred by members of the public etc. • Continued to comply with requirements of the Eastern Midlands Waste Management Plan (EMWMP). • Engaged with the Eastern Midlands Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authority (WERLA). Prioritised the National Waste Enforcement Priorities for 2023. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Tackling Illegal Waste and Multi-Agency Sites of Concern (b) Construction and Demolition Waste (c) End of Life Vehicles and Metals (d) Household and Commercial Waste (e) Producer Responsibility Initiatives and Local Priorities. • Increased the level of effective waste enforcement in the County. • Carried out inspections and audits in line with the Council's 2023 RMCEI Plan.

Area of Activity	Objectives	2023 Progress Update
	<p>and disposal of waste.</p> <p>To provide a healthy and safe working Environment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The staff also arranged for the removal of 315 tonnes of illegally dumped waste from numerous sites around the county in 2023. Carried out assessments, inspections and reports on planning applications. <p>In 2023 the Environment Section continued to work with householders to promote compliance with Laois County Council's Waste Management (Storage, Presentation & Segregation of Household & Commercial Waste) Bye Laws 2018 and EU Food Waste Regulations 2015 (Brown Bins).</p> <p>Mattress & Bulky Waste Amnesties were carried out in Portlaoise and Portarlington under the Anti-Dumping Initiative (ADI) funded by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (DCCAIE):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Portlaoise 820 mattresses. 23 tonnes of bulky goods. 72 Number 660 litre bins of paint. Portarlington 277 mattresses. 50 tonnes of bulky goods. 16 Number 660 litre bins of paint.
<p>Litter Management</p>	<p>To prevent, control & manage litter.</p> <p>To encourage & promote public awareness.</p> <p>Provision of Waste Facilities.</p> <p>Partnership with Communities & Business.</p> <p>Enforcement of the Litter Pollution Acts.</p> <p>To provide a healthy and safe working Environment.</p>	<p>Litter Wardens issued 82 Fixed Penalty Notices for offences under the Litter Pollution Act.</p> <p>Investigation of litter complaints (342) referred by members of the public etc.</p> <p>The Env Section continued to provide support to local communities and businesses. Litter picking materials were distributed to community groups. The Litter Wardens and landfill staff further assisted the voluntary/community groups by collecting and disposing of the collected waste.</p> <p>This support and co-operation between local authority, communities and businesses has seen Abbeyleix awarded as the Ireland Tidiest Town in 2023 with Portlaoise and Durrow seeing great improvements.</p> <p>Continued services at Kyletelesha Landfill Facility, Transfer Station and Civic Amenity Site. Landfill monitoring and aftercare maintenance is on-going. All monitoring results are being submitted to the EPA in compliance with the waste licence.</p>

Area of Activity	Objectives	2023 Progress Update
		<p>Carried out litter management inspections and actions in line with the Council's 2023 RMCEI Plan.</p> <p>The continued inspection and maintenance of the 42 bring bank locations in the county.</p>

Water Services

Uisce Éireann

Following on from the signing of the Master Co-operation Agreement by Laois County Council and Uisce Éireann on the 5th May 2023, Uisce Éireann now has full responsibility for the maintenance and operation of Water Services in County Laois since the effective date of 27th July 2023.

Laois County Council Laboratory

Laois County Council's Water Services Laboratory is an INAB accredited facility certified under the international standard ISO 17025:2017. The Laboratory retained its accreditation status following an annual INAB assessment on 19th April 202. The Laboratory was originally granted accreditation in 26th October 2016 by INAB. The sample throughput in 2022 was 4,239 which is a slight increase to the 2021 figure of 4,068.

Our customers include Irish Water for all public water supplies and wastewater schemes in Laois, Offaly County Council for private water supplies in Offaly, LAWPRO Regional Offices in Kilkenny, Clonmel & Tullamore for river and lake catchment projects. In addition, the Laboratory undertakes sampling and testing programmes for both the Water Services Department and Environment Department within Laois County Council.

There is ongoing engagement with WSTO, the Water Committee of the CCMA and the DPHLG to finalise the Business Plan for the implementation of the Network of Accredited Local Authority Laboratories Shared Service. Under this Plan the Laboratory will develop into a regional scale facility providing services to neighbouring local authorities. It is projected the sample throughput in the Laboratory will increase in the short-term from the current figure of 4,239 to 9,000. There is continued efforts to enhance our accreditation status by extending our accreditation scope and investing in modern instrumentation which will allow greater analytical capacity.

Group Water Schemes Annual Subsidy Payments: Subsidy payments totaling €559,637 was paid to a number of Group Water Schemes in the county towards the running costs of their water supply schemes.

Group Water Schemes Taking in Charge: the following schemes were taken in charge by Uisce Éireann in 2023;

- Moyadd 3
- Kilbride
- Crannagh
- Dereen
- Lower Lea
- Ullard

Well Grant Applications: There were 48 applications received for grant aid assistance to improve private water supplies to domestic households and the sum of €191,891.24 was paid out to 44 applicants in respect of well grants in 2023.

Monthly Management Reports continue to be provided to Members of Laois County Council for consideration at their monthly meetings.

Dangerous Structure and Places.

A Register of Dangerous Places/Structures is maintained by the local authority and there are 4 open files on the register in Co. Laois at 31st December 2023. All files are being monitored & progressed.

