



COMHAIRLE CHONTAE LAOISE
LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL



TUARASCÁIL BHLIANTÚIL 2023
ANNUAL REPORT 2023



JOINT MESSAGE BY THE CATHAOIRLEACH AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE



Paschal McEvoy (F.F.)

Cathaoirleach

This Annual Report showcases the wide variety of services provided by Laois County Council which include not only the core services but also the supports which we provide to local communities in the areas of the arts, libraries, heritage, conservation, age friendly and economic development.

Laois County Council is an innovative Council and we are committed to ensuring that our service delivery in areas such as Climate Action, Active Travel, Heritage and Biodiversity continues to be strengthened and extended.

2023 has been another busy year for the Council. Social and affordable housing continued to be a priority. To date under the 'Housing for All' plan, we have delivered 515 new build units or 96% of the target to 2026. We are also progressing a number of units under the Affordable housing initiative. In 2023, a multi disciplinary Regeneration Team, aimed at addressing vacancy and dereliction was also set up.



John Mulholland

Chief Executive

The new County Library on Main Street was officially opened in January 2023. The library offers an enhanced and expanded service for all of the county and its citizens. It is a welcoming space for the community and visitors and facilitates the provision of educational and cultural information, free digital access to WIFI, PCs and access to a range of free events.

Abbeyleix was crowned as Ireland's Tidiest Town winning a gold medal. Portlaoise Tidy Towns were awarded special recognition earning a prestigious Gold Medal while Durrow Tidy Towns also showcased commendable efforts and was honoured with a well-deserved Bronze Medal. As part of the All Island Pride of Place Competition, it was a special year for the Communities of Camross and Stradbally, Vicarstown and Timahoe (SVT) who entered in the respective categories of "population 0 to 500" and the "Community and Wellbeing Initiative" with Camross claiming 2nd place in their category and Stradbally, Vicarstown and Timahoe receiving a special

award.

We are committed to the transition towards an environmentally sustainable, climate neutral economy that is rich in biodiversity and resilient to climate change. A new Community Climate Action Officer was appointed in February 2023. The development of Local Authority Climate Action Plans together with the County Laois Local Development Strategy and the Laois Local Economic and Community Plan will ensure that these objectives are achieved

In relation to Energy Management, Laois County Council serving as the lead authority for the Midlands Energy Agency played a pivotal role by signing up as the lead authority to SEAI Pathfinder. This collaborative effort involves all five local authorities within the Midlands Energy Agency with funding being secured for the deep retrofit of Council buildings along with associated consultancy costs. In preparation for the SEAI Pathfinder, a comprehensive Gap to Target Report identified 29 buildings across the Midlands Energy Agency area for inclusion with 8 of them located in Laois.

We would like to acknowledge the commitment and hard work of the Elected Members and the staff of Laois County Council throughout 2023. We also wish to express our thanks and appreciation to all the voluntary and community organisations, which the Council interacts with on a daily basis for their ongoing collaboration and support

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MISSION STATEMENT

“The Council will lead the sustainable economic, social, cultural and community development of our County and deliver quality public services to the communities we serve”

Mandate

Laois County Council is the primary democratically elected authority in County Laois which provides an extensive and diverse range of services that impact upon the county’s economic, social, environmental, infrastructural, Industrial, tourism, and cultural activities. These services include the provision and maintenance of houses, roads, planning and economic development, waste management, environmental protection, recreational activities, libraries, cultural and community development, including recreation and sport. Laois County Council act as agents for the delivery of water and waste water services. The Council is serviced by a large workforce, including the Chief Executive, professional, technical, legal, administrative, financial and outdoor employees.

Council Membership

Laois County Council consists of 19 Elected Members– six members each from the Borris-in-Ossory – Mountmellick and Graiguecullen-Portarlinton Municipal Districts and seven members from the Portlaoise Municipal District



Elected Members with the Chief Executive at Laois County Council AGM in June 2019

Council Meetings

Council meetings in 2023 were usually held on the last Monday of each month in the Council Chamber with the option to join by remote means also available. Nineteen meetings were held in 2023 with no meeting held in August.

Corporate Policy Group (C.P.G.)

The Corporate Policy Group is designed to enhance the democratic mandate and policy making role of the elected members. The C.P.G. is supported by the Chief Executive and comprises the Cathaoirleach of the Council together with four Chairs of the Strategic Policy Committees (S.P.C.’s) . The main function of the C.P.G. is to co-ordinate the work of the different S.P.C.’s and provide a forum where policy decisions affecting the whole Council are agreed for submission to the full Council for decision. The C.P.G. met on 11 occasions in 2023.

Municipal Districts

The following are the details in relation to the number of Municipal District Meetings held in 2023:

- Borris-in-Ossory/Mountmellick Municipal District - 11 meetings
- Graiguecullen/Portarlinton Municipal District—11 meetings
- Portlaoise Municipal District—12 meetings

MEMBERS OF LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL

MEMBERS OF BORRIS IN OSSORY-MOUNTMELICK MUNICIPAL DISTRICT



Patrick Bracken (F.F.)



John King (F.G.)



Oliver Clooney (Non Party)



Conor Bergin (F.G.)



Seamus McDonald (F.F.)



James Kelly (Non Party)

MEMBERS OF PORTLAOISE MUNICIPAL DISTRICT



Barry Walsh (F.G.)



John Joe Fennelly (F.F.)



William Aird (F.G.)



Marie Tuohy (Labour)



Catherine Fitzgerald
(F.F.)



Caroline Dwane Stanley
(S.F.)



Thomasina Connell
(F.G.)

MEMBERS OF PORTARLINGTON-GRAIGUECULLEN MUNICIPAL DISTRICT



P J Kelly (F.G.)



Aisling Moran (F.G.)



Padraig Fleming (F.F.)



Ben Brennan (Non Party)



Aidan Mullins (S.F.)



Paschal McEvoy (F.F.)

Cllr. Noel Tuohy resigned from Laois County Council with effect from the 4th February 2023. Cllr Tuohy was first elected to the Council in June 2014 representing the Portlaoise Municipal District. Cllr Tuohy was a dedicated public representative and was widely regarded. The Elected Members together with the Management and Staff wished Cllr. Tuohy every good wish for his retirement.



Noel Tuohy (Labour)

DIRECTOR OF SERVICES:

Donal Brennan

SENIOR EXECUTIVE OFFICER, HUMAN RESOURCES/CORPORATE AFFAIRS
CORPORATE AFFAIRS

Pat Delaney

Corporate Plan

Laois County Council's Corporate Plan 2019 –2024 was adopted by the Members of the Council in November, 2019. The Corporate Plan provides the framework for the implementation of a coherent strategy for the development of the county for the period 2019-2024 and was prepared following consultation with employees, elected representatives, community, voluntary and environmental interests, external stakeholders and other public bodies operating at local level.

Customer Charter

Laois County Council's Customer Charter sets out the way in which the Council endeavours to deal with its customers. The document is on display in all public Council Offices and on our website at www.laois.ie. This Charter includes a commitment to equality in service provision and a recognition of the diverse nature of the community we serve. The Charter also includes a Customer Complaints Procedure which may be availed of by any person not satisfied with the quality of service received.

Highlights

- 23rd February 2023 - Civic Reception in honour of Teddy Fennelly



- 1st June 2023- Civic Reception in honour of Mary Mulhare



- 27th July 2023- Civic Reception in honour of Seamus Dooley



- 20th September 2023—Official Welcome of a delegation from the Sister Cities of Franklin and Williamson County



- 19th October 2023- Civic Reception in honour of Ronan Brennan



Annual Service Delivery Plan

The Members at their meeting of the Council held on the 11th of December 2023 adopted the Annual Service Delivery Plan for 2024. The implementation of the Plan will be reviewed in 2024 as part of the process of developing the 2025 Plan. The performance of the Council in relation to the performance indicators as specified by National Oversight and Audit Commission will also be taken into account.

Partnership

The following were the members of the Workplace Partnership Committee as at 31st December 2023

Management Nominees

Angela McEvoy
Pamela Tynan
Adrian Barrett
Bernie Foran
Susan Rooney

Union Nominees

Anne Marie Maher
Rosa Bray
Deirdre Alexander
Tom O'Carroll

The Partnership Committee met on 4 occasions during 2023.

Irish Language Scheme

Laois Local Authorities Irish Language Scheme was confirmed by the Minister for Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and came into effect on 1st December 2009. The scheme is available to view on our website, www.laois.ie. Work continues on the preparation of a new scheme. Laois Local Authorities recognise that our customers have the right to choose to do business with us in their preferred language and they are facilitated in their dealings with us as far as practicable, whether that is through Irish or through English.

Laois County Council is committed to achieving the targets related to Irish language promotion as outlined in the Official Languages Act 2021. These targets include:

Placement Requirement: The Act mandates that 20% of advertising should be in Irish. In 2023, the Council achieved a 33% placement rate.

Budgetary Requirement: The Council are also committed to allocating 5% of our budget to the Irish language media. In 2023, the Council achieved a rate of 5.1%.

If you wish to contact the Council in Irish, please send an e-mail to gaeilge@laoiscoco.ie.

Freedom of Information (F.O.I.)

The Freedom of Information Act 2014 was enacted on 14 October 2014. It introduced significant changes to the Freedom of Information regime repealing and replacing the Freedom of Information Acts 1997 and 2003 and expanding the scope of FOI to a number of further bodies. It also consolidated, modernised and updated the legislation generally.

Applications received in 2023

Applications on hand at 31 st December 2022:	7
Applications Received in 2023:	98
Decisions taken during 2023 (including 11 applications discontinued and 1 dealt with Outside of FOI) :	93
Applications not Continued with:	11
Applications dealt with outside of FOI:	1
Applications on hand at 31 st December 2023:	1

Nature of Requests

Personal:	40,
Non-Personal:	56
Mixed:	2

Appeals

There were 0 appeals to the Information Commissioner in 2023.

Sources of Requests

General Public, Solicitors and Others:	72
Journalists:	26

National Performance Indicators

Section 126c of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 sets out the functions of the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) which includes examination of the performance of local government bodies against forty four indicators.

The report in respect of 2022 was published by NOAC in September 2023. Laois County Council's performance is included in this Report in each of the relevant sections.

Register of Electors

The Electoral Reform Act 2022 was signed into law by the President on the 25th July 2022. As part of the phased commencement of the Act, certain provisions 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 can now apply to be included on the Rolling Register or to update their details at any time using an on line application via www.checktheregister.ie or alternatively through a paper form – copies of which are available from Laois County Council.

For those electors who wish to complete the paper form, an in-person identity check will only be required where an elector does not wish to provide their PPSN number or where the PPSN number given cannot be confirmed by the Registration Authority. In this regard, an elector can arrange to have their form witnessed at their local garda station or alternatively by the Registration Authority on production of one of the prescribed forms of photo ID or in the case of postal voters through certification from a G. P.

Further details in relation to the changes are available from Laois County Council at <https://laois.ie/about-the-council/register-of-electors/>

Rolling Register of Electors at 26th February 2024

<u>Dail Constituency</u>	<u>Presidential Electors</u>	<u>Dail Electors</u>
Laois- Offaly	54,675	55,494
Kildare South	6,161	6,269
<u>European Parliament Constituency</u>	<u>European Electors</u>	<u>Potential European Electors</u>
South	61,558	990
<u>Local Electoral Areas</u>	<u>Number of Electors</u>	
Borris in Ossory-Mountmellick	20,829	
Graiguecullen-Portarlinton	21,346	
Portlaoise	22,847	
<u>Postal and Special Voters</u>		
Gardai	Laois- Offaly	1
	Kildare South	0
Defence Forces	Laois- Offaly	185
	Kildare South	39
Diplomats	Laois- Offaly	4
	Kildare South	0
Physically Disabled	Laois-Offaly	8
	Kildare South	0
Occupation	Laois- Offaly	5
	Kildare South	0
Special Voters	Laois-Offaly	14
	Kildare South	0

HUMAN RESOURCES

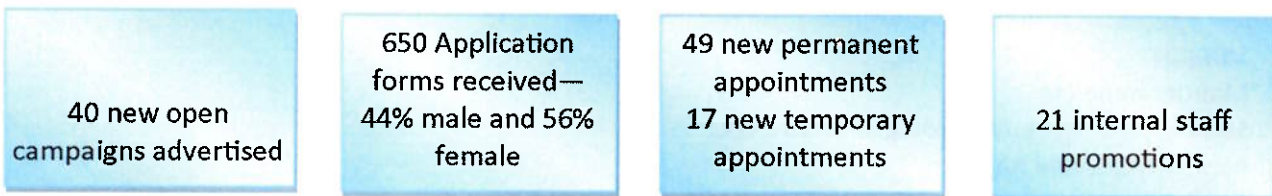
Recruitment Statistics

A total of 573 people (including retained firefighters) were employed by Laois County Council as of 31st December 2023.

During 2023 the Council held 36 competitions. For the most part in-person interviews were held at County Hall.

Successful Delivery

Since January 2023, the following outputs were delivered for our Council



Work Life Balance Initiatives

2023 saw the continuation of the official blended working initiative offering employees the opportunity to avail of remote working options where applicable.

The Council also continued with its existing work life balance initiatives including Career Break, Work Sharing, and Shorter Working Year.

National Performance Indicator

Performance Indicators in this document are extracted from the National Oversight and Audit Commission Report No. 58, published September 2023, as this is the most recent data set available.

In relation to the national performance indicator on the number of working days lost to certified and uncertified illness the following statistics apply.

Total No. of Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) staff in LA (based on data up to 31/12/2022)	Certified	Uncertified
476.34	3.50%	0.31%

The national target for absences on certified and uncertified illness leave is set at 3.5%.

Industrial Relations

Laois County Council continued to maintain good industrial relations during 2023 with no major disputes arising. The Council continues to operate in accordance with the Public Service Agreements in consultation with the relevant Unions. Negotiated pay increases for March 2023 and October 2023 were successfully applied during the year.

Employee Training & Development

Laois County Council is committed to the training and development of all our employees in the context of securing the goals and objectives of the Council and the skills development of employees. Laois County Council is committed to continuous improvement in service delivery through the personal development of its employees.

The annual Training Programme is primarily based on the training needs identified through staff Team Development Plans and Personal Development Plans as part of the Performance Management Development System process. The Programme also incorporates Health & Safety requirements, National FETAC programmes, third level open learning programmes and business-related seminars/workshops as they arise.

2023 saw a range of training programmes outlined hereunder:

- Safepass
- Manual Handling
- Signing Lighting and Guarding at Roadworks
- Road Surface and Repair
- Road Opening and Re-Instatement TTM Audit and Inspection
- Driver CPC
- Ladder Safety
- Chainsaw Training
- First Aid Training
- Disability Awareness Training
- Record Management Training
- Green Public Procurement and Climate Action Awareness Training

Open Learning Programme

Laois County Council endeavour, subject to available resources, to facilitate and support employees wishing to pursue third level open learning courses that are relevant to and contribute to the business development of both the Council and the employee's role and responsibilities. A number of the open learning programmes that were facilitated during 2023 included:

- Diploma in Library and Information Management
- Certificate in Environmental Planning Legislation
- Cert/Diploma in Local Government Studies
- IPASS Certificate in Payroll Techniques

Equality & Supporting Diversity

Laois County Council is an equal opportunity employer and is committed to a broad range of policies, practices and procedures which have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality and protect human rights of staff and people availing of its services.

December 2023 saw the publication of the Council's Gender Pay Gap Report which is accessible on our website at <https://laois.ie/wp-content/uploads/Gender-Pay-Gap-Report-for-2023.pdf>
This report was compiled based on available data up to 30th June 2023.

INFORMATION COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY

HEAD OF INFORMATION SYSTEMS:

Pat Grassick

The Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Department has responsibility for the Council's ICT and communications infrastructure, software systems and websites.

The Department provides technical support to all Council sections and to the Members of Laois County Council and is responsible for the implementation, maintenance, development, and security of the Council's ICT systems.

More than 9,800 technical support calls were handled by ICT support staff in 2023. This reflects the importance of ICT in the provision of service due to the modernisation and digitisation of services.

The ICT Department is committed to a policy of continuous improvement of ICT services, both within the Council itself and to the public who avail themselves of the Council's services with further expansion in 2023 of Online services.