Laois County Fire & Rescue Service

The Fire Service continued to provide a quality service in the areas of Fire Prevention, Fire Brigade Operations, Community Fire Safety Awareness and Major Emergency Planning.

In 2023, Laois County Fire & Rescue Service attended **773** emergency incidents consisting of **249** fires, **385** special service incidents & **139** false alarms.

To enhance equipment standards the programme for replacement and updating of equipment was continued in 2023. Our new 6x6 all-terrain vehicle for wildland fires was placed into service. New breathing apparatus sets & cylinders, ladders & specialist rescue equipment was provided. The new training facility in Abbeyleix also hosted its first training courses during 2023.

A new Class B fire appliance and a new water tanker were both delivered in 2023, funded by the National Directorate for Fire & Emergency Management.

To enhance Safety, Health and Welfare for fire crews the Standard Operational Guidelines program to implement a set of for fire brigade operations continued in 2023. In addition, our Health, Safety & Welfare Management Programme was approved by Senior Management and was reviewed 25 times throughout the year.

92 fire safety certificate applications and **55** District Court and Circuit Court licensing applications were processed. **15** “during performance” inspections were carried out on premises throughout the County

Laois County Council Fire and Rescue Service participated in **407** fire safety consultations with members of the public and fire safety consultants throughout 2023. **2** premises was requested to provide Fire Safety Assessment was requested under Section 18(6) of the Fire Services Acts 1981 and 2003.

The Fire Safety Primary Schools Programme was carried out across the County between October and December 2023. All eight fire stations were involved with this programme.

National Fire Safety Week was held between the 9th and 15th October 2023. Laois County Council Fire and Rescue Service personnel, in all eight fire stations, provided presentations on fire safety in the home throughout the County. The presentations were aimed specifically at our most at risk demographic i.e. over 65's. Laois Community Fire Safety Group (group members include Laois County Council Fire and Rescue Service, TFI Local Link Laois Offaly, Laois Public Participation Network and Age Friendly Laois), ran a smoke detector in the home competition in local newspapers, radio, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and on our www.laois.ie page. Fire service personnel, from all eight stations, are currently installing smoke detectors in the winning entrants homes throughout the County

Smoke detectors have been installed in over 600 homes throughout the County since this annual competition commenced in 2018. Additionally, the Community Fire Safety Group actively delivered fire safety messages to communities in order to target our most at risk demographic during Fire Safety Week and at Halloween. The Group used text ,WhatsApp messages, local newspapers and social media to deliver fire safety messages and this new programme included correspondence to all **650+** community groups available through the Laois Public Participation Network.

All **Major Emergency Management** facilities were maintained in 2023, with all relevant plans, sub-plans and procedures were updated throughout the year.

Laois Civil Defence

Laois Civil Defence continued to provide support to the Local Authority, Primary Response Agencies, and the community.

In 2023 Laois Civil Defence took part in **129** duties and operations which included **20** missing person activities, **8** Ukrainian Crisis Supports, and **80** Community Events. The unit also carried out joint training sessions with the Gardaí and Ambulance Services.

In 2023 a new Headquarters Building was purchased by Laois County Council which will see the centralisation of all Defence facilities and training into a modern facility in Portlaoise. The unit is currently operating its training, community and search operations from this building and plans are underway for further works on the building in 2024.

Two recruit training courses were completed in 2023 bringing the total number of active volunteers from **34** to **53** in 2023.

A new Volunteer Equipment Management System (VEMS) procured by the Department of Defence went live in 2023 which provides a platform for Civil Defence Officers to manage all equipment, training, and volunteers on a central system.

A comprehensive training programme took place during 2023 where volunteers took part in over **40** certified training courses such as: Severe Weather & Off-Road Driving, Swiftwater Flood Response, Personal Survival Techniques, Emergency First Response, Missing Person Search Responder, First Aid Response, Emergency First Response, and ISA National Powerboat Operator Certification.

Enterprise & Economic Development

The Council continued to promote enterprise and economic development in the County through the Business Support Unit, which incorporates the Local Enterprise Office.

2023 saw Laois businesses continue to bounce back from the hardships of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, with the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, the energy crisis, and the increased cost of doing business, challenges remained. Despite these challenges, 2023 was a very productive year and demand continued to be high for supports, from businesses across all sectors. Some highlights include:

- €427,351 approved in grant aid to 16 businesses with potential to create 35 new jobs.
- 34 Trading online approved to the value of €65,817.
- 280 Laois businesses availed of mentoring with 419 mentoring sessions delivered in specific areas such as finance, social media, business development and web development.
- 75 training courses were delivered with 1,137 participants.
- 10 businesses took part in the Export Ready Programme.
- 15 participants with a food idea or within the first 24 months of trading took part in the Start Your own Food Business Programme.
- 103 participants took part on the Start Your own Business Programme.
- 10 companies participated in the Lean for Business Programme.
- 5 businesses took part in the Digital for Business Programme.
- 18 companies took part in the Green for Business Programme.
- 7 secondary schools in Laois took part in the Student Enterprise Awards Programme with over 500 students participating.
- Over 100 businesses attended Local Enterprise Week took place in March 2023.
- 14 businesses approved for funding under the Shopfront Grant Scheme
- 5 businesses approved under the Business Incentive Scheme

In 2024 the BSU/LEO will focus on:

1. Promote Council / LEO supports to new and existing businesses in the County.
2. Work with Laois Chamber Alliance and other key stakeholders to promote Laois as a place to do business.
3. Promote Portlaoise as a place to do business through the “Portlaoise Town Team initiative”.
4. Work with Laois TASTE to promote, support and grow the Food and Drinks Sector in the County.
5. Continue the roll out of the Façade Enhancement Scheme & Vacant Commercial Property Incentive Scheme across the County.
6. Promote the Green Agenda
7. Support new/existing projects through the provision of direct financial assistance.

8. Co-ordinate training and mentoring support for businesses.
9. Assist businesses in developing an export strategy.
10. Assist businesses in becoming more innovative and competitive.
11. Assist businesses grow online through the Online Trading Voucher Scheme
12. Work with Enterprise Centres in the County to increase enterprise space offering
13. Support economic actions in the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan, the Local Economic and Community Plan, etc

(4) To promote and support socially inclusive communities

The Irish State continues to play its role in accordance with the Temporary Protection Directive 2001/55/EC, to provide shelter and accommodation to Ukrainian citizens fleeing their war-torn country. The period of temporary protection granted under the Directive now extends to March 2025. To support the proposed rapid provision of emergency accommodation the Government also put in place separate Planning Regulations, during 2022 and 2023. These provided that certain classes of temporary development, to provide accommodation to displaced persons from Ukraine and elsewhere, will be exempt from certain provisions of the Planning and Development Act, for a period up to 31st December 2028.

The Ukrainian Response Department of the Council continued throughout 2023 to work with the relevant government departments, Department of Integration (DCEDIY) and Department of Housing, the Irish Red Cross and other stakeholders, coordinating action on the ground, providing the necessary supports and addressing the challenges arising. This included for:

- Leading on the business of the multi-stakeholder Community Response Forum, which managed the local support and integration response at each of the Emergency Ukrainian Accommodation Centres around Laois, together with the Transitional Accommodation Centre at Stradbally, and at the new modular homes development at Rathdowney.
- Identification of suitable vacant accommodation options within the county and supporting DCEDIY in the activation of their refurbishment, for the provision of accommodation to Ukrainian arrivals into Ireland.
- Assisting DCEDIY and the OPW in activating the delivery of 42 Modular Homes for Ukrainian families at 'Spring Crescent', Rathdowney, and supporting the new arrivals who took up occupation in December 2023. A very successful 'Welcome and Integration Event' was hosted for the local Ukrainian community in the Community Centre, Rathdowney on 15th January last.
- Placing 52 Ukrainian families with host families, and in vacant properties offered and managed through the national Offer A Home Scheme.

At the end of 2023 there were 1,426 displaced Ukrainian citizens in County Laois. Approximately 414 of these were residing in the various accommodation centres, with the remainder at Spring Crescent, Rathdowney (Modular Homes), and in privately sourced or pledged accommodation.

Separately during 2023, there was an increase in the number of refugee arrivals to our shores seeking International Protection. The government, following on from commitments outlined in the White Paper on ending the system of Direct Provision, approved the establishment of a permanent integration system at local level that will provide support to all refugees. Recruitment to the new Laois County Council Integration Support Service took place in late 2023, and operations commenced in January 2024, from the Treo Nua Resource Centre, Portlaoise, where other community services and support programmes are already well established. This new team will support will all newly arrived refugees, linking them in with mainstream support services, facilitating independent living, promoting social inclusion and encouraging integration.

Laois, along with other counties during 2023, was assigned a role by the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (Unit within DCEDIY), for the resettlement of the next phase of programme refugees within County Laois. This phase will run over an 18 month period, from 2024-2025.

In light of the latter developments in the area of integration supports, the role of the Community Response Forum is being strengthened and broadened to reflect a revised mandate for the delivery of supports and services to all refugee cohorts and facilitating their integration into our Laois community.

PLANNING

Forward Planning plays a pivotal role in the physical, economic and social development of County Laois. The Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027 and Local Area Plans for Portlaoise (2018-2024), Portarlinton (2018-2024), Mountmellick (2018-2024) and Graiguecullen (2013-2018 provides the strategic framework and policy context within which the Local Authority makes its planning decisions.

LOCAL AREA PLANNING

Draft Joint Urban Area Plan for Carlow - Graiguecullen

The Draft JULAP (Written Statement, including Appendices), SEA Environmental Report, AA Natura Impact Report, Strategic Flood Risk Assessment, Local Transport Plan and Maps was prepared in Conjunction with Carlow County Council and went on display from **13th December 2023 to 5th February 2024.**

Draft Portarlinton Joint Local Area Plan

The pre-draft stage of the **Draft Portarlington Joint Local Area Plan** ended on 19th October 2023. A total of 38 submissions were made. A Chief Executives report in respect of the 28 submissions made to Laois County Council has been completed. Writing of the draft Plan is now commencing. It will go on public display in Q2 of 2024.

Residential Zoned Land Tax

The final RZLT in-scope maps were prepared and issued to the Dept. by deadline date of 15th November 2023. In preparing the final RZLT in-scope maps, the Planning Authority had regard to the guidance provided in the Department circular letter **NRUP 02/2023** of 27th October 2023.

DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT

The number of planning applications received in 2023 was 864. However, it should be noted that 332 of the total applications received were invalid and required the applicant to submit a new application. The main reasons for invalidation of planning files were public notices being out of date, or not erected on site, previous permissions expired, agents name omitted from maps/drawings, no north point shown on maps and distances not shown on site layouts.