ICT Security

In 2023, Cyber security was still a major concern within the Council. Further security 'hardening' of the Council's ICT infrastructure took place in 2023 which included the introduction of a new system for remote access to the Council network for third party support services.

The Council Information Security Committee approved policies in relation to Cyber Incident Management and the approved plan was successfully tested.

Communication channels and collaboration with the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), the national Local Authority's Security Officers Group were strengthened, and the Council participated fully in these engagements.

ICT Communications

The upgrade of connectivity in all Area Offices and Libraries finished in 2023. This standardised the network connections in Council buildings to provide a consistent and stable network to build improved service delivery to the public.

ICT Online Services

The ICT Department completed the upgrade of the Customer online payments system to the MyCoCo (www.mycoco.ie) platform. This allowed customers to access their account details online and to process payments in the following areas:

- Housing Rents
- Commercial Rates
- Housing Loans
- Fire Service Payments

The new system provided Rates customer an opportunity to manage their accounts online for the first time.

National Performance Indicators 2022

Per capita total page views of the local authority's websites in 2022	Per capita total number of followers at end 2022 of the local authority's social media accounts	Overall Cost of ICT Provision per WTE	Overall cost of ICT as a proportion of Revenue Expenditure
6.30	0.66	€4,791.64	2.50



CLIMATE ACTION & COMMUNITY STRATEGIC POLICY COMMITTEE

DIRECTOR OF SERVICES:

Donal Brennan

A/SENIOR EXECUTIVE OFFICER:

Pamela Tynan

Members

Cllr John King

Cllr Padraig Fleming (Chair)

Cllr P J Kelly

Cllr James Kelly

Cllr Oliver Clooney

Sectoral

Ruth Sullivan (PPN, Community/Voluntary)

Bobby Delaney (PPN, Environment)

Donald Scully (Agriculture Farming Pillar)

Michael Gorman (PPN, Social Inclusion)

Ann Fingleton (PPN Business/Commercial)

Laois Local Community Development Committee (LCDC)

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:



- The Social Inclusion Community Action Programme (SICAP) 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 opened for tender, with Laois Partnership Company being awarded the Contract in December 2023. The new programme will run from 2024- 2028 and is valued in excess of €5million.
- The LECP 2023-2028 – was developed through collaboration with a broad range of stakeholders, and organisations. The consultation process included:
 - An online survey conducted over two weeks to which 509 individuals responded.
 - Six in person and one online community workshops in Rathdowney, Mountmellick, Abbeyleix, Portarlinton, Portlaoise and Ballylinan.
 - A stakeholder workshop attended by representatives of a range of local organisations, including Laois Sports Partnership, Laois Local Enterprise Office and Portlaoise Community and Family Resource Centre.
 - Consultation with the LECP Advisory Steering Group (ASG), the Enterprise, Economic Development and Tourism Strategic Policy Committee (SPC) and the Local Community Development Committee (LCDC)

Ten High Level Goals were developed and ratified and includes a socio-economic statement and socio - economic profile of Laois. 33 Sustainable objectives were also developed and ratified. An Appropriate Assessment Screening and Strategic Environmental Assessment Screening were undertaken, which determined that full screening was not required. Actions and KPI (Key Performance Indicators) are now being finalised. Work will commence on the LECP implementation plan in early 2024.

- Laois LCDC administered the Community Support Fund 2023 receiving an allocation of €291,487. The allocation was divided into a general capital/current project allocation, women's group allocation and an administration allocation. In total 138 groups received funding under this scheme.
- LEADER original Programme 2014–2020 concluded on the 31st of 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 concluded on the 31st of December 2023 with all project approvals now complete. Under the Transitional LEADER programme, Laois LCDC acting as Laois LAG were awarded €1,092,976, for which 51 groups were approved for funding. Under the LEADER EURI programme, Laois LAG received a funding allocation of €485,767 for which 14 projects were approved by the LAG.
- Laois LCDC acting as Laois LAG tendered for the LEADER 2023-2027 programme completing a Local Development Strategy, which was based on comprehensive public consultations and an on-line survey, for which both the turnout and response were incredibly positive. In December 2023, it was noted that Laois LAG were not successful in their submission.

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 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 JPCs. In 2023 Laois PPN completed its re-registration of Member with 640 currently registered.

Laois PPNs Climate Action Project 2023 was a year-long calendar of events for all PPN Member Groups, the aim of which was to raise awareness, educating and inspiring positive Climate Action initiatives in our communities. Laois PPN wish to acknowledge the support of Laois County Council who we collaborated with on several of these events.

Highlights of Laois PPNs Climate Action Project 2023 included:

- Free native Irish tree giveaway to Community Groups across Laois.
- Climate Action Funding Workshop.
- Heritage Bike Tour in Vicarstown during National Bike Week to promote Active Travel.
- Biodiversity Walk and Talk in Portlaoise, with Ecologist Dr Fiona McGowan and Portlaoise Tidy Towns. (Portlaoise has



been designated Ireland’s first Low Carbon Town).

- A Tree for Peace – Planting Ceremony for the Ukrainian Community, during National Tree Week.
- Winter Wander in Abbeyleix – Winner of Ireland Tidiest Town 2023.
- Guided Biodiversity walk of Abbeyleix Bog Project – considered one of the finest Community led conservation projects in Ireland.

The Joint Oireachtas on Environment and Climate Change invited a report on Climate Activities of PPNs, 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, with its Climate Action Project 2023 being selected as one of three case studies, showcasing the potential positive impact and role the PPN can play nationally on Climate Action.

Laois PPN launched a “Property Marker” for Community Groups in Laois. Funding was secured for the Property Marker through the Community Support Fund 2022 which was administered by Laois LCDC being funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development.

The first of its kind in Laois, the Property Marker is a crime prevention initiative, that provides a unique identifier on property, thus acting as a theft deterrent assisting An Garda Síochana in the recovery of stolen property. Laois PPN will make the Property Marker machine available to Community Groups in towns and villages across the county of Laois over the coming months.

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.

Laois Community & Voluntary Awards 2023

The 2023 Laois 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 the awards long term sponsor People First Credit Union. Nominees were honored in eight categories for their contribution to community life in Laois, including an individual Unsung Hero Award and a newly established Climate Action Award. The Awards showcase annually, the great work that is being undertaken locally by the community/voluntary, social inclusion and environmental sectors in the County.



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 and averting early school leavers, helping to inspire pupils to reach their full potential. This programme was facilitated in partnership with Portlaoise College and incorporated a company overview, a workshop in relation to Climate Change facilitated by Climate Change Co-Ordinator (LCC) and a “*Day in the Life*” session, where students met members of Laois County Council staff from varying sections and educational backgrounds. The sessions facilitated conversations and insights into the many roles in the workplace and aimed to inspire and encourage young minds to look towards the future. Students were also given an opportunity to visit the Fire Station in Portlaoise. The programme was run by the Post Primary Schools Business Partnership and the Department of Education and Skills in association with Laois County Council.

Laois Comhairle na nÓg

In 2023, Laois Comhairle members undertook several projects including ‘*If it wasn’t for*’ Podcast. This proved to be a very successful initiative and was launched by the Cathaoirleach Cllr Paschal McEvoy in October 2023. Comhairle na nÓg members also participated in several consultations and events throughout the year to include the Local Development Strategy, Local Authority Climate Action Plan and Local Economic & Community Plan consultations. On the 7th of November 2023, 75 young people from secondary schools across county Laois, attended Laois Comhairle na nÓg’s Youth Conference (AGM) at the Midlands Park Hotel, with a workshop being convened on the topic of *Mental Health*.

All Island Pride of Place competition 2023

In its 21st year, the Pride of Place awards is an annual competition, organised by peacebuilding charity Co-Operation Ireland and sponsored by IPB Insurance. It is an All-Island competition, whereby local authorities from across the island of Ireland nominate groups in their communities, who they believe have made a significant contribution working collectively to improve their neighborhood. In 2023, Laois was represented by Camross Community Association entering the category for the “Population 0 to 500”, and Stradbally, Vicarstown, Timahoe Activity & Wellness Hub (SVT) entered the category ‘Community & Wellbeing Initiative’. It was a special year for both groups with Camross Community Association claiming 2nd Place in their category and SVT Activity & Wellness Hub receiving a Special Award.



County Laois Joint Policing Committee (JPC)

The County Laois Joint Policing Committee met 4 times in 2023 with its membership representing both public and private representatives. Joint Policing Committee Working Group meetings in each of the three Municipal District continue to take place each quarter and have proved very successful.

Community Projects (Elected Members) Fund 2023

Over 101 community groups/projects were funded under the Community Projects (Elected Members) Fund in 2023 totaling €125,202.

Collaborative Projects/Social Inclusion

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

- Laois Integration Network
- Laois Africa Day
- Integration supports for new communities.
- CYPSC
- Make Way Day



Laois Connects 2023 Promoting Positive Mental Health & Wellbeing

Laois Connects 2023 took place from the 9th to the 15th of October 2023. The programme featured online, indoor, and outdoor programmes and events and one central day at the Dunamaise Arts Centre called “Mind Yourself Day”, targeting students, parents, and grandparents.

Laois Age Friendly Programme

The new Laois Age Friendly County Strategy was launched at the Older Peoples Council AGM in Castletown in October 2023. A new Older Peoples Council Executive was formed. The older Peoples Council has grown to more than 300 members. 2023 saw the continued roll out of ICE (In Case of Emergency) cards with over 6,000 distributed in 2023. An Eircode awareness campaign was also launched in 2023 and 1000 Eircode Stickers were distributed following requests from individuals and community groups.

The inaugural Living Well Expo was held in April 2023 and was attended by over 1000 citizens in Portlaoise College. The event featured cooking demos, expert talks and more than 70 exhibitors from healthcare, community, technology sectors were in attendance. The event is planned to take place in 2024 again.



A Guide to Services for older people was updated in 2023 and will be available for distribution in early 2024. This will be a comprehensive listing of services and supports available to older people in Laois.

Laois Connects also featured an extensive age friendly element and there were a series of events including talks and demos, held at the Dunamais Arts Centre on the 12th of October 2023.

Laois Africa Day

Laois Africa Day 2023 was held on Saturday the 3rd of June 2023 on the grounds of Laois Leisure, Portlaoise. It featured and showcased the sights, sounds, crafts, and food of Africa and celebrated the contribution of the African community to Laois.



Healthy Ireland

The Healthy Ireland Fund aims to support innovative sectoral, evidence-based projects and programmes that support key national policies in areas such as mental health, physical activity, nutrition, and sexual health. It also supports initiatives which promote a tobacco free Ireland and reduce alcohol consumption, while also developing spaces and places for health and wellbeing. 2023 saw a wide range of programmes implemented with a cross section of partners.

Operation Transformation

Laois Sports and Leisure Section in conjunction with Healthy Laois and SVT Activity and Wellness Hub (SVT), successfully bid for the filming of Operation Transformation in Laois. Ad Break challenges were recorded over seven weeks and the Operation Transformation host Mr Karl Henry, confirmed that the attendances in Stradbally, Vicarstown, Portlaoise, Kilcavan, Portarlinton, Ratheniska and Timahoe were the highest on record. SVT reported a tripling of Park Run attendances, because of the success of this programme in Laois, whilst the GAA Light Up walks reported enormous attendances.

Laois Pride

Midlands LGBT+ Project is a Laois based service that provides services and supports to LGBT+ people in the Midlands. The Project ran a weeklong programme of events to mark Laois Pride 2023, culminating in a Pride Parade on Saturday, 17th September 2023, which was supported by Healthy Laois funding. These events promoted opportunities to support those within the community, whilst encouraging acceptance.



Active Parks

A series of free Outdoor Classes in public green spaces were delivered by the Sports and Leisure section and funded by Healthy Laois. These sessions use public spaces, whilst engaging the community in outdoor

exercise and were held in Portlaoise, Stradbally, Abbeyleix and Portarlinton.

Menowell

Menowell was a collaborative programme with Laois Sports Partnership. It provided participants with a 6-week physical activity and health education programme, (for women in all stages of menopause) and was also facilitated online. All exercise classes are designed by clinical exercise physiologists specifically for all fitness abilities and those living with clinical conditions.

Musical Memories

Musical Memories saw the expansion of weekly Ukulele and singing sessions in Laois Men's Sheds. The men took great pride in learning a new skill with their friends and peers, in a sociable and encouraging environment. They worked on a common set of songs, suitable to their skill level.

Laois Traveller Action Group

This collaboration was formed to help support children and adults in the travelling community, to make healthier food and nutrition choices. A series of cooking classes were enjoyed by the mothers and the children look forward to planting and harvesting produce from their new Polytunnel.

Light Up Laois

A series of Wellness Workshops were held in Youth Work Ireland Laois premises in Portlaoise, where young people took part in several wellbeing activities in conjunction with a walk, lit by their beautifully made Willow Lanterns. This programme demonstrated several creative ways to cope with mental health and encouraged the teenage demographic to enjoy a walk and exercise outdoors.

Nutrition and cooking classes

A series of cooking classes was held in The Irish Wheelchair Association premises in Portlaoise. Service users developed and enhanced their knowledge of nutrition, which complimented the newly installed gym on the premises. The overall aim of this programme was to support the users with living independently.

Support Services

Support and wellbeing services were implemented through Laois Domestic Abuse services and Youth Work Ireland Laois (YWIL). These two separate programmes focused on vulnerable members of our societies and provide timely and safe spaces to children and young people to have time to express their needs and their experiences.

Make Way Day 2023

Healthy Laois, Age Friendly Laois and a Make Way Day Working group from Laois County Council, led a number of Make Way Day events on Friday 22nd September 2023 in Portarlinton, Portlaoise, Mountrath, Vicarstown and Mountmellick. The aim of Make Way Day is to bring the disability and wider community together to "consider the needs of people of all abilities and allow them to share the spaces we all take for granted."

[Climate Action /Environmental Programmes](#)

[Local Authority Climate Action Plan \(LACAP\)](#)

In February 2023, a Ministerial Direction was issued, mandating the development and adoption of Local Authority Climate Action Plans (LACAP) within one year. In preparation for this initiative, three essential evidence-based reports were prepared by external consultants: a Climate Change Risk Assessment for County Laois, a Baseline Emission Inventory Analysis for County Laois, and a Baseline Emissions Inventory Analysis for the Decarbonizing Zone (Portlaoise). Extensive training for Local Authority Climate Action Plans (LACAP) was conducted, including Sectoral Workshops, Online Webinars, and in-person training sessions.

Public consultation workshops on the LACAP were conducted from 16th to 25th May 2023, concurrently with consultations on the County Laois Local Development Strategy (LDS 2023 – 2027) and Laois Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP 2023 - 2028), to ensure policy alignment across all plans.

The public consultation for the draft Laois Climate Action Plan took place from November 1st to December 14th. To encourage local input, Community Climate Action clinics were hosted in four libraries across Laois. These drop-in sessions facilitated open discussions on the LACAP. The LACAP underwent a rigorous Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Appropriate Assessment (AA) assessment. The Climate Action and Community SPC were consulted at all milestones throughout the process. The LACAP will be presented at the January 2024 Council Meeting for adoption.

[Community Climate Action Fund](#)

A new Community Climate Action Officer (CCAO) was appointed in February 2023. The CCAO will support communities in accessing the Community Climate Action Fund (CCAF). Projects should address one or more of the themes of energy, travel, food and waste, shopping and recycling, and local climate and environmental action. Total funding allocated to Laois was €465,000

[Laois Federation of Tidy Towns](#)

The Laois Federation of Tidy Towns, established in 1998 with 33 registered groups, is a unique organisation and remains a vital resource and support for Tidy Towns, fostering community collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and environmental enhancement. The adjudication process, conducted by dedicated committee members, reflected the strong competition across all categories, highlighting the commitment and efforts of Tidy Towns groups in preserving and enhancing the local environment. The highlight of the year was the awarding of Abbeyleix being crowned as Ireland's Tidiest Town for 2023.



Annual General Meeting & Seminar

The Annual General Meeting of the Laois Federation of Tidy Towns was held at Durrow Castle Arms hotel in February 2023. Laois Federation of Tidy Towns also hosted a seminar in Camross on 19th June, uniting community groups, environmental enthusiasts, and local organisations to delve into community engagement, sustainable practices, and biodiversity conservation. The event, featuring a tour of Camross led by Johanna McDonald Steenkist, offered participants a close-up view of the village's beauty and environmental projects.