2023 PERFORMANCE

The following table gives a breakdown of valid planning applications received and decisions made during 2023:

Total No of Planning Applications	864
Number of valid applications received:	534
Invalid applications returned to applicant:	332 (38.6%) *
Number of decisions made:	554
Number of applications granted:	521
Number of applications refused:	23
Referrals to Area Offices (working days):	within 14 days achieved
No of applications appealed to An Bord Pleanála in 2023	23
Pre planning meetings held in 2023	324

Large Residential Developments (LRD)

One application was received in 2023 in respect of 195 units on the Dublin Road, Portlaoise.

LICENSING OF OUTDOOR EVENTS

An outdoor event is defined as a public performance which takes place wholly or mainly in the open air or in a structure with no roof or a partial, temporary or retractable roof, a tent

or similar temporary structure and which consists of music, dancing, displays of public entertainment or any activity of a like kind. The organisers of such events are required to obtain a licence from the Planning Authority where the audience comprises of 5,000 or more people.

Two such outdoor events occurred in County Laois in 2023 –

1. “Electric Picnic” music festival returned to Stradbally attracting 70,000 people in September 2023 and
2. “Forest fest” music festival took place at Morette, Emo attracting 10,000 people in July 2023.

LOCAL AUTHORITY DEVELOPMENT (PART 8 PROJECTS)

Planning reports were prepared for the following Part 8 Local Authority projects and were approved by the Council during 2023:

1. Housing Development at Iona , Abbeyleix Road Portlaoise (March 2023)
2. Car parking facilities at the Rock of Dunamais (June 2023)
3. Redevelopment of Borris in Ossory Courthouse (October 2023)

Under Section 179A of the Planning and Development Act the following notifications were given with respect to the development of social housing projects: -

1. 1 no rural house Ballyadams (March 2023)
2. 1 no house at New Road Portlaoise (March 2023)
3. 1 no house at Emmet Terrace , mountmellick (March 2023)
4. Housing Development at Newtown Doonane Portlaoise (July 2023)
5. Housing Development at Derry road Durrow (September 2023)

PLANNING ENFORCEMENT

The Planning Authority, in accordance with the statutory requirements under the Planning and Development Act 2000 as amended, seeks to ensure compliance with planning permissions and also to prevent unauthorised development.

Work was continued in 2023 by the Enforcement team to ensure that any breaches of planning law were investigated and followed up.

In 2023, Council Staff attended Court 65 times in respect of enforcement prosecutions and while some cases are still ongoing, 14 cases have been successfully resolved during 2023. The Planning Authority served 104 enforcement notices, 448 warning letters and investigated 147 new complaints all of which highlight the active pursuit of planning non-compliance and unauthorised development by our Enforcement Section.

€13,547 Enforcement costs recouped

€45,645 fees received through valid retention applications received relating to enforcement action.

BUILDING CONTROL














The Building Control Section deal with all commencement notices received, and carries out inspections on the buildings to ensure they comply with the various Building Control regulations.

In **2023** , a total of **844 New Buildings** were notified to Building Control. A total of **101** no. buildings were inspected (at varying stages of construction) - an inspection rate of **11.97 %**

UNFINISHED HOUSING ESTATES

Laois County Council is responsible for the taking in charge of estates. In 2023, 13 no. estates were taken in charge which is listed in the table below. Traditionally this occurred when a request was received from the developer of the estate and/or the owners of the houses within the estate. However, in recent years, where the developer has failed to complete the estate, Laois County Council has intervened to complete the estate and this work, where possible, is funded from the bond. This policy of actively pursuing the developer and Bond holder will continue in 2024.

The following estates were taken in charge in 2023 –

-  **Bellingham (Phase 2 Area 2) Mountrath Road, Portlaoise**
-  **Garden Village, Portlaoise**
-  **Ashwood Walk and Ashwood Gardens, Portlaoise**
-  **The Orchard, Stradbally**
-  **Cathair na gCapall, Portarlinton**
-  **Rushall, Mountrath**
-  **Kyle Manor, Borris in Ossory**
-  **Silverwood, Silverglen and Silverbrook, Mountmellick**
-  **Cill an Oir, Graiguecullen**
-  **Droughill Lawns, Portarlinton**
-  **Meadows Way (Part) Graiguecullen**
-  **Marian Grove, Mountmellick**
-  **Featherbed Lane, Borris in Ossory**

The Planning Department endeavour to liaise with the residents of unfinished estates to keep them fully informed of progress in relation to their estates.

VACANT SITES

There were 6 sites entered onto the Vacant Sites register at the 1st January 2023. These related to sites within Portlaoise, Portarlinton and Graiguecullen. Valuations have been received in relation to the sites. A demand notice for payment of the levy for 2020,21 and 22 was issued on the site in Graiguecullen following confirmation of the value of the site by the Valuation Tribunal in 2023. The levy amounts to €31,500 for the 3 years.

3 sites in Portlaoise are subject to Derelict Sites notices/levy and therefore cannot be levied under vacant sites legislation.

The owner(s) of the site in Portarlington cannot be determined.