Tidy Towns One-to-One Consultations

Tidy Towns Adjudicators, Mr Billy Flynn and Ms Sharon Eastwood conducted two days of one-to-one advisory clinics on 17th and 18th April at Áras an Chontae, Portlaoise. These sessions involved a desk review of the 2022 submissions, followed by feedback and recommendations to improve and maximise points in future competitions.

Laois Federation of Tidy Towns Awards 2023

A total of 17 Tidy Town Groups submitted applications for the Laois Federation of Tidy Town Awards 2023, with judging and deliberation taking place in August 2023. The awards were presented at the Community and Voluntary Awards on 3rd November, which recognised outstanding achievements in seven subcategories with Clough Tidy Towns (Overall Impression Village), and Portlaoise Tidy Towns (Overall Impression Town) talking home the two main prizes.

Energy Management

Laois County Council, serving as the lead authority for the Midlands Energy Agency (MEA), played a pivotal role by signing up as the lead authority to SEAI Pathfinder. This collaborative effort involves all five local authorities within the MEA. The three-year agreement secures 50% funding for the deep retrofit of Council buildings and covers 50% of associated consultancy costs. In preparation for the SEAI Pathfinder, a comprehensive Gap to Target Report, identified 29 buildings across the MEA for inclusion, with 8 of them located in Laois.

The Energy Officer organised a bespoke two-day, in-person Energy Management Action Plan (MAP) for MEA local authorities, attended by internal energy teams from each authority. All MEA local authorities actively participated in the SEAI Engaging People Programme, with Laois County Council being recognized as exemplars. The Council received a larger allocation of €16,000 to develop a year-long "Positive Energy" campaign. The Positive Energy campaign was presented as a Case Study at the national Reduce Your Use Campaign launch in October 2023.

While official SEAI Public Sector performance results for 2022 are pending, Laois County Council's scorecard indicates an impressive 47.7% improvement in energy efficiency compared to the baseline.

Environmental Awareness

The Climate Action Section has undertaken a series of comprehensive and impactful environmental awareness initiatives which reflect a strategic commitment to fostering sustainability, biodiversity conservation and active community engagement.

Biodiversity Demonstration Garden at Laois Education Centre

Laois County Council was awarded €34,000 under the Local Biodiversity Action Fund (LBAF) for a Biodiversity Demonstration Garden at Laois Education Centre, which will act as a learning tool for teachers who attend the Centre for training. It will showcase practical actions that schools can develop to support biodiversity across the region. The landscaping of this project is complete and signage to complement the "Biodiversity in your Garden" booklet produced by Laois County Council, will be developed. The official opening will take place in Spring 2024.

Climate Action Resources for Teachers

Laois County Council has developed a Climate Action Resource for 2nd to 6th classes which has been distributed to all 80 primary schools in the county. This comprehensive kit includes curriculum-aligned lesson plans, animated videos, powerpoint presentations, and interactive learning games for effective climate action education. Susan Adams from Education for Sustainability provided an instructional video for teachers to maximize kit utilization. Dr. Niamh Shaw's narrated animated video series enriches the content.

Antarctica Series

As an extension of this resource, Laois County Council sponsored an Antarctic Workshop series led by Dr. Niamh Shaw, in conjunction with Laois Education Centre which featured video blogs from her and 70 of her fellow female explorers and scientists. Each week a lesson plan complementing the themes in the video was provided to classes participating in the series. This project will culminate with a school competition on Climate Action, which will be showcased at the Laois Education Centre in February 2024.

A Playful City Study

Laois County Council engaged A Playful City Consultants, who piloted A Playful Active School Zone project in Portlaoise during June 2023, to create more playful, healthy, and inclusive public places, to encourage active travel. 5 of the 6 primary schools in Portlaoise are located in the Summerhill area in close proximity to the new Triogue way. The interventions were decided upon through co-creation workshops and input from survey responses of 500 community members, in conjunction with the Councils Active Travel section.

A Playful City prepared and presented a report in August 2023 on suggested interventions for the Triogue Way, Peoples Park, and Summer Hill School Zone, to encourage active travel.

Laois County Council Climate Action Video Series

Climate Action Team produced a 14-part video series on climate action, recognising the activities of Laois County Council towards sustainability across a range of services and functions, including pollinators, housing retrofit, active travel, Green Public Procurement, and Information Technology.

Greening of Durrow Scarecrow festival

The Climate Action section funded several initiatives such as Durrow Scarecrow festival 2023, to support the greening of the event. 'Green your Festival' signage was developed and displayed throughout the festival emphasizing the importance of the separation and prevention of waste. Sponsorship was provided for a theatre production and children's workshop called "Spooky Before – A Caws for Concern" with a climate action and peatland conservation theme.

Green Hub Portarlinton

Portarlinton Art Collective and Portarlinton Business Association SEC submitted a proposal in conjunction with Laois County Council for Green Hub Project. The project was one of six selected nationally and received €10k in funding from the Eastern Midlands Regional Waste Management Office.

- **Sit, Sip and Stitch events** were held from 22nd - 27th of January 2023 in Portarlinton where the My Brat Bhríde community members, in a casual setting with a cuppa, stitched their upcycled scarves into 'brat bhrídes' reviving an ancient tradition of St. Brigid and breathing new life and purpose into pre-loved and unwanted scarves and shawls. They were held in local cafes and restaurants and the aim was to highlight the scourge of single use coffee cups.

- **Dumpster Dives**

- A waste management consultant visited in March 2023 and conducted several “dumpster dives”/ waste audits with participating local businesses. Waste Audit Reports were produced for 12 local businesses.

- **Gragoyles Exhibition**

Artists were partnered with a business and commissioned to make “Gragoyles” from their waste to symbolise the warding off of excessive waste. A showcase event whereby the Gragoyles were unveiled was held in Solas on the 21st of April 2023. The Gragoyles remained on exhibition at this location for a 6-week period.

Burial Grounds

The Community Section has responsibility for 27 active burial grounds within the county. Grant aid is provided to voluntary cemetery committees and improvement works were carried out on a number of the burial grounds as part of the annual works programme.

2023 saw the construction of new footpaths and plinths in Mountmellick and Ballacolla as well as risk abatement works which included the removal of overhanging trees and trip hazards in Portlaoise, Abbeyleix and Emo.

Town & Village Renewal Scheme

In 2023, work was ongoing on 5 schemes in Killeshin, Portarlinton, Ballinakill, and Ballyroan. Laois County Council sought funding for a further 5 schemes under the 2023 Town and Village scheme, with announcements of successful applications being made in early 2024.



Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF)

Borris in Ossory Courthouse.

Following a successful application to the Department of Rural and Community Development, Category 2

RRDF Grant funding in the amount of €212,332.00 was awarded to Laois County Council for the conservation and renovation of the Borris in Ossory Courthouse. Howley Hayes Cooney Architecture were appointed as the design team for this project. Planning permission was granted in Q3 of 2023 and the project is currently at Stage 2B in preparation for tendering. An application for RRDF Category 1 funding will be submitted to the Department in February 2024.

Durrow Community Enterprise 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 was awarded in respect of a proposed Community Enterprise Hub at Durrow, County Laois. Bluett & O’Donoghue Architects was appointed as lead designer.

Town Centre First

In February 2022, the Government launched the Town Centre First (TCF) policy which aims to create town centres that function as viable, vibrant, and attractive locations for people to live, work and visit, while also functioning as the service, social, cultural, and recreational hub for the local community. The local authority appointed a Town Regeneration Officer in April 2023 to implement the Town Centre First Policy in Laois. The Town Centre First Plan for Rathdowney was launched in December 2023.

This Plan provides a vision for the ongoing development of Rathdowney, building buy-in from existing property owners and local communities. The TCF Plan for Rathdowney contains proposals for 5 transformative projects and a 10-year action plan which aim to promote the social and economic development of the town for the benefit of the community.

A crucial element for the successful delivery of the Plan is the creation of a Town Team to work in collaboration with the Council. In 2023, the Town Regeneration Officer and the Council brought together community stakeholders who represent various sectors across the town of Rathdowney to form a Town Team. The Town Team will work in collaboration with the Council to deliver positive outcomes for the town.

Mountrath

The Town Team was re-established in Mountrath in 2023 and is committed to revitalising the Town Centre. Mountrath Town Team is comprised of representatives from all the local community groups within the town and initially, it will focus on projects which will promote the social and economic revival of Mountrath Town Centre. The team is supported by the Council and the Town Regeneration Officer.

Performance Indicators 2022

Percentage of local schools involved in the local youth council/Comhairle na Nóg scheme	Percentage number of organisations included on the County Register and proportion of those organisations part of the Social Inclusion College with the PPN
100%	12.88%

SPORT & LEISURE SECTION

Leisure Provision

Portlaoise and Portarlinton Leisure Centres, operating as Laois Leisure Portlaoise and Laois Leisure Portarlinton continue to be managed by the voluntary board of Laois Leisure. Both centres continue to deliver excellent service to the public with both Laois Leisure Portlaoise and Portarlinton achieved 'Outstanding' in the National Quality Standards for 2023/24. Minor improvement works have continued to be delivered at both centers during 2023 to improve quality of service, accessibility, and energy efficiency.

Funding applications were submitted under the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme in September 2023 for upgrading works at both centres.

Laois County Council continue to provide advice and support to Ballinakill Community Development Association, who operate Ballinakill Outdoor Pool. The Sport & Leisure Office assisted Ballinakill Community Development Association CLG throughout the year. Additionally, Laois County Council made a financial contribution towards the staffing and safety costs of operating the facility for the 2023 summer season.

Playing Facilities

Laois County Council managed twenty-two community play facilities in 2023, which required a considerable annual maintenance and repair programme. An extensive upgrade of Doonane playground was completed in July 2023 and Laois County Council continued to deliver on accessibility and biodiversity enhancements of several play spaces during 2023.

Additionally, the Council successfully applied for funding of €18,000 to DECDIY under the Playground Capital Programme to upgrade Mountmellick playground.

Laois County Council continue to assist local groups with the development of community playgrounds. Borris in Ossory Playground and MUGA was officially opened in June 2023 by An Cathaoirleach Thomasina Connell MCC. Installation commenced on Ballyfin playground in September 2023, and it will open to the public early in 2024.

Green Flag Award for Parks

The Sport and Leisure Section worked with other sections to expand the Green Flag Award to other Council and community facilities during 2023 with Páirc an Phobail, Portlaoise retaining its Green Flag Award for 2023/24. Fr Breen Park, Abbeyleix completed all the required documentation and was submitted for judging.

Bike Week

Bike Week 2023 is a national programme which encourages people to use their bicycles for travel and leisure and was co-ordinated by the National Transport Authority and funded by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. Funding of €23,827.50 was secured by the Council from the Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport to deliver the 2023 Bike Week Programme. The Council co-ordinated over fifty events with the assistance of schools and community partners countywide, which took place during May 2023. Events included family fun cycles, school cycling events and workplace cycles including Laois County Council's own in-house initiatives to encourage employees to cycle to work and to meetings. Laois County Council with Durrow Community Bike Hire organised a symposium on Rural Cycling, held in Durrow during Bike Week. This event, featuring keynote speakers from national

organisations was attended by a wide range of voluntary and statutory agencies. Numbers participating in Bike Week activities exceed all expectation with over 2,000 people of all ages taking part in events and activities.

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE ACTIVITY PROGRAMME

National Recreation Week/National Play Day

National Recreation Week/National Play Day is a joint initiative between the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and Local Authorities. Laois County Council Sport & Leisure Section delivered a series of workshops in partnership with local groups countywide in July & August 2023. These events were aimed at Creating Playful Communities, to get children and young people in targeted areas playing outdoors and involved Scarecrow Making, Architectural Modelling, Mountain Biking Workshops

Special Projects 2023

CLÁR Projects

Work on developing and processing CLÁR projects continued throughout 2023. Funding was secured for eleven additional recreational projects under CLÁR 2023. Applications were submitted under Measure 1 under the 2023 CLÁR programme. Funding of €68,648 was announced in December 2023 for two Measure 1 projects in Clough and Ballyadams, with additional announcements anticipated early in 2024.

Three CLÁR funded projects in Camross were showcased during Pride of Place judging in July 2023 which made a very positive impression on the judges.

Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS)

Work on the maintenance and development projects continued throughout 2023. Applications were submitted under all Measures under the 2023 ORIS programme. Funding of €44,280 was secured in December 2023 under ORIS Development Measure for a feasibility study to develop a riverside amenity area in Derryounce, Portarlinton.

Healthy Ireland Projects 2023

Laois County Council continued the delivery of the **Active Parks Programme** in 2023, including Laois Connects Mental Health Awareness week in October, with delivery of the programmes in public areas/parks in Portlaoise, Portarlinton, Mountmellick, Castletown, Abbeyleix and Stradbally. The programme offers free activity sessions for adults and groups of all ages and abilities and was extremely successful and well received by all communities.

The **Playful Spaces** project has resulted in the preparation of three detailed plans in consultation with the three selected social housing areas in Stradbally, Portlaoise and Mountrath. Funding of €10,000 was secured under the Community Recognition fund to commence the delivery of the plan for Cois na hAbhann/Bruach na hAbhann in Portlaoise.

Light Up Laois was a joint initiative delivered by Healthy Laois, Youth Work Ireland, and local community groups in December 2023. This involved the delivery of services of Lantern Making workshops culminating in several events which shone a light on positive mental health including a 3km walk in Portlaoise with lanterns and a very successful Winter Solstice celebration in Vicarstown on December 21st, which was attended by 150 people and co-ordinated by SVT Activity & Wellness Hub.

Support of Clubs/Community Groups

During 2023 the Sport & Leisure Office continued to successfully work with clubs, schools, and community groups to apply for and draw down funding to develop their facilities which included:

- Sports Capital and Equipment Grant Scheme
- Large Scale Sports Infrastructure Scheme
- CLÁR Programme
- Town and Village Renewal Scheme
- Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS)

A very successful Sports Capital & Equipment Grant workshop was held in partnership with Laois PPN resulting in a record number of applications being submitted by clubs, schools, and community organisations in Laois in 2023.

Ukrainian Support Programme

Additionally, the Sport & Leisure Section delivered 8 events in 2023 as part of the Ukrainian Support Programme, which involved integrated walks and recreational activities being delivered in partnership with local community groups.

Active Community Hubs

The Sport and Leisure Section continues to work with Laois Sports Partnership and local communities to provide support for Stradbally/Vicarstown/Timahoe Hub and Rathdowney/Errill Hub. The aim of the active Community hub is to promote sustainable physical activity opportunities in local communities.

Operation Transformation

Together with SVT Activity and Wellness Hub, the Council assisted with the delivery of Operation Transformation during January & February 2023 with Stradbally as the primary location for filming. The programme visited seven locations countywide and showcased images and community activities that promoted the county in an incredibly positive way as well as shining a light on community activities on offer. Over 1500 people attended the weekly Ad Break Challenges and participating groups reported a marked increase in participation numbers following the programme.

LAOIS WATER SAFETY

Water Safety Awareness 2023

Laois County Council in conjunction with the Laois Water Safety Area Committee delivered several key events to promote Water Safety Awareness in 2023. Schools & community group visits were conducted, and basic water safety awareness talks and ring buoy demonstrations were delivered.

The events emphasised the importance of wearing the appropriate lifejacket/buoyancy aid when participating in open water and dangers of using inflatables.

Water Safety Classes 2023

WATER safety Ireland – Laois successfully delivered Spring and Autumn Water Safety Classes during 2023 at Laois Leisure Portlaoise. Swim Week 2023 was held in Ballinakill Outdoor Pool in June 2023. In total 125 adults & children participated in Irish Water Safety Classes in Laois throughout the year. The autumn programme was very successfully extended to provide free water safety training for the rescue services.

Swim Week Ballinakill Outdoor Pool: Water Safety Ireland

Paws Programme

Laois County Council in association with Laois Water Safety and Portlaoise Leisure Centre continued to successfully support & deliver the Primary Aquatic Water Safety Programme (PAWS). Primary schools were visited in Laois during 2023 by Water Safety Ireland - Laois' instructors.

World Ploughing Championships 2023

Volunteers from Water Safety Ireland – Laois operated the stand at the World Ploughing Championships in Ratheniska for three days and distributed information and promotional material on behalf of Water Safety Ireland

Ring Buoys

During 2023 Laois County Council continued to inspect, maintain, erect and replace ring buoys at open water locations countywide. The Council placed an order in 2023 for 26 ring buoys sensors having received funding from Dublin City Council led SMART Solutions initiative.

LIBRARY SERVICES

COUNTY LIBRARIAN:

Bernie Foran

Public Libraries in Laois continued to offer a modern and efficient service through a network of eight branch libraries for all members providing them with free access to books, e-books, meeting and study space, free courses and events for both children and adults, government and Council information, online services and internet/wifi/printing facilities.

Portlaoise New Library

The new County Library on Main Street was officially opened on Monday the 17th of January by Minister Heather Humphreys, Minister of Rural and Community Development. The new library will offer an enhanced and expanded library service for all of the county and its citizens. It is not only a place to borrow books, study or perform a task, Portlaoise Library will also be a place to relax and recharge in the heart of the town. The library will be a welcoming free space for the community and visitors and will facilitate the provision of educational and cultural information, provide free digital access to WIFI, PCs and a range of free events. Occupying a central location on the Main Street, the library will form a significant element of The Cultural Quarter development in the historic core of Portlaoise showcasing and promoting the Fort Protector and Fitzmaurice Place.

The premises is a newly constructed building providing library public space in excess of 1500 square metres. Additional space from the rear has been incorporated for library space, including an external enclosed reading area with planting which will facilitate exhibitions and cultural festivals. The ground floor area has general lending services with books, media and other library stock with separately definable areas for adults, and children. The first floor provides study spaces, teen section, a dedicated local history reading room, and a community room which will cater for community events and group activities. Book storage and staff offices will be housed on the second floor. The Library opened to the public on Tuesday 18th of July on full time hours including lunch times.

Since opening, the library has welcomed 76,813 visits (18th July 2023-31-December2023) and issued 45,639 items of stock for this period. The construction cost of the building was €7.1m excluding site cost. The Council received €3,035m from the Department of Rural and Community Development for the project alongside €125k towards additional book stock. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage provided a funding line up to €2.7m under the Urban Regeneration and Development fund for this project

Library Services -Reading and Literacy programmes

The 2023 Laois Library Summer stars programme had over 1,500 children in the county sign up to the annual summer star reading programme. A county wide event programme hosting over 300 individual events was held to encourage young readers to join the library. For 2023 the library service created and hosted a Library Storystroll in outdoor public parks. The Storystroll reproduced local Laois author Donna Mills children's book "What can I do?" so that children and families could read along and then visit their local library to complete a treasure hunt and quiz. Over 1,250 free craft bags were created and collected for young readers and families coming into the library. Family Time at Your Library focuses on getting families with young children directly involved with libraries and is run in December. The library hosted over 70 events with a total attendance at 944. The Spring into Storytime programme held during the Spring months in the 8 libraries held over 31 events for children which promoted reading and libraries with 714 attendees in total.

Free Little Library Bag

Laois County Library Service provided a “My Little Library book bag” to every child starting school in September, encouraging children to join their local library. The book bags are available in either Irish or English. To date over 700 bags have been distributed in the county increasing library membership in this age category and attracting over 500 new library members. To help children navigate starting school, libraries have put together a bag of books especially for them that can be collected at any library. The initiative is a collaboration between libraries, the Department of Rural and Community Development, and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth as part of the First 5 Strategy.

- **Parenting Support Programme**

Laois Libraries together with Offaly Libraries were delighted to co-deliver a series of over 15 online talks and in-person workshops for parents at various stages throughout the year. Supported and funded by Laois/Offaly Children and Young People’s Services Committees (CYPSC), the Parenting Support Programme invited experts to discuss a broad range of parenting topics currently impacting our children. The aim of the programme is to give parents simple and practical strategies to help them build healthy relationships with their children and confidently manage issues as they arise. In addition, parenting support books were purchased for every branch to supplement the existing stock available.

- **Dormant Accounts Funding And ICT Grant 2023**

The Library service was awarded Dormant Account Funding towards sensory library services in Portlaoise of €5,019.77 (Equipment and Resources) . The Library Services were awarded grant aid of €40,399.35 to provide new computers, laptops and iPads in our public library networks .

- **Healthy Ireland at your Library**

Laois County Library, working with LGMA, Department of Health and local Healthy Ireland partners, delivered a varied programme of free events both online and in branch. 14 Library talks focussing on health-related topics such as Anxiety in Teenagers, Menopause, Cancer, Autism and Mindfulness were delivered to over 300 attendees.

LOETB Community Education at the Library

In 2023, in collaboration with Laois And Offaly ETB, the Library service provided free adult classes in the libraries in the areas of Art, Digital Skills, Creative Writing and Photography. The Library service provided over 150 separate class sessions with over 1,141 attendees in total in Durrow, Mountmellick, Stradbally, Portlaoise, Portarlington, Abbeyleix and Mountrath Libraries.

Age Friendly Library 2023

All 8 branch libraries have been awarded the “ Age Friendly Library “ status . This has been awarded on successful completion of the National Age friendly Library recognition Programme in each library .

Library of Sanctuary

Laois libraries continued to implement the Library of Sanctuary in all service points.

The Library service secured Integration Funding through CYPSC & DCEDIY to deliver 16 events for 270 children and their families, aimed at supporting families living in International Protection Accommodation Service centres in integrating into their local communities.

Culture Night events in Portlaoise Library were also hosted as part of the Sanctuary programme

Local History and Studies at Portlaoise New Library

The local studies Section has now moved to a dedicated area of the new library.

The new facility offers increased access to books, maps, manuscripts, photographs and archives pertaining to Laois and is open to the public on full time hours.

'[The Terry Redmond Collection](#)' was one of the most popular exhibitions in the new library space in the local history room and is a black and white display from the photographer who worked in Laois from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Decade of Centenaries

Laois County Library services facilitated the programmes below as part of the Decade of Centenaries Programme and is supported by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and Laois County Council under the Community Strand of the 2023 Decade of Centenaries Programme.

Historian in Residence Laois

The aim of the residency in 2023 was to continue to bring to life the experience of all sections of Laois society a hundred years ago. Utilising the resources and archives of Laois County Library, Terry Dunne, Historian in Residence developed a research and engagement programme that explored various aspects of Laois history in the revolutionary period. The residency is supported by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and Laois County Council under the Community Strand of the 2023 Decade of Centenaries Programme. Highlights of 2023 are listed below- Note All Researched and written blog posts and articles related to Laois in the period, with details at this link: <https://laoislocalstudies.ie/articles>

1. Captain Michael Dunne one of the dead of KnocknaGoshel
<https://laoislocalstudies.ie/captain-michael-dunne-one-of-the-dead-of-knocknagoshel/>
2. The death of a doctor
<https://laoislocalstudies.ie/the-death-of-a-doctor/>
<https://laoislocalstudies.ie/from-the-trenches-to-the-streets/>
<https://laoislocalstudies.ie/recollections-of-old-times-from-1914/>
3. Dail Courts to Cattle Drives
In this, in the summer of 1920, agrarian protest has expanded and Sinn Féin are trying to put a halter on it with a new system of Dáil courts – supplanting London's authority while doing so.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLIMyK2LtzA>
4. April 1920 – Month of Revolution is episode 2 of Terry Dunne's podcast 'Divided Land.' This episode looks at the 'Land for the People' demonstration that took place in Killeshin in April 1920

The history talks below were supported by Decade of Centenaries Funding

- 'Laois Loyalist Applications to the Second Irish Grants Committee' 2 Talks By Historian Cormac Moore
- Irish History Live -a series of interactive history shows for children by Mike Moylan
- Marita Conlon Mc Kenna (author) spoke to Laois children about her novels and inspiration from Irish history.
- Nuala Hayes - storyteller spoke to children about their local heritage, folklore and local customs from 100 years ago
- The Dublin Guard in the civil war by John Dorney
- Irish South Asian - radical connections by Professor Laurence Cox and Associate Professor Catherine Candy
- The civil war and Hogans Land Act with Terry Dunne Historian in Residence and Tony Carley - former lecturer in the department of Policial Science
- Protestant Experiences of the Irish Revolution and Free State with Ida Milne, Emmet O'Connor and Ian D'Alton
- Digital Skills for local history with a focus on researching the Irish pensions records and the Irish Census Records - workshops given in branch libraries by Historian Regina Dunne.
- Talk on Volunteer Aid Detachment world War 1 by Regina Dunne
- Interactive traditional Irish craft workshops for Children by Donna Gilligan
- Interactive History Workshops for Children By Alan Dunne in Mountrath and Durrow Libraries

Purchase of History Stock for Branch libraries

The Decade of Centenaries programme has supported Laois County Libraries with funding the purchase of Irish -related reading materials, including materials for young people. The section includes history, biography, Irish fiction, culture, sporting and modern Irish literature and reading material. The county library services are an accessible and free service for all sections of the community. The financial support of the Decade of Centenaries book grant will assist in developing and updating library collections for both adults and children. The aims of this initiative are to ensure a stock of high quality published Irish material such as history, Irish culture and general Irish material is available for the public to borrow and browse in our public libraries.

Digitising Programme 2023

1. Tomás O Monacháin /Tomás Ó Mannacháin 1881-1953 -papers were digitised as part of the Decade of Centenaries programme 2023.
Tomás O Mannacháin – travelling teacher in Laois and Offaly. Tomás was a member of Company A of the 3rd South Laois Brigade of the Volunteers carrying messages around the county. Tomás was involved in the Gaelic League in Laois and the digitisation of this archive will shed further light on this period in Laois. Laois County Library service received a donation of the above archive.
2. Recorded Irish Oral History Collections pertaining to Laois were acquired from Irish Life and Lore, Oral History Projects.
3. Digitisation and Microfilming of Nationalist Newspaper 2002-2012 was completed in 2023, assisted by Creative Ireland Laois Funding.

4. Johnny O Brien Photographic Collection – Further digitisation of this unique photographic collection was undertaken .

Creative Ireland Laois Programme 2023

The Creative Ireland Laois programme in 2023 supported a wide range of projects and events throughout the year, below is an example of some of these projects.

Cruinniú na nÓg 2023

On June 10th 2023, Cruinniú na nÓg was celebrated. Hundreds of children and adults attended what was a very successful day. Thanks to all who collaborated with us to deliver such a wonderful day of creativity and fun. The activities and events took place in Portlaoise, Rathdowney, Mountmellick , Portarlinton, Abbeyleix, Mountrath, and Stradbally.

Cruinniú na nÓg Laois is a day of creativity for children and young people under the age of 18 which celebrates and encourages participation in culture and creativity through ‘doing’, ‘making’ and ‘creating’ from visual and performing arts to workshops and adventures in heritage, libraries, culture, science, technology. Events were free, local and activity-based.

- The Heritage through Art Grant Scheme - In August 2023, Creative Laois announced a grant scheme for communities and artists to work together in exploring and presenting aspects of Laois’s heritage through varying art forms. There were several successful applications including the three mentioned below.
- Dysart Enos Old Church Conservation Committee who commissioned artist Aileen Donovan to paint in acrylic form the Dysart Enos Old Church. The completed painting was unveiled at the Park-Ratheniska GAA club house.
- The staff of Heritage House Abbeyleix constructed a folklore themed fairy trail on the grounds of Heritage House for all the local children to enjoy and learn about local folklore in a fun and creative way.
- Mountmellick Christmas Tree Committee organised a number of creative workshops entitled 'The Valley Star Project' aimed at developing a number of window displays for Christmas 2023 in the town's Georgian square.
- With funding from our general community fund Portlaoise Camera Club were supported in developing an exhibition and book launch ‘Laois through the Lens’ which was launched at the Dunamaise Arts Centre.
- In Autumn, Creative Laois placed a call out to Digital Practitioners. Two applicants were included on this digital residency, Margaret Kane-Rowe and Emily Miller who have worked on several heritage themed digital projects.
- The Laois Short Film Bursary 2022 was awarded to Denis McArdle who produced The Light Within which was launched at the Dunamaise Arts Centre in 2023.
- Creative Laois also supported several projects with our cultural partners in the Library and Arts Departments and also with Dunamaise Arts Centre and Music Generation Laois.

Performance Indicators 2022

No of items issued to library borrowers in the year	170,294
No of registered members in the library in the year	18,748

A. Director of Laois

Carmel McNicholl

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, 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 Ukrainian Community Response Forum, which manages the local support and integration response at each of the 10 Emergency Ukrainian Accommodation Centres around Laois, together with the Transitional Accommodation Centre at Stradbally, and at the modular homes development at Rathdowney.
- Identification of suitable vacant accommodation options within the county and the activation of their refurbishment, for the provision of accommodation to Ukrainian arrivals into Ireland.
- Assisting the Department of Integration (DCEDIY) and the OPW in activating the delivery of 42 Modular Homes for Ukrainian families at 'Spring Crescent', Rathdowney, and supporting the new arrivals.
- 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 commence 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 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, it was advised and agreed at Forum level during 2023, that the role of the Community Response Forum would be 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.

TRANSPORT, WATER SERVICES, ENVIRONMENT AND EMERGENCY SERVICES STRATEGIC POLICY COMMITTEE

DIRECTOR OF SERVICES:

Simon Walton

SENIOR ENGINEER:

Paul McLoughlin

Members

Cllr. Paddy Bracken

Cllr. John Joe Fennelly (Chair)

Cllr William Aird

Cllr Ben Brennan

Cllr Marie Tuohy

Sectoral

John Killeen, Development/Construction

John Talbot, Agriculture/Farming

Deirdre O'Connell Hopkins, Trade Union

In 2023, the Roads Department received road grants and budget funding of nearly €28 million. Additional funds were also 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

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, 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 included 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 Tin Weir 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

An application was submitted 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 of the intervention measures. To date the ramps and associated public lighting have been installed.

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. There were 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”.



Local Biodiversity Action Fund

In 2023 the Portlaoise Municipal District 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.

Grass and Meadow Management

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

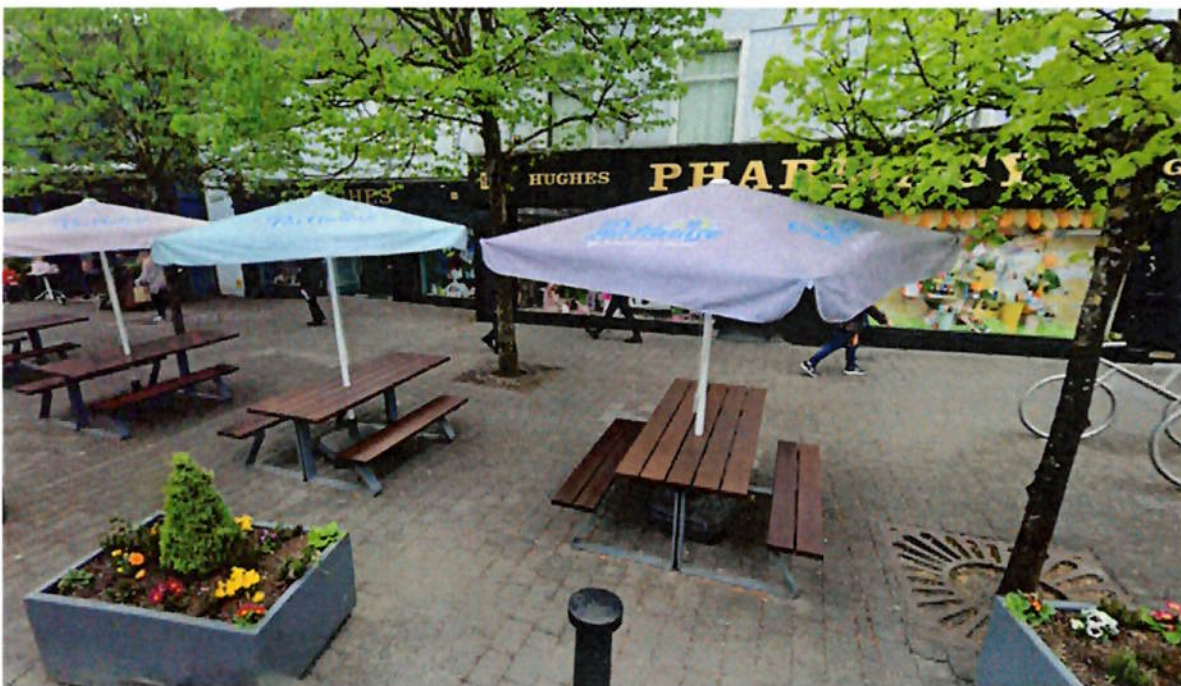
Tree Planting and Management

The 10,000 Trees for Portlaoise Project in conjunction with Trees on the Land, Portlaoise Tidy Towns and Climate Action Plan were 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 trees in public spaces.