Location of Sites	No of sites on the VSL register
Portlaoise	4
Portarlington	1
Graiguecullen	1
Total	6

Broadband

The following projects were delivered under the 4 themes from the Laois Digital Strategy 2020-2024

- Infrastructure
- Citizen Smart
- Digital Education and Skills
- Digital Economy

with the support of Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD). The Broadband officer continues to utilise Government initiatives to maximise the potential of having broadband connectivity available throughout the county.

NBI ROLLOUT

NBI continued to work on the National Broadband Infrastructure roll out Programme in all MD areas of the county in 2023.

At the end of 2023, the total number of Premises in Laois = 12874 with 8426 Residential, 2234 Commercial & Residential, 1776 Farm and 438 Commercial.

21% of Premises (2681) - have HSB connected to date.

57% of Premises (7206) - now available to pre order connection.

12 % of Premises (1548) – Network build in progress.

2% of Premises (207) – Survey completed.

8% of Premises (1094) – Survey pending.

WiFi4EU

WiFi4EU was rolled out in 3 locations in Rathdowney in 2023 - 2 locations in the Main Square and one at the New Garden of remembrance. These were launched on 12th December 2023 with formal launch of the Town Centre First Plan for Rathdowney.

This brings the WiFi4EU to 11 towns including the following - Portlaoise, Portarlington, Stradbally, Abbeyleix, Ballinakill, Ballyroan, Mountmellick, Mountrath, Camross and Borris in Ossory.



Launch of WiFi4EU in Rathdowney

Digital Education and Skills

Vex Robotics Program was rolled out in 4 schools in Laois last year (Sept '22 to June '23) for Laois.

1. Scoil Eoin Phóil II Naofa Ballyroan,
2. Shanganamore Barrowhouse,
3. Camross and
4. Emo NS.

The Midland ICT cluster – (Laois, Offaly, Longford and Westmeath) was launched in The Midlands Park Hotel on Thursday 27th of April '23.

Computer Science training for Secondary School teachers was piloted with 2 modules offered last year, February - May 23 with 4 remaining modules to be rolled out this year to May '24. This will allow schools to offer Computer Science to Leaving Cert students in the future.

3 Laois schools took part last year.

1. Dunamase Collage Portlaoise,
2. St. Fergal's Rathdowney and
3. Colaiste Iosagain Portarlinton.

This is an initiative been piloted by Laois Co.Co., Offaly Co.Co., LOETB and ATU Donegal.

Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board (LOETB) launched their (S.T.E.A.M.) Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics programme in conjunction with Laois County Council and Offaly County Council Broadband Officers on Thursday 16th November 2023.

The Programme was launched by Mr Joe Cunningham CEO, LOETB and was joined by both Mr Paschal McEvoy, Cathaoirleach, Laois County Council and Mr Eddie Fitzpatrick Cathaoirleach, Offaly County Council in welcoming the programme.



Students from Portlaoise College showcased MINECRAFT and how it can be applied to various professions and spoke about the importance of partaking in this programme from a skills development and on a team working level. Other programmes showcased included VEX robotics, LEGO and Podcasting.

This programme will be rolled out in County Laois during 2023-2024 with the support of the Broadband Officer.



HOUSING

2023 saw the continuation of a very successful Housing Capital Programme under the *Housing for All* 2022-2026 programme, a 5-year plan to increase housing supply and address other housing related issues nationally.

Annual Social Housing Delivery Targets 2022-2026

Year	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	Total
Units	200	79	80	87	88	534

In accordance with Laois County Council's **Housing Delivery Action Plan** for the provision of social and affordable housing, 286 new social homes were provided in 2023, making a total of 515 since the commencement of the *Housing for All* programme. These were provided via local authority direct construction, Part V, turnkey projects and in cooperation with Approved Housing Bodies.

Laois County Council has to date delivered 96.4% of the *Housing for All* target set by Government for newly built social homes in Laois over the plan 5-year period, and is set to exceed that target over the next 3 years.

Tenancies were created for 490 social housing applicants via various means in 2023, as set out below. To date, this is the highest number of tenancies created in one year.

	Relets	Acquisitions	LCC Construct/TK/ Part V	Voids	AHB New build and relet	Leasing	Totals
2016	70	16		12	32	14	144
2017	65	47	1	4	50	47	214
2018	45	24	33	2	88	6	198
2019	50	42	7	5	26	8	138
2020	62	20	20	5	95	15	217
2021	56	14	46	0	102	34	252
2022	74	5	59	0	157	18	313
2023	79	14	70	0	320	7	490*

*146 tenancies were created for applicants with a disability in 2023.



Official Opening of Dóirín Aláinn, Ballylinan – North and East Housing Association (AHB)



Official Opening of Gleann na Glaise, Ballyroan – Laois County Council Construction



Official Opening of The Maltings, Portlaoise – Cluid Housing (AHB)



Official Opening of Sean Doire, Durrow – Laois County Council Construction

Approximately 570 new build social units are currently in progress across the county, i.e., via direct build by the local authority, Part V, Turnkey arrangements and through support for Approved Housing Bodies. These schemes are at various stages, either under construction or in the design/planning process.