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 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

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.

Footpath Programme

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

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 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

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 include visibility and driver safety were carried out at

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

Local Improvement Schemes

Road improvement works were carried out at the following locations;

- Rahavannagh, Ballyroan
- Heywood Ballinakill

Bridge Rehabilitation Works

Bridge replacement works were completed at Clohogue, Ballinakill

Graigecullen-Portarlington Municipal District (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.

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.

Castletown Bridge

Castletown Bridge is located on road [L7972-0](#) and spans the Douglas River. Laois County Council installed a new foundation/plinth and re-constructed 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 which involved the installation of a new crash barrier at the sharp bend adjacent to the bridge and 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.

Two new speed radars were installed at Pound Cross near Ballybrittas and a new speed radar was also installed on the N80 near the Rock of Dunamaise and 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, Portarlinton
	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 issues.
- Ballycarroll: At the road verge on the L-7830 to resolve flooding on the 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 were 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 issues.
- 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 a 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 which was 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 Portarlington, from the entrance to the Derrycastle lakes and trails amenity area to the county boundary where Offaly County Council are continuing with the provision of a footpath to Botley Lane:

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.
- 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 Pleanála. 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.

- **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.
- Graiguecullen (Oakley Park): New footpath constructed at the front of the estate.
- Graiguecullen (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

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).



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

Bridge Rehabilitation Works

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

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 facility at the Glenbarrow Trailhead.



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

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/NTA Projects

Laois 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 continued to be advanced, 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

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.



Portlaoise Local Transport Plan (LTP)

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

This 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 Plan 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 did not require an electrical connection and is solar powered. It arrived on site fully assembled with no requirement for significant ground works.

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

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



Performance Indicators 2022

Road Type	1—4 Rating	5—6 Rating	7—8 Rating	9— 10 Rating
A) Regional	2.69	10.56	49.15	37.58
B) Local Primary	15.86	18.51	44.29	19.27
C) Local Secondary	21.81	19.97	42.15	15.9
D) Local Tertiary	15.22	23.09	35.84	18.42

	Regional Road Strengthening	Regional Road Re-sealing	Local Road Strengthening
Length	6.7	10.1	41.3
Amount expended	2,073,576	788,145.00	4,666,665

Uisce Éireann

SENIOR ENGINEER:

Adrian Barrett

Master Co-operation Agreement

The Service Level Agreement with Uisce Éireann for the management and operation of Water Services has now been replaced with a Master Co-operation Agreement to implement the Government's Framework for the Future Delivery of Water Services. The Master Co-operation Agreement was signed on the 5th of May 2023.

Irish Water Capital Investment Plan 2019-24

Uisce Éireann continues to fund all Water Services Capital Projects to support the socio-economic development of County Laois

- UÉ Water Treatment Upgrade Contract – *Coffey Water*
Kilminchy WTP - Design review meeting recently took place between UE/LCC/CWL to discuss the replacement of the existing chlorine gas system at Kilminchy WTP with a sodium hypochlorite dosing system.
Doolough WTP – disinfection upgrade (residual control) - at scoping stage.
Le Bergerie WTP – Scada system, Filter status, Ferric dosing, OrthoP.
Arles WTP – 24 hr storage, filters, pumps, disinfection kiosk
Lough WTP – explore if yield can be increased from the existing boreholes. Standby UV installation to be added.
- Borehole Rehab - *Briody Well Drilling Ltd.*
Remediation works completed at Derrygarron wells no.1 and no.2.
Remediation works expected to be complete at Eyne wells no. 1 and no.3 in Q3/Q4 2024.
- Borehole Development – *UE/LCC*
Ongoing at Coolbanagher wells – ESB connection works outstanding.
- UE Portlaoise WWTP upgrade
TOBIN Consulting Engineers - acting as agents for UÉ.
In general, the proposed upgrade will involve the construction of new treatment units on the current site footprint, and in an area to the west of the current site boundary.
- UÉ WwTP Upgrades:
Ballyroan WwTP: Conway Engineering have been engaged by UÉ to progress upgrade works – new SBR, stormwater holding tank, sludge holding tank etc. Planning for the proposed upgrade is due to be submitted in 2024.
Borris-in-Ossory WwTP: Conway Engineering engaged by UÉ to carry out upgrade works. Planning due to be progressed in Q3/Q4 2024.
ICW Clonaslee: UE currently dosing alum sludge into the sewer line at Clonaslee WTP to address the ortho-Phosphate non-compliant issue at the ICW.
Mountmellick WWTP: Ferric dosing installation ongoing on site.
- New storm tank completed at Castletown WWTP

Programmes

- **UE Disinfection Program – Coffey Water**
Upgrade works now complete at Derryguile, Lough, Castle Durrow, Coolenaugh, Cloghogue, Derrymoyle, The Strand, Clonin Hill, Ballyroan, Kyle and The Knocks WTPs.
Upgrade works in progress at Donaghmore, Fermoy and Five Wells WTPs.
Disinfection upgrade works also to be completed at Camross WTP.
- **Power supplies – ESB/Campions**
Three phase power supply to Five Wells WTP being progressed as part of UÉ disinfection program with UÉ
Single phase power supply to Clonin Hill Reservoir complete.
Single phase power supply to Sentry Hill, Aughfeerish and Heywood reservoirs in progress.
- **Filter assessment – Rusken Laboratories.**
Completed at La Bergerie, Derrymoyle and Kilminchy WTPs.
- **UE Reservoir Cleaning Program – McBreen Environmental**
Works completed at Clonaslee, Rosenallis, Ballyroan, Gallowshill, Park Ratheniska, Pallas, and Clonking reservoirs.
- **UE Ground Water Monitoring Program**
3 no. supplies in Portarlinton, Aries, Rosenallis, The Knocks and The Swan WTPs ongoing.
- **Alarm and inhibit reviews together with Drinking Water Safety Plans assessment ongoing with UE.**
- **UE Compliance WWPS program**
Bob's Bar, Belair and Sweetview WWPSs currently at options shortlisting workshop stage.
- **UE NCAP program**
There have been 15 no. SARs (Site Assessment Reports) done in Laois by RPS to date as part of the NCAP program.
- **UE Inlet works Storm and Sludge Programme**
New storm tank installed in Castletown WwTP.

Irish Water Small Towns & Villages Growth Programme

€2.25m allocated for improvement and capacity increase at selected WWTP's in Laois

Surveys conducted at Ballyroan, Borris in Ossory and Ballinakill Wastewater Treatment Plants to aid design of upgrades under the Small Towns and Villages Growth Program.

Lead Mitigation Strategy

Derrymoyle and Derryguile WTP – being progressed for Ortho-P dosing for lead.

Mountmellick and Portarlinton DAP

UE Drainage Area Plans;

- Completed for Portlaoise agglomeration.
- Survey contractor expected to be on site in Q4 2024 in Portarlinton agglomeration.
- Mountmellick drainage area plan expected to commence in 2025.

Networks and Water Conservation.

- UÉ Water Conservation Program (Leakage Reduction Program) - *Shareridge*
First fix, find and fix and lead replacement work continued throughout the county in 2023. Significant progress was made in leakage management in Portarlinton.

Mains rehabilitation works completed in Castlecuffe(Clonaslee), Annebrook(Portlaoise), Knocks and Link Rd (Mountrath), Lord Edward St(Mountmellick), Ballymullen Rd(Abbeyleix), Canal Rd(Portarlinton) and Stradbally Reservoir - which will provide a safer, more secure water supply by minimising the frequency of bursts and improving the resilience of the network.

Water Services Laboratory

Laois County Councils Laboratory undertakes testing of drinking water to safeguard public health and testing of rivers, lakes, groundwater and wastewater for environmental protection. Since 2016, the Laboratory has been an internationally accredited facility certified under the standard ISO 17025:2017: Requirements for the competence of testing laboratories. A statutory inspection is undertaken annually by the Regulator the Irish National Accreditation Board (INAB) to ensure that the requirements of ISO 17025:2017 are met thereby producing test results of the highest standard. Similar to previous years the laboratory successfully passed the statutory inspection on 18th April 2023.

Under the National Laboratory Strategy endorsed by the CCMA the Laboratory is one of six local authority laboratories being developed into regional scale facilities providing laboratory services to the local authority sector under a shared services model. This will result in the annual throughput increasing from 4,250 samples currently to at least 8,500 samples by 2026. Accordingly, there has been significant investment in staff resources, equipment and instrumentation allowing the Laboratory to become a modern facility serving the needs of the local authority sector in the region.

The Laboratory undertakes sampling and testing of drinking water relating to public health and rivers, lakes and wastewater relating to environmental protection. In 2023 the total sample throughput was 4,259 compared to 4,068 in 2022. In addition to providing laboratory services to Laois County Council currently our customers include Uisce Éireann, Offaly County Council and LAWPRO regional offices in Kilkenny, Clonmel and Tullamore.

A Project Board has been established under the auspices of the LGMA tasked with implementing the National Laboratory Strategy re-endorsed by the CCMA in 2023. Under this Strategy our Laboratory will become part of a network of regional accredited laboratory facilities along with laboratories in Dublin City, Roscommon, Kerry, Cork and Limerick City & County Council providing laboratory services to the local authority sector based on a shared services model. This is separate to the Uisce Éireann planned standalone primary laboratory in Limerick and secondary laboratory in the Greater Dublin area. Under this National Laboratory Strategy, capacity must be increased to 9,000 samples/annum. To cater for this increased demand significant investment of €157,000 in modern analytical instrumentation and an active expansion plan to provide the physical and human resources required to become a regional scale facility has taken place.

Multi Annual Rural Water Programme 2019-2021

Goodwin Estate/Rosenallis Group Sewerage Scheme

This project has been completed and includes the Goodwin Estate and other houses adjacent to the sewer. A total of 11 houses can connect to this sewer and discontinue using septic tanks and percolation areas. 9 are fully connected.

Performance Indicators 2022

Under the EU (Drinking Water) Regulations S.I. 99 of 2023 local authorities have a legal obligation to monitor all private water supplies (group water schemes and small private supplies) in their jurisdiction so any water quality issues can be identified and remediated thereby protecting public health. In 2023 our register of private supplies comprised 27 group water schemes and 82 small private supplies all of which were monitored in accordance with EU (Drinking Water) Regulations S.I. 99 of 2023 amounting to 258 samples equating to 100% monitoring compliance. In 2023, the % compliance for group water schemes and small private supplies was 97.7% and 92.4% respectively. If drinking water quality deficiencies are identified, the Health Service Executive are consulted and appropriate enforcement action invoked. During 2023, 18 enforcement actions were instigated consisting of boil water notices and do not consume notices.

% of Registered Schemes Monitored	99.08%
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ENVIRONMENT

SENIOR ENGINEER:

Adrian Barrett

The key aims of the Environment Section are to promote sustainable development, provide an environmentally efficient waste management infrastructure, implement the Eastern Midlands Waste Management Plan and maintain proper regulatory and monitoring systems for environmental protection and control of pollution.

The Environment Section is responsible for a range of statutory and non-statutory functions, which include:

- Environmental Complaints Management
- Waste Management
- Environmental Protection – Water, Air & Noise
- Litter Management – Prevention & Control
- Recycling & Civic Amenity Sites
- Planning Referrals
- Tidy Towns

Each year as part of Laois County Council’s commitments and obligations under EU & State rules, an RMCEI Plan (Recommended Minimum Criteria for Environmental Inspections) is developed outlining Laois County Council’s inspection objectives. The RMCEI contains non-binding criteria for the planning, carrying out, following up and reporting on environmental inspections. Its objective is to strengthen compliance with EU environment law and to contribute to its more consistent implementation and enforcement in all Member States.

Environmental Complaint Management

The Environment Section operates an Environmental Complaints Management System. Complaints are received through various forms from the public, local representatives, local area offices, the EPA and other agencies by phone, email, letter, the Litter Hotline (1 800 323230) or the National Hotline (1 850 365 123). Complaints are categorised and prioritised and referred to the appropriate personnel for investigation. The following is the breakdown of the complaints received in 2023:

Complaint Type	Complaints	Investigated	Resolved
Litter	155	155	155
Abandoned Vehicles	27	27	27
Waste Enforcement	478	478	456
Management & Infrastructure	13	13	13
Air	41	41	35
Water	56	56	48
Noise	34	34	32
Veterinary	45	45	41
Total	849	849	807

Waste Enforcement

In 2023 Waste Enforcement Officers carried out 247 household waste inspections in different housing schemes in Portlaoise, Portarlinton, Mountrath and Mountmellick. Talks were also given to new Laois County Council tenants who were advised of their obligations under the Waste Bye-Laws.

The majority of households were compliant with the Waste Byelaws, however there are still some estates where compliance is very poor.

The Waste Enforcement Section is committed to maintaining and improving the high-quality environment for the people of Laois through the enforcement of Waste Legislation and Regulation. The Section has had a successful year in resolving waste complaints and works closely with colleagues in the Planning Enforcement Section. In 2023, 478 waste enforcement related complaints were received.

The Section is responsible for reviewing and issuing new Waste Facility Permits and Certificate of Registrations. In 2023, there were 19 active Waste Facility Permits and 4 active Certificates of Registration under the Waste Management (Facility Permit and Registration) Regulations, 2007 as amended and 1 Certificate of Registration under the Waste Management (Registration of Sewage Sludge Facility) Regulations 2010.

In 2023 Waste Enforcement continued to expand the deployment of mobile audio devices in blackspot areas. This technology has resulted in a marked decrease in illegal waste activity at several sites.

Waste Enforcement worked with the Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authority (WERLA) in tackling national waste enforcement priorities in 2023 and will be focusing on national waste enforcement priorities for 2024 as directed by Eastern and Midlands Region WERLA.

The National Waste Enforcement Priorities 2022 – 2024 are:

- Tackling Illegal Waste and Multi-Agency Sites of Concern
- Construction and Demolition Waste
- End of Life Vehicles and Metals
- Household and Commercial Waste
- Producer Responsibility Initiatives and local priorities

Anti-Dumping Initiatives 2023

The following projects were delivered under the ADI 2023 Bulky Waste Amnesties at multiple locations across the County and Billboard Campaign focusing on Illegal Waste Disposal:-

- **Mattress & Bulky Waste Amnesties**

These amnesty days focused on the collection of mattresses and household bulky waste and the project captured significant volumes of waste from the 3 Municipal Districts. Amnesty days held at central locations are not always accessible and to address this issue, amnesties were also held in selected estates around the 3 Districts with 210.8 tonnes of bulky waste, 1,097 mattresses and 88,660 litre paint bins recorded.

- **Billboard Campaign**

The billboard campaign involved the placement of 4 no. billboards at strategic locations around Portlaoise. These locations were selected based on traffic volumes on these routes. The billboard campaign created awareness about illegal dumping and encourages communities to take pride in their place.



- **Clean up Open Space Areas - Illegal Dumping**

Throughout 2023 the Section carried out the removal of 642 tonnes of illegally dumped waste at various locations from around the county.

Clean-Up Laois Week

Clean Up Laois Week took place from 17th to 21st April 2023. National Spring Clean has been operated by An Taisce since 1999 in partnership with the Department of Environment, Heritage & Local Government, and local authorities throughout the country.

Laois County Council and their sponsors Bord na Mona worked with local communities to join the fight against litter. Groups, communities, neighbours and friends registered with the Environment Section to receive packs of bags, gloves and litter pickers to help tackle the issue of litter. The litter was collected by Bord na Mona during the week commencing 24th April 2023. This initiative is Ireland's biggest and longest running anti-litter campaign and makes a real impact on local environments. 104 groups registered and more than 1,497 volunteers took part in the clean-up.

Throughout 2023, the Litter Wardens, with the co-operation of community groups along with the Council appointed contractors removed 335.78 tonnes of illegal dumped waste to authorised facilities.



Historic Unregulated Waste Disposal Sites

Department funding was received to carry out Environmental Risk Assessments for 3 unregulated historic waste disposal sites (Aghanure, Killabban and Rathdowney Road, Durrow). These Site Risk assessments were completed and Certificate of Authorisation Applications for each facility was submitted to the EPA.

Environmental Protection

Environmental Protection staff are involved in the implementation of legislation and policy regarding river water and groundwater quality, air quality and noise pollution as they apply in Laois.

A) Water Quality

- Approximately 96 planning applications were assessed, and reports generated on water pollution prevention measures. Catchment and Farm inspections were carried out in the Douglas, Barrow and Stradbally River Catchments. The purpose of the inspections is to improve the water quality in the “at-risk” river catchments identified as catchments under pressure from agricultural activities. Approximately 63 farm inspections were completed. Where necessary, appropriate enforcement action was taken.
- The Council continued to monitor discharge licenses to rivers and groundwater in 2023 under Section 4 of the Local Government (Water Pollution) Acts 1977 to 1990. 14 licences were operational in 2023.
- The Council also inspected septic tanks in accordance with the EPA’s National Inspection Plan 2022 – 2026: Domestic Wastewater Treatment Systems. Five Advisory Notices were issued as a result of these inspections in 2023.
- Laois County Council investigated a large number of water quality complaints in 2023 including a significant investigation into an unauthorized discharge to River Dinin.
- Laois County Council carried out investigative monitoring on the River Triogue, River Owenass, River Fushoge, River Douglas and Stradbally River.

B) Air Quality

There was one active Air Emissions License in the county in 2023. The Council received 41 air quality complaints in 2023. The nature of these complaints included agricultural odour problems, illegal burning and smoke nuisance. There are 3 air quality monitoring stations (Portlaoise, Mountrath and Emo Court) in

the county. Live air quality data for all three monitoring stations in the county can be found at www.airquality.ie.

C) Noise Pollution

Laois County Council received 34 noise complaints in 2023. These complaints can be domestic in nature (neighbour's loud music, dogs barking etc.) or relate to nuisance noise from commercial/industrial activities.

Litter Management - Prevention & Control

The Litter Management Plan was adopted by Laois County Council on the 1st of March 2022. It is a statutory Plan prepared as prescribed in Section 10 of the Litter Pollution Act 1997 as amended, which requires local authorities to make and implement a Litter Management Plan and to review the Plan every three years.

Laois County Council has 3 full-time Litter Prevention and Control Officers.

84 fixed penalty notices were issued in 2023 for breaches of Litter Pollution Act, 1997.

In partnership with the local Tidy Towns groups, the Environment Section continued to promote the Anti Dog Fouling campaign which aims to promote responsible dog ownership and encourage dog owners to clean up after their dogs, through a multi-faceted advertising programme with emphasis on public education and awareness and encouragement to do the right thing. Staff continued working with Tidy Towns groups to provide Mutt Mitt Dispensers along popular walking routes in many areas.

Waste Facilities and Infrastructure

Landfill and Civic Amenity Sites

The Council continues to manage and operate the Landfill, Transfer Station and Civic Amenity Site in Portlaoise. Landfill monitoring and aftercare maintenance is on-going. All operations and monitoring is being carried out in accordance with the facility's EPA waste licence.

The Portarlinton Civic Amenity Site is operational under the management of Bord na Mona Recycling. The Environment Section carries out regular site inspections to ensure that good levels of service are being provided.

The Council also operates 44 Bring Banks (bottle and can banks) throughout the County maintained by Glassco Recycling and monitored regularly by the Environment staff. A total of 1,612.23 tonnage of recyclable material was collected in 2023.

Planning

The Environment Section assesses applications received for planning permission for compliance with environmental legislation and best practice.

The typical issues that are considered from an environmental perspective are:

- The proper management of construction and demolition /site clearance waste
- Nutrient Management Plans

- Farmyard Management/Nitrates Directive
- Noise Impact Assessments
- Quarry Operations
- Anaerobic Digestion Plants

2023 Awards & Achievements

Tidy Towns

Abbeyleix were named as "IRELAND'S TIDIEST TOWN 2023" at the National Tidy Towns Awards 2023 ceremony hosted in Croke Park.



Portlaoise Tidy Towns were awarded special recognition earning a prestigious Gold Medal, while Durrow Tidy Town also showcased commendable efforts and was honored with a well-deserved Bronze Medal.

Midlands Energy Agency Overview of Energy Usage in 2023

1. Leadership and Engagement:

- Laois County Council continues to serve as the lead local authority within the Midlands Energy Agency (MEA).
- Actively engaged in the SEAI Pathfinder programme, under which 26 buildings across five local authorities are being retrofitted, receiving 50% grant aid for technical services and capital works.

2. Compliance and Certification:

- All public buildings with a floor area greater than 250m² have been issued Display Energy Certificates in compliance with SI 243 (2012).
- Energy Audits in line with SI 426 (2014) as amended have been completed.

3. Energy Savings

- Laois County Council continues to participate in the OPW Optimising Power at Work Programme at County Hall.
- Since the baseline year of 2014, County Hall alone has saved 467,891 kWh, equivalent to the annual energy usage of 111 Irish homes, marking a 30% energy saving.

4. Gap to Target Analysis:

- Conducted for all local authorities in the MEA, this analysis serves as a model for public bodies to evaluate their energy efficiency performance and energy-related greenhouse gas emissions over time.
- In accordance with SEAI's public sector energy monitoring and reporting framework for the period up to 2030, the Council was able to model future greenhouse gas emissions pathways, incorporating decarbonisation initiatives and anticipated supply-side gains from electricity system decarbonisation and biofuel blending.

5. Energy Efficiency Performance

- The latest figures on Public Sector Energy Efficiency Performance indicate that Laois County Council achieved a 51.2% reduction in energy efficiency for 2023, a 3.7% improvement from 2022, surpassing the 50% reduction target set for 2050.
- Since the baseline, the Council has achieved a 36.9% reduction in CO2 equivalent emissions, amounting to 1,537 tonnes.
- The 2023 target is a 51% reduction in absolute CO2 equivalent emissions. However, with electricity effectively excluded from the Gap to Target emissions calculations, a further 52.3% reduction is required to meet the overall target of a 77% reduction, which must be achieved through improvements in heating and fleet efficiency.

National Performance Indicators 2022

Total no of households availing of a 3 bin service at 31/12/2022	% of households availing of a 3 bin service	Total no of pollution cases that were the subject of a complaint during 2022	Total no of pollution cases closed during 2022	Total no of pollution cases on hand at 31/12/2022
12,679	81.73	834	805	56

% area unpoluted or litter free	% area slightly polluted	% area moderately polluted	% area significantly polluted	% area grossly polluted
21	76	2	0	0

% of schools that have been awarded/renewed green flag status in the two years to 31/12/2022

31.58

Total annual consumption of the public lighting system	Average wattage of the public lighting system	Percentage of the total system that LED lights represent
3,124	70.55	67.20

HEALTH & SAFETY

HEALTH & SAFETY OFFICER:

Jim Bolger

The process of supporting the Councils’ Safety Management System (SMS) with the provision of an appropriate software package commenced in 2023 with the view to rolling out same in 2024. The inspection programme which served to enhance the evidence base relative to the effectiveness of the SMS continued. In relation to the Safety Training Programme the Council continued to provide sufficient resources to ensure that statutory obligations were met. Additionally where deemed appropriate the Council provided discretionary training. There was an increase in induction training which reflected the Council’s ongoing recruitment. From an occupational health perspective, the Council provided the necessary supports, for example: our inoculation and work station assessment programmes

LAOIS CIVIL DEFENCE

Laois Civil Defence provides a wide range of services to the local community such as First Aid, Search & Rescue, Swift Water Rescue as well as providing cover for community events.

Civil Defence’s prime role is to give aid and assistance in times of emergency, supporting frontline emergency services such as the Gardai, HSE and local authority.

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.

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

Approval was received from the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency management to appoint consultants to carry out a detailed design and then project manage the new 2-bay fire station planned for Stradbally, on the site of the old Civil Defence base.

Approval was also received for two new Class B fire appliances, which will be funded by the National Directorate for Fire & Emergency Management in 2024. Funding was also provided by NDFEM for the purchase of next generation battery powered rescue equipment in 2023.

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 equipment standards the programme for replacement and updating of equipment was continued in 2023. New breathing apparatus sets & cylinders, ladders & specialist rescue equipment was provided.

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

The Service processed **92** fire safety certificate applications and **55** District and Circuit Court licensing applications in 2023. **32** premises were inspected under the Fire Services Acts 1981 and 2003 and **15** during performance inspections were carried out on premises. (During Performance Inspections and fire safety assessments of public assembly type premises are held when they are open to the public and include large occupancy venues, bingo halls, public houses, night clubs, outdoor events etc)

The Service participated in **407** fire safety consultations with members of the public and fire safety consultants throughout 2023. In addition, planning & liaison meetings and site visits were carried out on several licensed and outdoor events not requiring licencing including the Electric Picnic Music Festival and the National Ploughing Championships. During performance inspections were also carried out during these outdoor events.

Laois County Fire and Rescue Service carried out the following work under Part III of the Fire Services Acts 1981 and 2003.

- A) Requested **2** number Fire Safety Assessments, permitted under Section 18(6) of the Act, to be carried out on premises where fire safety deficiencies were observed but did not necessitate immediate action.
- B) Provided fire safety advice letters, permitted under Section 18 (4) and 18 (5) of the Act, to **7** premises throughout the County.

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 and Fire and Rescue Service personnel in all eight fire stations provided presentations on fire safety in the home. The presentations were aimed specifically at the 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 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 also 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, with all relevant plans, sub-plans and procedures were updated throughout the year.

National Performance Indicators 2022

Cost per Capital

€52.78

Average time taken in minutes to mobilise fire brigades in respect of fire incidences in fire stations (full time)	Average time taken in minutes to mobilise fire brigades in respect of fire incidents in fire stations (retained)	Average time taken in minutes to mobilise fire brigades in respect of all other (non-fire) emergency incidents (full time)	Average time taken in minutes to mobilise fire brigades in respect of all other (non-fire) emergency incidents (retained)
N/A	5.32	N/A	5.19

% Fire cases first attended within 10 minutes	% Fire cases first attended after 10 minutes but within 20 mins	% Fire cases first attended after 20 minutes	% All other emergency incidents first attended within 10 mins	% All other emergency incidents first attendance after 10 mins but within 20 mins	% All other emergency incidents first attendance after 20 mins
27.86	62.76	9.38	32.67	55.12	12.21

HOUSING, REGENERATION AND PLANNING STRATEGIC POLICY COMMITTEE

DIRECTOR OF SERVICES:	Angela McEvoy
A/SENIOR ENGINEER:	Trevor Hennessy
SENIOR EXECUTIVE OFFICER:	Georgina Ireland
SENIOR SOCIAL WORKER:	Fionnuala Daly

<u>Members</u>	<u>Sectoral</u>
<i>Cllr. Thomasina Connell</i>	<i>Michael Kelly Jr, (Development/Construction)</i>
<i>Cllr. Barry Walsh</i>	<i>Yvonne McKeon (Business/Commercial)</i>
<i>Cllr. Caroline Dwane Stanley (Chair)</i>	<i>Michael Cobbe (Social Inclusion)</i>
<i>Cllr. Paschal McEvoy</i>	<i>Sheelagh Coyle (Environment /Conservation)</i>
<i>Cllr. Catherine Fitzgerald</i>	

HOUSING SERVICES

The Core Objective for Housing is to ensure that all our citizens enjoy an adequate standard of housing accommodation appropriate to their needs, and as far as possible, in a location and tenure of their choice and to provide a responsive and supportive housing service for those in need of assistance.

Report on SPC

The Housing Strategic Policy Committee met 5 times in 2023 -March, April, June, September and December. Various issues were discussed and noted by Members.

Housing For All 2022 – 2026

In accordance with the Government’s plan for Housing entitled “Housing for All 2022-2026”, Laois County Council’s **Housing Delivery Action Plan** for the provision of social and affordable housing in Laois for the period is available on <https://laois.ie/wp-content/uploads/LCC-Housing-Delivery-Action-Plan-2022-2026.pdf>

Social Housing Build Delivery

Laois County Council is tasked with delivering 534 new social housing units by 2026. To date under the ‘The Housing for All’ plan, the Council has delivered 515 new build units, or 96% of the target to 2026.

Annual Social Housing Delivery Targets 2022-2026

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

The total number of new build social housing units delivered in 2023 was 286. These were provided via local authority direct construction, Part V, turnkey projects and in cooperation with Approved Housing Bodies.



25 direct build and turnkey capital schemes are currently in progress in Stradbally, Durrow, Rathdowney, Mountmellick, Ballinakill, Borris-in-Ossory, Killeen, Ballylinan, Doonane, Mountrath, Portarlinton, Portlaoise and are being progressed through the Department's Capital Stage Approval process.

Housing Needs Assessment

At 31st December 2023, there were 1,554 applicants on the Council's waiting list for social housing support.

Housing Assistance Payment

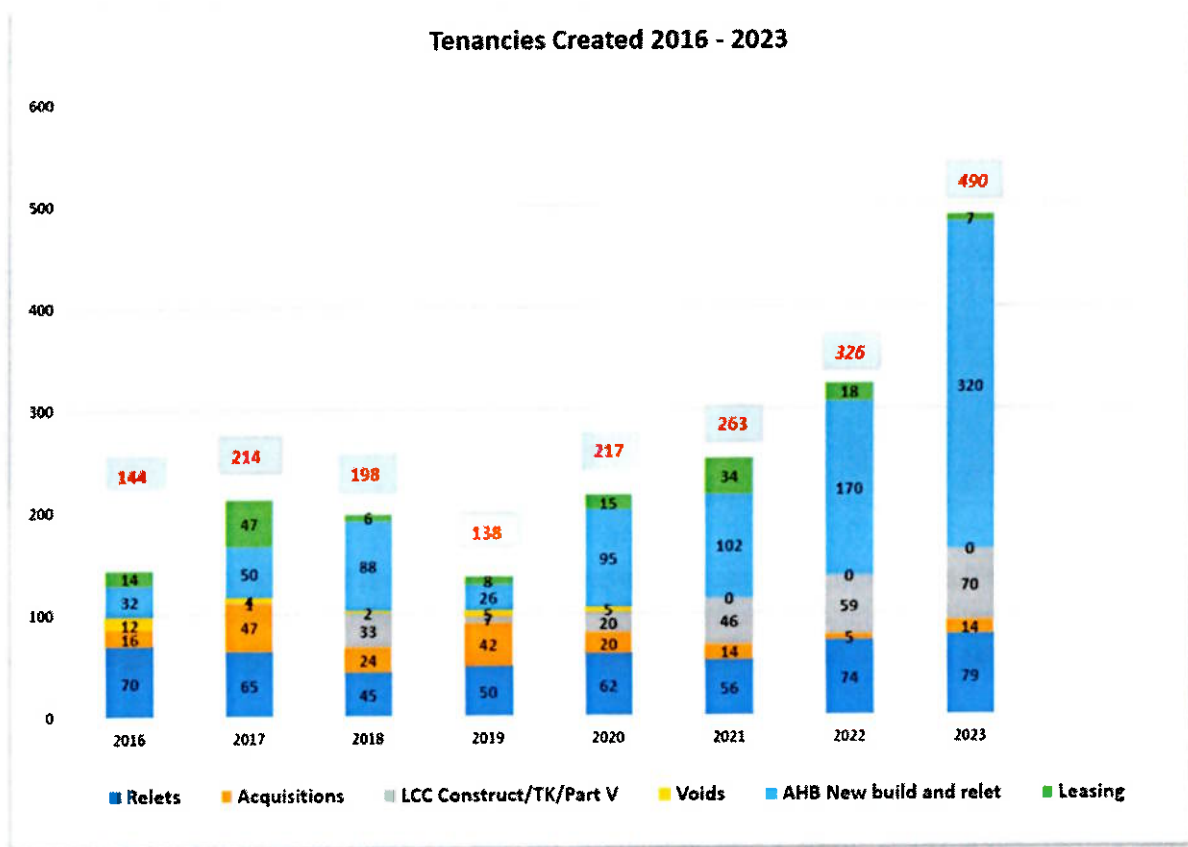
HAP commenced in Laois on 1st December 2016. There were 720 tenancies active by 31st December 2023. All HAP properties must be inspected within 8 months from the time that the first HAP payment is made to the landlord.

The Homeless HAP Place Finder supports homeless households in securing a HAP tenancy. In 2023, 62 homeless households were accommodated through HAP.