Carrig Glas, Stradbally (26 units) - Sod Turning 2023

Affordable Housing

The Affordable Housing Act 2021 and associated Regulations sets out the mechanism for delivery of affordable and cost rental housing. The Dept of Housing has set a minimum target of 38 affordable units to be delivered by 2026. In 2023, Laois County Council sought and received approval from the Dept of Housing for 40 affordable purchase units across 3 schemes in the county, via turnkey arrangements with developers. 13 units were approved in Stradbally, 16 in Kilminchy and 11 at An Lochán, Summerhill, Portlaoise. Applications were invited for both schemes in Portlaoise and are currently being processed in accordance with our Scheme of Priorities for Affordable Purchase houses.

Design has been finalised for social (21) and affordable (46) housing on Council owned landbank on the Stradbally Road, Portlaoise. Funding mechanism for this developing this site as a mixed tenure scheme is still to be determined – Dept of Housing is advising on this.

REGENERATION

Laois County Council has established a **multi-disciplinary Regeneration Team**, comprising staff from Housing, Planning sections and the Town Regeneration Officer, aimed at addressing vacancy and dereliction in the county.



This team aims to achieve targets set, by gathering data via:

- Geodirectory exercise (set out below)
- Continued engagement with property owners
- Engagement via derelict sites legislation where appropriate
- Action objectives of the Town Centre First Plan for Rathdowney and other town/village plans.

Town Centre First

In relation to the Town Centre First Programme, the Town Regeneration Officer has a focused remit on the following Towns where town regeneration strategies and Town Centre First Plans have been approved :-

- **Rathdowney**
 - The Town Centre First Plan for Rathdowney has been finalised and the official launch of the plan took place in December 2023 at an event that was very well attended.

- Rathdowney Town Team submitted an application under the 2023 Town and Village Renewal Scheme.
 - The Commercial Vacant building scheme for Rathdowney was launched on 28th November.
 - Free WI4EU points have also being installed in Rathdowney and the scheme was launched in December with free WIFI now available in 2 locations in the town
 - The TRO is liaising with the derelict sites staff to issue notices in respect of vacant and derelict buildings that have been identified as causing concern in the respective towns.
- **Mountrath**
 - Mountrath Town Team are submitted an application under the 2023 Town and Village Renewal Scheme.
 - The Commercial Vacant building scheme for Mountrath was launched on 31st October.
 - A landscape plan for the town was finalised at the end of November.
 - The TRO is liaising with the derelict sites staff to issue notices in respect of vacant and derelict buildings that have been identified as causing concern in the respective towns.

DERELICT SITES

The Council is implementing its powers under the Derelict Sites Act 1990 targeting those properties that are on the Derelict Sites Register. Working with the owners of those properties, the outstanding issues are being dealt with and those properties that are no longer deemed ‘derelict’ are then removed from the Derelict Sites Register.

The Derelicts sites register is maintained by the Planning Staff. In conjunction with the TRO, the Derelict sites team are working on sites in both Rathdowney and Mountrath as indicated on the maps above.

Currently

- Total No of Derelict sites entered onto Register in 2023 – 30
- Total No of Files on hand: 93
- 22 new files in 2023
- 16 files closed in 2023

The Derelict sites Team also works along side the Business Support Unit in advising in relation to the incentives available through the BSU and LEO office in relation to the reuse of derelict and vacant commercial properties.

Vacancy Surveys

In 2023, the Vacant Homes Team carried out a survey of properties identified as being vacant in data supplied by GeoDirectory (Dept of Housing 2022 initiative).

The app has shown the following data so far - of the **919 properties surveyed** (residential and commercial), **551 properties were found to be vacant**, with 37 of those also found to have some elements of dereliction.

The Housing Section endeavours to contact the owners of the vacant residential properties and outline the schemes available to return these properties to use for social housing. Where ownership cannot be established, local enquiries will continue in relation to ownership, vacancy history, etc. Where all other means of returning the properties to use have been exhausted, use of the CPO process to acquire properties deemed to be suitable for social housing may be considered.

CPO Activation Programme

Dept of Housing launched the CPO Activation Programme in 2023, aimed at addressing vacancy and dereliction nationwide by setting targets for each county for properties to enter the Compulsory Acquisition process, where engagement with the owner has not resulted in the vacant or derelict property being brought back into use, to be subsequently used for social housing or made available for sale on the open market.

A target of **60 vacant and derelict properties** to enter the Programme and **16 CPOs / Compulsory Acquisitions** to commence/complete in 2023 was set for Laois County Council.

Properties are counted as entering the CPO Activation Programme where they have been identified as being vacant or derelict as part of the vacancy survey and where efforts are being made to contact property owners. Properties approved/approved in principle for a Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant are also counted as entering the Programme. The Regeneration Team has cross referenced any common properties from both Derelict Sites register and vacancy surveys in an effort to determine the number of properties activated for the purpose of potential CPO.