Approved Housing Bodies

Approved Housing Bodies (AHB) provide and manage social housing for people who qualify for housing and are nominated by the housing authority. The Council has a positive working relationship with the Approved Housing Bodies who are active in the County.

Laois County Council via various means (new build, relets, acquisitions, Part V, leasing, nominations to AHB's) created 490 tenancies in 2023.



AFFORDALE HOUSING

The Affordable Housing Act 2021 and associated Regulations sets out the mechanism for delivery of affordable and cost rental housing.

Minimum targets for Laois issued by the Department of Housing in relation to the delivery of Affordable Purchase/Cost Rental housing by the local authority are as follows:

	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	TOTAL
LA Affordable Purchase & Cost Rental Delivery Target	5	7	10	8	8	38

In 2023, Laois County Council advertised 27 affordable units for sale in Portlaoise under the Affordable Housing scheme. The Council are in discussions with developers who have expressed an interest in the scheme for an additional 28 and are currently at design stage for a proposed local authority constructed mixed tenure scheme to contain over 40 affordable units.

Laois County Council’s Affordable Purchase Schemes are the first *digital only* option for applications for any Laois County Council Housing Scheme. Priorities agreements with all Pillar Banks were also put in place in 2023.

The call remains open and is renewed annually for Expressions of Interest in respect of:

- Appropriately zoned land for housing development
- Advanced Turnkey Purchase arrangements for un-commenced residential developments in respect of social/affordable housing.

Queries regarding affordable housing can be emailed to our Affordable Purchase Team at affordablepurchase@laoiscoco.ie

Housing Management and Maintenance

In 2023, Laois County Council progressed over 4,900 maintenance work orders and retrofitted 159 units of housing stock as part of the Midlands Retrofit Programme. Retrofitting works also commenced on a further 46 units in 2023.

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



Traveller Accommodation

Laois County Council's Traveller Accommodation Programme 2019-2024 set a target for the delivery of 37 units of standard local authority housing. To date, the Council has provided 78 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.

Estate Management

Estate management remains a key function for the Housing Section which provided a range of

supports to 63 resident groups including grants for estate enhancement and painting.

A second Tenant Liaison Officer was appointed in 2023 which facilitated an increase in house inspections to 830.

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. This Strategy forms an integral part of the Housing Service Delivery Plan 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 by 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.

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: 96 families and 166 single persons.

The Council booked 104 households into emergency B&B in 2023. 73 single persons and 31 families. 161 households were allocated housing from homelessness; 86 families and 75 single persons.

Accommodation and supports are provided by the 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, i.e. 7 per year.

Loans and Grants

The **Local Authority Home Loan (LAHL)** Scheme is available nationwide, replacing the previous Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan Scheme.

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 declined.

Private Grant

In 2023, grants totalling € 1,236,472 were paid out under the Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes for Older People and People with a Disability.

Disabled Persons Grants

Works to the value of €523,778.66 were carried out to assist tenants of 46 properties. This number included the construction of 2 extensions.

Private Rented Inspections

Laois County Council is responsible, through inspection, for determining if a property meets the standards for rental accommodation in accordance with the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019.

Target for number of inspections in 2023 was 874.

	1 st Jan – 31 st December 2023
No of properties inspected	976
No of notices of works issued	813

The Housing Inspections team can be contacted via email at propertyinspections@laoiscoco.ie

Addressing Vacancy/Regeneration

In 2023, Laois County Council established a **multi-disciplinary Regeneration Team**, aimed at addressing vacancy and dereliction in the county comprising of the following staff:

- Director of Services - Housing & Planning
- A/Director of Services - Ukrainian Response Forum
- Senior Executive Officer - Housing
- Town Regeneration Officer
- Vacant Homes Office Staff
- Technical Staff - Housing Department
- Technical Staff - Planning Department
- Administrative Staff (Derelict Sites) - Planning Department



TOWN REGENERATION

- Policy and strategy
- Town Centre First
- Town Team



DERELICT SITES

- Derelict sites activation
- Working with owners
- CPO



VACANT HOMES

- Survey work
- Identifying properties for CPO for social housing
- Administering grants

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

- Vacancy surveys based on An Post GeoDirectory data
- 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.

Work carried out to date includes:

- Initiation of survey work in relation to vacancy and dereliction in Mountrath and Mountmellick;
- Commenced roll out of the Croí Conaithe Scheme - fund for vacant and derelict buildings in towns and villages
- Engaged with the Commissioning of Consultants for the Rathdowney Town Centre First Plan in conjunction with the Community Section, and commenced work on the plan;
- Engaged facilitator to work with Portlaoise Town Team in drawing up the second Town Action Plan with the Business Support Unit;
- Continued to engage with Business Support Office in the sign off on Façade Enhancement and shopfront grant support;
- Coordinated a seminar in 2023 with Elected Members and SPC Members on Vacancy and Dereliction.

Vacant Home Office

The Vacant Homes Office has an advisory role both internally for local authority teams and externally as a contact point for members of the public and interested parties on vacant homes/properties to assist, inform and provide advice on bringing vacant properties back into use. They will identify vacant properties in Laois and work with property owners to bring the properties back into use for social and private housing purposes. Vacant properties can also be reported to the Vacant Homes Office on www.vacanthomes.ie or by e-mail to vacanthomes@laoiscoco.ie.

Some of the key functions of the Vacant Homes Office are as follows:

- Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant under the Croí Cónaithe (Towns) Fund
- Repair & Leasing Scheme
- Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) of vacant properties to secure future residential use

Vacancy Surveys

In 2023 the Vacant Homes Team carried out a survey of properties identified as being vacant in data supplied by GeoDirectory (via a Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage 2022 initiative). A total of 916 properties were surveyed in 2023. 551 properties were found to be vacant and of these, 37 properties were deemed to be in a derelict condition. The Vacant Homes Team will endeavour 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.

Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant

The Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant under the Croí Cónaithe (Towns) Fund was launched in July 2022 to enable applicants to turn a formerly vacant house or building into their principal private residence. When the grant was launched, only vacant properties in towns and villages were included. The grant was expanded in November 2022 to include eligible vacant properties in cities, towns, villages, and rural locations.

From 1st May 2023, the grant was further expanded to include properties which are made available to rent and the maximum funding available was also increased. The expanded scheme provides for applications for one property which will be made available for rent, in addition to one property which will be the principal private residence of the owner. A maximum of two grants are available to an applicant. Only one grant is available for a vacant property being made available for rent.

The following are the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant statistics for Laois County Council 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

Further information on the Vacant Homes office and the above schemes is available at www.laois.ie/departments/housing

National Performance Indicators 2022

Social Housing Stock

No of dwellings in the ownership of the Local Authority at 01/01/2022	2,272
No of dwellings added to the Local Authority owned stock during 2022 (whether constructed or acquired)	62
No of Local Authority dwellings sold in 2022	12
No of Local Authority dwellings demolished in 2022	0

No of dwellings in the ownership of the Local Authority at 31/12/2022	2,322
No of Local Authority owned dwellings planned for demolition under a DHLGH approved scheme	3
<u>Housing Vacancies</u>	
% of the total number of Local Authority owned dwellings that were vacant on 31/12/2022	1.25
<u>Average Re-letting time and cost; Maintenance Cost by Unit</u>	
Average time from date of vacation of dwelling to the date in 2022 when a new tenancy had commenced	24.4 wks
Average cost expended on getting the re-tenanted dwellings ready for re-letting (€)	16,734.09
Average per unit expenditure in 2022 on repair and maintenance of LA Housing (€)	877.60
<u>Private Rented Sector Inspections</u>	
Total no of registered tenancies in the LA area at the end of June 2022	N/A
No of rented dwellings inspected in 2022	1,098
% inspected dwellings in 2022 not compliant with standard regulations	98.36
No of dwellings deemed compliant in 2022 (including those originally deemed non compliant)	33
No of inspections including re-inspections undertaken by the local authority in 2022	1,160
<u>Long Term Homeless Adults</u>	
Number of adults in emergency accommodation that are long term homeless as a % of the total number of homeless adults in emergency accommodation at end of 2022	8.33

PLANNING**SENIOR PLANNER:****David O'Hara****SENIOR EXECUTIVE PLANNER:****Donal Kiely**

The overall objective of the Planning Department is to implement the provisions of the Planning Acts and provide appropriate support measures in order to promote the physical, social and economical well being of the county so that living standards are protected and raised, and work opportunities fostered and created, having regard to the principles of sustainability.

The Planning Department can be broken down into 5 separate areas:

- i) Development Management
- ii) Forward Planning
- iii) Planning Enforcement
- iv) Building Control
- v) Unfinished Housing Estates

(i) 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.

2022 Performance

EPlanning went live in the planning section on the 11th November 2022. 65% of the applications received in 2023 have been made online – 564 online applications out of total 864 applications in 2023

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

Total No of Planning Applications	864
No 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 Pleanala in 2023	23

Large Residential Developments (LRD)

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

Customer Service Initiatives

2023 saw the continuation of the scanning of planning applications as they are received. Throughout 2023, the public were able to access all planning applications on-line within two weeks, although they were mostly available within 5 days of the Planning Authority receiving them.

324 pre-planning meetings were held in 2023, at which members of the public had an opportunity to discuss planning matters with a planner prior to submitting a planning application. The Planners also facilitated the public by holding a number of pre-planning meetings on site.

47 Section 5 applications were processed in 2023.

The Planning website continues to be a very popular tool of engagement with approximately 19,842 page views last year.

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 – the annual “Electric Picnic” music festival returned to Stradbally attracting 70,000 people in September 2023 and Forest Fest music festival took place at Morette, Emo attracting 10,000 people in July 2023.

(ii) Forward 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.

Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027

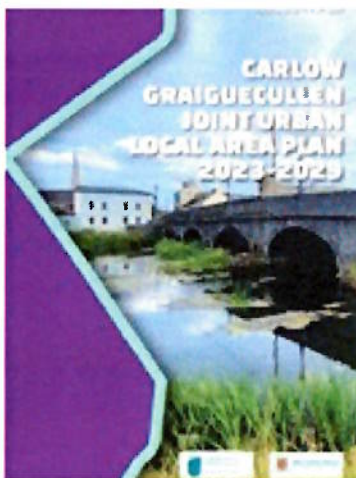
The Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027 was adopted on the 25th January 2022 and came into effect on the 8th March 2022. The Plan is a statutory document prepared by the Planning Authority in accordance with the requirements of the Planning & Development Act 2000 (as amended) and the Planning & Development Regulations 2001 (as amended). Zoning Maps contained in Volume 2 of the Plan will inform the LAPs for Portlaoise and Mountmellick.

The Minister issued a Section 31 draft Direction to Laois County Council on 7th March 2022 in relation to a number of aspects of the Plan relating to energy targets, policy on building heights

and zonings. The Minister concluded the process and issued the Direction with minor amendments on the 28th September 2022.

Not more than 2 years after its making, the Chief Executive is required to give a report to the Members on the progress achieved in securing the objectives of the Plan. Preparation of that report is now underway.

Draft Local Area Plans



The **Draft Graiguecullen/Carlow Joint Urban Area Plan (JULAP)** and various associated appendices including SEA, AA, SFRA and LTP has been completed and is on public display for a 6-week period up to 5th February 2024.

Two public information sessions to optimize public engagement and debate have been arranged.



The **Draft Portlaoise Local Area Plan** and associated appendices is being finalized and will go on public display on 30th January 2024. Public notice and information sessions to be organized.

The pre-draft stage of the Draft Portarlinton Joint Local Area Plan ended on 19th October 2023. A total of 38 submissions were made. A Chief Executives report in respect of the 38 submissions made to Laois County Council has been completed. Writing of the draft Plan is now commencing. It will go on public display on 8th April 2024.

The pre-draft stage of the **Draft Mountmellick Joint Local Area Plan** will commence for a 4-week period through 5th February 2024. An Issues Paper has been prepared and a public information session will be organised for January 23rd 2024. This draft Plan is also scheduled to go on public display on 8th April 2024.

Residential Zoned Land Tax

The final RZLT in-scope maps for calendar year 2023 were prepared and issued to the Department by the deadline date of 15th November 2023.

There were a number of appeals to An Bord Pleanála by landowners objecting to their lands being included as in-scope. With one exception, the Board upheld the rulings of the Planning Authority.

Section 57s

Twelve applications were processed in 2023.

Section 254 Licences

Six licence applications were processed in 2023.

Part 8s

A large number of Part 8 Projects were presented to and approved in the course of 2023. These were mainly for housing developments at various locations throughout the county.

Infrastructure projects including, for example, provision of a carpark at Rock of Dunamase, a digital hub at Borris-in-Ossort Courthouse and a playground at Ballyroan were also brought forward.

SPC

A policy paper on the pros and cons of modular housing as an acceptable building form in County Laois will be brought to the February 2024 SPC meeting.

Rathdowney Town Centre First Plan

This Plan was completed in 2023 and formally launched at a well-attended public meeting in December.

A Town Team whose function is to deliver on the actions of the Town Centre First Plan has also been established. It comprises members of the local business and community sectors as well as Elected Members and Council officials.

(iii) 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 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.

(iv) 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 removed from the Derelict Sites Register.

- Total Number of Files opened for 2023: 22
- Total Number of Files closed as a result of dereliction being addressed in 2023: 16
- Total Number of Files: 93
- Total No of sites on Derelict Sites Register : 30

(v) Vacant Sites

6 sites were entered onto the Vacant Sites Register at the 1st January 2023 relating to sites in Portlaoise, Portarlinton and Graiguecullen. Valuations were received in relation to these sites.

A demand notice for payment of the levy for 2020, 2021 and 2022 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 Portarlinton cannot be determined.

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

(vi) 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 buildings were inspected (at varying stages of construction) - an inspection rate of 11.97 %

(vii) Unfinished Housing Estates

Laois County Council is responsible for the taking in charge of estates. In 2023, 13 estates were taken in charge details of which are listed below. Traditionally this occurs when a request is 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.

National Performance Indicators 2022

New Buildings Inspected

New Buildings Inspected as a percentage of new buildings notified to the local authority	No. of local authority planning decisions which were the subject of an appeal to An Bord Pleanála that were determined by the Board in 2022	% of the determinations that confirmed (with or without variation) the decision made by the local authority
14.45	4	100

Enforcement cases closed as resolved

Total no. of planning cases referred to or initiated by the local authority during 2022 that were investigated	Total no. of investigated cases closed during 2022	% closed cases dismissed or statute barred or exempted development	% closed cases resolved to the local authority's satisfaction through negotiations	% closed cases due to enforcement proceedings	Total no. planning cases being investigated as at 31/12/2022
122	157	46.50	1.27	52.23	143

Cost per Capital of Planning Service

Cost per Capita
€25.91

Applications for Fire Safety Certificates

% applications for fire safety certificates received in 2022 that were decided within 2 months of their receipt	% applications for fire safety certificates received in 2022 that were decided within an extended period agreed with the applicant
20.00	57.78

ARTS SECTION

Laois Arthouse, Stradbally

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 Dunamaise 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.

Creative Ireland/Cruinniú na nÓg

Laois Arthouse, Stradbally – The Laois Arthouse Cruinniú na nÓg events were very well received by the young participants.

- ◆ 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 was given to Treo Nua, Family Resource Centre and Rathdowney on programming events for Cruinniú na nÓg. The Music Generation Cruinniú na nÓg events were very successful.

Creative Writing Course

Eileen Casey’s Creative Writing Courses for adults were delivered in the Laois Arthouse & Library as part of Bealtaine Festival in May and November/December.



Summer 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 and Portarlinton for young and old alike.

Laois Arthouse Adult Summer Art Programme

The Arts Office and the Laois Arthouse, Stradbally invited Bridgid Flannery to deliver the 2023 programme entitled Looking/Seeing/Making. It took place in the beautiful surroundings of the Malthouse, Stradbally, Co Laois.

The four-day course ran from Tuesday 13th June to Friday 16th June from 10:30am-4:00pm with an official exhibition on Friday 16th June at 5.00pm.

The week concluded with an exhibition opening of Bridgid Flannery's work entitled Looking/Seeing/Making BOGLANDS and selected work by the participants at the Laois Arthouse 2023. Events were held in several 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 the Arts Office.



Laois Culture Night

Culture Night took place on September 22nd and it was managed by the Arts Office. Culture Night is a national movement celebrating culture, creativity and the arts.