11 properties are under consideration for CPO in a range of locations, however there are ongoing discussions in relation to potential acquisition by agreement under way. CPO of these properties will be for a number of reasons :-

- For use a social residential unit
- For use as an affordable residential unit
- For commercial or community purposes

At 31st December 2023	Target	Actual
Vacant and derelict properties that have entered the CPO Activation Programme	60	172 *
CPO's / Compulsory Acquisitions commenced/completed in 2023	16	4 **

(* 85 Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant Approvals/Approvals in Principle, 52 Vacant Homes Office correspondence, 35 Derelict Sites correspondence)

(** 3 CPO acquisitions completed in 2023 and 1 CPO commenced)

Vacancy / Regeneration Funding Schemes

The Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant is available for up to a maximum of €50,000, including VAT, for refurbishment of vacant properties for *use as a principle private residence or to be made available for rent*, including the conversion of a property which has not been used as residential heretofore. A top-up grant of up to €20,000 is also available for properties which are derelict. To qualify for the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant, properties must be:

- Vacant for over 2 years
- Built before 2008

Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant Applications at 31st December 2023

Number of grant applications received	121
Number of applications APPROVED	65
Number of applications APPROVED IN PRINCIPLE	20
Number of applications REFUSED	5
Number of applications WITHDRAWN	4
Number of grants paid to Applicants	6

Of the 121 applications received to 31/12/2023:

- 65 properties are in rural locations.
- 56 properties are located in a town or village.
- 103 of the properties were for use as the applicant's principal private residence.
- 18 properties were to be made available for rent (the option to make a property available for rent is available since 01/05/2023).

Ready to Build (Serviced Sites) Scheme

This scheme was introduced in 2023. Laois County Council is actively considering the development of **serviced sites** over the coming years at a number of locations in the county.

In the first instance, eligibility will be determined by criteria as set out under the **Croí Conaithe (Towns) Fund – Ready to Build Scheme (Serviced Sites for New Homes) Scheme**. Under the scheme, local authorities are supported to make serviced sites in towns and villages available to potential individual purchasers. These sites will be available at a discount on the market value of the site for the building of a property for occupation as the principal private residence of the purchaser. The level of discount to the individual will depend on the level of servicing cost incurred by the local authority before the sale of the site with discounts up to a maximum of €30,000. The amount of such discount will be reflected in the sale price of the site to the purchaser.

Serviced Sites in Ballyroan and Durrow were advertised in 2023 and 8 sites are currently going through the acquisition process under this scheme.

Housing Management and Maintenance

In 2023, Laois County Council progressed 4,808 maintenance work orders and *retrofitted 105 of our housing stock as part of the Midlands Retrofit Programme. Budget approval has been granted for the retrofitting of an additional 62 homes through the County in 2024.*

We also carried out re-letting works to 91 of our properties that were surrendered during 2023.

Housing Needs Assessment

On 31st December 2023, there were 1,554 applicants on the Council's waiting list for social housing support. This is a reduction of 13.69% on 2022 waiting list figures.

On 31st December 2023, there were 720 applicants availing of the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP).

Homeless Services/Emergency Accommodation

Laois County Council continued in 2023 to provide emergency accommodation, where appropriate, to households presenting as homeless. All housing supply mechanisms are utilised in seeking to accommodate those who are assessed as homeless.

In 2023, 262 households presented as homeless, that is 96 families and 166 single persons.

Laois County Council booked 104 households into emergency B&B in 2023, that is 73 single households and 31 families. 161 households were allocated housing from homelessness, 86 families and 75 single persons.

Laois County Council also prevented 62 households from entering homelessness due to the intervention of the HAP Place Finder.

Accommodation and supports are provided by Laois County Council to homeless individuals with complex needs, in accordance with the Housing First National Implementation Plan 2022 – 2026. A target for the provision of 35 units of accommodation over five years is included in this plan, that is, 7 per year.

Traveller Accommodation

Laois County Council's Traveller Accommodation Programme 2019-2024 set a target for the delivery of 37 no. units of standard local authority housing. In 2023, Laois County Council has provided 78 no. standard local authority houses. The Programme also provided a target for the refurbishment of Oak Park Halting Site, with the provision of three additional bays. Construction works are ongoing at the site.

Laois County Council, in 2024, will commence the preparation of the next Traveller Accommodation Programme 2025 – 2029 and it will be adopted before December 31st 2024.

Estate Management

Estate management remains a key function for the Housing Section. The Housing Section provided a range of supports to various resident groups, including grants and a painting programme.

In 2023 a second Tenant Liaison Officer was appointed. The Estate Management Section carried out 830 home visits in 2023. 63 grants were paid in 2023 to resident associations for enhancement works and painting in their estates.

Laois County Council's Strategic Plan for People with Disabilities 2021 – 2026

Laois County Council's Strategic Plan for People with Disabilities 2021 – 2026 was adopted in December 2021. The Strategy forms an integral part of the Housing Service Delivery Plans and will promote and support the delivery of accommodation for people with disabilities using all appropriate housing supply mechanisms.

In 2023, 146 households with a person(s) with a disability were allocated housing with Laois County Council and the various Approved Housing Bodies in the county. This figure accounts for 29.79% of the total allocations by Laois County Council in 2023.

Loans and Grants

The **Local Authority Home Loan (LAHL)** Scheme is available nationwide.

Applications are for the purchase of new or second-hand residential properties and for self-builds. It also includes purchase of homes through State schemes such as the Tenant Purchase Scheme and Affordable Housing Scheme. In the year 2023, 14 Home Loans were approved and 5 were declined.

Private Grants

In 2023, Private Grants totalling €1,236,472 were paid to out for Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes for Older People and People with a Disability.

Disabled Persons Grants

Works to the value of €523,779 were carried out to assist tenants of 46 properties. This number included the construction of 2 extensions.

Private Rented Inspections

Laois County Council carried out 976 Private rented inspections for 2023, thus exceeding the target set by the Dept of Housing of 874.

(5) To continue to develop and improve the quality of customer services
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Corporate Affairs

Laois County Council's web site, Twitter & Facebook Social Media sites continued to be updated on a regular basis to ensure that the most up to date information was available. The Council continued to implement the policy in relation to Acceptable

Customer Behaviour and the Customer Complaints Policy continued to be monitored in 2023.

Regarding the National Performance Indicators, the statistical report in respect of 2022 which was published in September 2023 showed that Laois County Council improved its performance across a range of indicators .

E-mail and text messaging continue to be used, wherever possible, for correspondence, to reduce cost and resource use. Reports and publications are made available electronically via the www.laois.ie websites, which reduces cost as well as being more environmentally sustainable.

With regard to the Register of Electors, the Electoral Reform Act 2022 was signed into law by the President on the 25th July 2022. As part of the phase of commencements of this Act, certain provisions were commenced with effect from the 13th October 2022 including Part 3 – Franchise and the Registration of Electors. This Part of the Act sets out the legislative framework for the modernisation of the electoral registration process, including the move to a rolling or continuous register and the standardisation and simplification of the registration process. Electors are now be able to apply to be included on the Rolling Register or to update their details at any time using a single on line application via www.checktheregister.ie or alternatively through a paper form.

The Council continued to maximise efficiencies in the conduct of Council business and to provide administrative support to the Elected Members in 2023. The Statutory requirements of the Ethics Framework in Local Government were also implemented in 2023.

(6) To prudently manage the Council’s resources to achieve effectiveness in outcomes for resources expended

Human Resources

A programme of continued investment in the development of the Council’s employees was in place during 2023. Laois County Council undertook a substantial training programme with particular emphasis on Health and Safety requirements.

The Council continues to maintain a highly committed workforce to deliver on the objectives of the Corporate Plan and recruitment continues in accordance with the requirements of the Workforce Plan.

Laois County Council maintained good industrial relations during 2023. The Council continues to operate in accordance with the Public Service Agreements in consultation with the relevant Unions.

Local Government Payroll and Superannuation Shared Services Centre

- There are currently 88 employees based in the MyPay shared services centre.
- The following local authorities are being paid through MyPay: Longford, Roscommon, Westmeath, Leitrim, Laois, Offaly, Galway, Carlow, Monaghan, Cavan, Kildare, Meath, Kilkenny, Louth, South Dublin, Tipperary, Kerry, Wicklow, Mayo, Donegal, Sligo, Clare, Fingal, DunLaoghaire/Rathdown, Wexford, Cork County Councils, Limerick and Waterford City & County Councils and Galway and Cork City Councils.
- The LGMA and the East & Midlands Regional Assembly are also being paid from MyPay.
- Wicklow County Council went live with MyPay for Superannuation in May 2023.
- The following are the statistics on the project up to 31st December 2023:

Value of Payments	€7.469bn
Number of Payments	8,410,987
Number of Pay Groups Paid	16,076
Number of Payroll Runs	9,440

- There are currently 22 local authorities live for superannuation administration in MyPay with 11 sites yet to be onboarded. We are currently working with South Dublin Co Co to onboard them in January of 2023.
- MyPay has been chosen to administer the single public service pension scheme on behalf of the sector. We are currently providing the service for the 20 sites who are live for the Superannuation service.
- MyPay have achieved the ISAE 3402 certification (international standard for service organisations). The Type 2 Report has issued to the Chief Executive of all clients. This will be renewed annually.

Finance/Internal Audit

Revenue and Capital income and expenditure for 2023 was monitored against budget on an ongoing basis, with reports reviewed by Management Team on a weekly basis. The Corporate Policy Group was updated at all its monthly meetings as were the elected members of the Council in the Chief Executive's monthly report.

(7) To continue to develop Corporate Management practices within the Council and to execute effective risk management practices

Our safety statement / safety management system (SMS) manual was enhanced through review and update ensuring compatibility with ISO 45001 standard. Our risk register was amended and updated as appropriate throughout the course of the year. We were kept informed of changes and amendments to legislation through our legislative database.

Summary

Laois County Council is now five years into the timeline of its 2019-2024 Corporate Plan. In that context it is informative to consider implementation of the plan in some key areas of public service delivery such as housing, economic and community development. At a summary level it should be noted that with assistance from various various streams of Government Funding, through collaboration with community volunteers and with the support of Elected members the following headline outcomes have been achieved over the past four years,

- The provision of accommodation for over 1,300 applicants on our social housing list
- The construction of 810 new social homes
- The granting of approx. 2,300 planning permissions for new houses
- The ongoing development of a nationally significant enterprise park at J17, Toghher and the commencement of a business Park in Portarlinton
- The provision of over €3million for business start-ups through the LEO office
- The investment of over €20million in rural development projects, including Rural Regeneration projects in Portarlinton, Borris in Ossory and Durrow.
- The implementation of measures to improve energy efficiency and to reduce carbon emissions including the retrofitting of over 300 Council houses
- Investment of €12million in Urban Regeneration Development projects in Portlaoise, including a new County Library

The progress made on housing and economic development, for example, is evident and it is very clear that the Council makes every effort to improve the quality of life for all in our community. Given the commitment and dedication of both staff and the elected members, together with ongoing collaboration with local and state partners, I am confident that this Council will continue to deliver quality public services for the people of Laois and that the Council can be pivotal in the economic, social and cultural development of our County.

John Mulholland
Chief Executive

26th of January 2024