The Arts Office managed and hosted the launch of 'Fragments of Time and Space', sculpture by David Beattie at the Portlaoise Library. Workshops were held with local schools and community groups.

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

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



HOUSING, REGENERATION AND PLANNING

Night Creatures Parade. this outdoor parade with illuminations involved 250 participants in Court Square, Stradbally. The events concluded with a concert by Country 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 Community Centre, Mountrath Youth Theatre, Market Square, Portarlinton, Mount Henry Art Studio, Killenard and Emo Court.

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 where he grew up. 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	Eddie O’Neill	Drumming project
Arles National School, Ballickmoyler	Fiona McElroy	Theatre based project
Holy Family Junior School, Portlaoise	Caroline Keane	Multicultural travel themed art
Paddock National School, Mountrath	Marie Moylan	Exploring the flora & fauna in the Slieve Blooms
Portlaoise Educate Together, National School, Portlaoise	Maeve Sookram	Reflections on belief systems of pupils & exhibition
St Fergal’s College, Rathdowney	Adam Ward	Wall piece addressing diversity, inclusion & equality
St Francis School, Portlaoise	Marian Whyte	Ceramic art for wellbeing
St Joseph’s GNS, Abbeyleix	Orla McDonagh	Art project exploring students’ identity through portrait drawing, painting & mixed media
St Colmcille’s National School, Errill	Mary Dillon	Botanical painting workshops
Wolfhill National School	Kate Knowles	Visual arts, poetry, ecological project

Leaves Festival of Literature

The Leaves Festival ran from the 8th-11th 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 and held two conversations with senior cycle students, in Mountmellick Library and the Dunamais 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 Dunamais 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 Portlaoise 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, 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 were 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 include Sightless Cinema, a drama/theatre programme held in Laois for members of the county's visually impaired community in association with Dublin South and Meath local authorities. The programme concluded with a public performance in the Dunamaise Arts Centre. The initiative was funded by the Arts Council's Invitation to Collaboration Scheme

POP

The POP (Planning for Outdoor Performance) commenced. It is part of the partnership initiative funded by the Arts Council. 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, Portarlington, 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 the 2022 winning film, was screened in the Dunamaise 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.



Laois Youth Theatre

The Laois Youth Theatre ran throughout the year in Portlaoise with a final showcase performance at the end of the term.

The Laois Music Centre and Music Generation Laois (MGL) and Laois School of Music (LSM)

In March MGL and LSM presented their first ever Community Concert, featuring the Ukrainian Community Choir, Men's Sheds, and TY music week, and Direct Provision Centre programmes.

MGL premiered a new suite of music, 'Bicycles, Boomerangs and Blue Macaws' supported by the Arts Council's 70th Birthday commissions award.

In June/July the MGL and LSM hosted Youth Music Day with the Old Fort Quarter Festival; rock and pop bands from MGL in Sligo, Offaly, Limerick City, South Dublin, Waterford, Roscommon and Laois participated.

A long-term strategic goal by the Laois Arts Office since the inception of the Laois School of Music by it in 2001 was realised in September. QQI Level 5 and Level 6 courses commenced in LMC. The third level music programming is now a reality.

In October, former student of LSM Elliot Murphy won the '11th International Film Music Competition' at Zurich Film Festival.

Lions Club Children's Art Competition

The annual international Lions Club children's art competition was hosted by the Laois Arts Office.

HERITAGE

1. 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.

1.1 Awareness Raising, Heritage Week and Biodiversity Week

National Biodiversity Week (19th—28th May 2023)

The Heritage Office supported Biodiversity Week events in Laois by assisting in organising and also publicising events with the Laois Heritage network and on social media. The events in 2023 focused on different aspects of biodiversity and varied from a ‘dusk chorus’ at Abbeyleix Bog hosted by the Laois branch of Birdwatch Ireland to a workshop looking at the rich and important biodiversity of the Delour River in Camross. The events are listed on the graphic below.



National Heritage Week

The Heritage Office helped to support, promote and publicise Heritage Week events various ways.

- Laois Heritage Week 2023 Event Guide: The Laois Heritage Office produced a high-quality Heritage Week events guide and distributed 2,000 copies to libraries in the county. An interactive version was also available online at the Laois Heritage Website.
- Heritage Week Events – Advert: Laois Heritage Week events and information on availability of the Laois Heritage Week Events Guide were included in article in the Leinster Leader, as well as being shared throughout Heritage Week on the Laois Heritage Office Twitter and Facebook pages.

1.2 Connecting Communities

Timahoe – Heritage Festival & Landscape Maintenance

As in previous years the Heritage Office continued engagement with the local community for this important site by supporting the Timahoe Heritage Festival (held on the June Bank holiday) and funding the ‘Big Dig’ workshops, which are very popular for children and bring the history of the site to life through archaeology. Vegetation Management also continued for the year at Timahoe, to improve the site for access and biodiversity.



1.3 Publications

Publications

Publications for 2023 included: Laois Heritage & Biodiversity strategy 2021 – 2026

This strategy had been completed but not previously published or launched due to the Covid 19 pandemic. It was officially launched at the Laois Heritage Annual Seminar December.

Gardening for Biodiversity

Due to continued demand, a reprint of this very popular booklet was done in 2023.

2 Establish and promote the best practice in heritage management and conservation.

2.1 National Biodiversity Action Plan Projects:

Four projects received funding under the Local Biodiversity Action Fund (LBAF). Details below;

2023 LBAF Project Details
Biodiversity Enhancement: Project to install a demonstration biodiversity garden at Laois Education Centre. This collaborative project led by the Environment Section has produced an amazing educational resource for teachers and other groups.
Abbeyleix Bog Invasive Species: Multi-annual project to tackle invasive species on Abbeyleix Bog. This project has been successful in eliminating rhododendron and laurel with an innovative management approach.
Pollinator Awareness Radio Ads: The Laois Heritage Office continued to support the 'In Your Nature' Podcast in collaboration with Westmeath and Offaly County Councils. In Your Nature features Ricky Whelan, Biodiversity Officer with Offaly County Council and Niall Hatch of BirdWatch Ireland and is edited by Ann-Marie Kelly. Podcast: https://inyournature.buzzsprout.com/1701709/14135976
Biodiversity planting on the Portlaoise Orbital Route. This multi-annual project was led by the Roads section and has both visually enhanced the town with the planting on the roundabouts but contributed to increased biodiversity by consciously selecting non annual plants which are the most beneficial for pollinators.

2.2 Just Transition Fund Project

The JTF project, which combines the conservation of medieval structures and biodiversity commenced in 2021 with an initial deadline for completion of all project elements by December 2023. However, an extension was sought by the Heritage Office as all project elements has not been completed. The new deadline for completion is June 2024. The three graveyard sites in Laois are as follows:

Kilmanman (Laois)	Conservation Plan complete	Masonry conservation to be completed in 2024.
DysartGallen (Laois)	Conservation Plan complete	Masonry conservation and management for pollinators complete in 2022.
Cloppook (Laois)	Conservation Plan complete	Masonry conservation and management for pollinators complete in 2022.

The Design Team is led by Howley Hayes Cooney Architects and includes Colm Flynn Archaeologist, Fiona MacGowan Ecologist, Tina Aughney Bat Specialist, CORA Structural Engineers.

Crannóg Media has recorded progress at each site including engagement with local communities, which will be used for communication purposes when the project is complete.

2.3 Community Monuments Fund

This national scheme which is aimed at the conservation of archaeological monuments continued in 2023, with four projects receiving funding, which were completed successfully.

Structure	Project Details	Awarded
Dysart Enos Church	Conservation works on internal floor, perimeter wall, and tombs.	€60,300
Baunaghra Church	Vegetation removal and masonry conservation to church walls.	€43,241
Clonkeen Church	Preparation of Conservation Management Plan	€21,710
Ballyadden Church	Preparation of Conservation Management Plan	€27,789
	TOTAL	€153,040

2.4 Conservation Grants (BHIS & HSF)

As in previous years – two separate architectural heritage conservation grant schemes (for Protected Structures) were run by Laois County Council in 2023, with funding from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. These are the Built Heritage Investment Scheme (BHIS) and the Historic Structures Fund (HSF).

- **Built Heritage Investment Scheme 2023**

The Built Heritage Investment Scheme is for smaller scale, labour intensive projects to conserve and maintain protected structures. A total of five projects were awarded funding and completed in 2023.

- **Historic Structures Fund 2023**

The Historic Structures fund is for larger scale projects and buildings of community importance. Funding was successfully sourced for the four projects in 2023.

Details of 2023 BHIS and HSF projects below:

Stream	Structure	Awarded
BHIS	Portrane House, Portlaoise.	€15,000
BHIS	Preston House Boutique Ltd., Abbeyleix	€15,000
BHIS	RIC Barracks, Clonaslee.	€1,537
BHIS	Cuffsborough House, Ballacolla.	€15,000
BHIS	Former Goods Shed, Abbeyleix.	€15,000
	TOTAL:	€61,537
HSF	Donaghmore Workhouse & Museum.	€37,500
HSF	Vernacular House, Dooary, Ballyroan.	€10,000
HSF	Roundwood House, Mountrath.	€37,000
HSF	Old School House Vicarstown.	€22,600
	TOTAL:	€107,100

3. Raise awareness of and promote enjoyment of the heritage of County Laois

Laois Heritage Seminar 2023

On 2nd December the Laois Heritage seminar took place in the Midlands Park Hotel in Portlaoise. With talks on recent heritage projects and activities in Laois, the event was very well attended and provided a great opportunity to share the work of the Laois Heritage Office with the wider community.

The event also provided the opportunity to officially launch the Laois Heritage & Biodiversity strategy 2021 – 2026.



Launch of Laois Heritage & Biodiversity Strategy 2021 – 2026

The Laois Heritage Seminar finished with the launch of the Laois Heritage & Biodiversity Strategy 2021 – 2026. John Mulholland, Chief Executive, Cllr Paschal McEvoy, Cathaoirleach and members of Laois Heritage Society were in attendance for the launch.



BROADBAND

The following projects from the Laois Digital Strategy 2020-2024 were undertaken 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 Rollout year end 2023: - Total number of Premises in Laois = 12,874 with 8,426 Residential, 2,234 Commercial & Residential, 1,776 Farm and 438 Commercial

- 21% of Premises (2,681) - have HSB connected to date.
- 57% of Premises (7,206) - now available to pre order connection.
- 12 % of Premises (1,548) – Network build in progress.
- 2% of Premises (207) – Survey complete.
- 8% of Premises (1,094) – Survey pending.

1. VEX IQ ROBOTICS

Vex IQ Robotics Programme was secured for 4 Laois schools in 2023.

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

- Workshop events took place in all school showing children how to build and operate Robots using Coding and Scratch.
- All the equipment for the Robot, the board game and the arena has been supplied by funding secured from DRCD, with training support from the Laois County Council.

Laois Vex Competition

A County Competition was held in *Scoil* Eoin Phóil II Naofa Ballyroan on 24th April 2023 with over 80 students from 5th and 6th class from the 4 schools taking part on the day. All schools played several games and took part in Coding the Robot with each student being presented with a certificate on the day.

All Ireland Vex IQ Competition

3 of the 4 schools: - 1.Scoil Eoin Phóil II Naofa Ballyroan, 2.Shanganamore Barrowhouse and 3.Camross competed in the All-Ireland finals in Castlebar on Thursday 1st of June.

This was a huge undertaking for all schools considering they have only been involved in the program a few months. All teams played a hectic 14 games and excelled on the day considering this was their 1st major event. Shanganamore were the Judges most impressive newcomer to the program. Scoil Eoin Pol Naofa were pipped in their final game by 3 points by the current All Ireland champions from Donegal on a score line of 91 to 88. Camross were also narrowly beaten in the qualifier by the current Connaught Regional champions from Mayo.

2. Vex Robotics.- IQ Programme.

Vex Robotics IQ Program was rolled out in 4 primary schools in School year end June 2023.

2 new schools were added in December 2023 – 1. Paddock N.S. and 2. Gael Scoil Sli Dala Ballaghmore. The Vex IQ Robotics Competitions for primary schools for the school year September 2023 to June 2024 are as follows:

- a. RECF Midlands Regional VEX Robotics competition will be taking place in Mucklagh Community Centre, Offaly R35 DN02 - Thursday 8th February with all winners going forward to the All Ireland Championships in Cork in May.
 - B. The Midlands LA Competitions are as follows:
Emo National School Laois – Wednesday 6th March. (1st time an event will be held in Laois).
Gallen Community School Offaly – Wednesday 20th March.
Sacred Heart School Tullamore Offaly - Thursday 21st March
3. Vex Robotics. – V5 Programme.

For the 1st time Vex Robotics V5 for Senior Cycle Secondary Schools is being piloted in Laois and was rolled out in Clonaslee Collage on the 18th of December 2023. The TY class are taking part in the programme with competitions in 2024.

Launch of the ICT cluster in the midlands

The Midland ICT Cluster – (Laois, Offaly, Longford and Westmeath) was launched in The Midlands Park hotel on Thursday 27th of April. The event showcased the Vex IQ Robotic program to Ministers Dara Calleary T.D. and Minister Simon Coveney T.D.

Four students from Scoil Eoin Phoil Naofa Ballyroan exhibited on the day with a lot of interest from all sectors of business in the midlands.

Future Stem Projects

(a) Computer Science in Secondary schools

This is an initiative been piloted by Laois and Offaly County Councils, the LOETB and ATU Donegal. Computer Science training for Secondary School teachers commenced in February with 2 modules offered to year end May 2023 with 4 remaining modules rolled out in the school year September 2023 to May 2024. This will allow schools to offer Computer Science to Leaving Certificate students in the future.

Four Laois schools took part in the programme. **1.**Portlaoise Community College, **2.** Dunamase Collage Portlaoise, **3.**St. Fergal's Rathdowney and **4.** Colaiste Iosagain Portarlinton. Laois County Council hosted the in-person workshop on Saturday 11th of March in conjunction with the LOETB office in Lyster Square.

(b) STEM in Primary and Secondary Schools.

The STEM (Science Technology Engineering & Maths) Programme was collaborated by the 4 Midland Broadband Officer in association with Ericsson to introduce and rollout STEAM(Science Technology Engineering Arts & Maths) to Primary and Secondary schools throughout the midlands. Ericson built the programme to suit facilitators / teachers to teach students Computer subjects in the above.

The following schools have started this program in May 2023:

1. Killeshin NS.
2. St. Colmans NS Stradbally.
3. Muire Naofa Castlecuff Clonaslee.
4. Rath NS.

(c) CEF – 2 Traffic Corridors and Smart Communities Project.

- Cellnex together with Laois County Council jointly applied for CEF 2 funding under the “Smart Communities Works Call” for the delivery of 2 x 5G enabled sites in Laois being used by Laois County Council and HSE where blackspots have been identified.
- The two locations selected are: - Clonaslee Health Centre and The Swan Health Centre. These locations have been agreed with the HSE.
- The 5G Coverage will be provided by Three Ireland and this will support the delivery of a Health-related Use Case for a trial period of 2 years.
- The Health Use Case to be deployed will revolve around remote monitoring via the use of Virtual Goggles within the 5G coverage area.
- Cellnex managed the application process with assistance from Laois County Council and HSE and they will fund the 25% required to deliver the project and will manage the deployment of the infrastructure and Use Case trial for the agreed period.
- CEF 2 – 18 submissions were made across Europe in our category (and Ireland made 3). There is a budget of €50m available to disburse.

S.T.E.A.M. Programme 2023 –2026

“Steam Programme in Secondary Schools” is a collaboration by the BBO’s from Laois and Offaly County Council in association with the LOETB was launched on Thursday 16th Nov 2023 in the ETB Centre Tullamore. The programme provides training and equipment for teachers and students across all the LOETB schools to run lunchtime and after-school clubs that help develop skills around S.T.E.A.M. (Science Technology Engineering Arts and Maths). The aim of the programme is to encourage significant engagement with digital and computer science activities among Junior Cycle students, with an associated rise following in numbers participating in Computer Science at Leaving Certificate level. The value to each school including Equipment, Training/Support and Prize Money is €10,000. All the 9 LOETB schools - 4 in Laois and 5 in Offaly are taking part in the programme.

The 4 ETB schools in Laois are -

1. Portlaoise College,
2. Dunamase College Portlaoise,
3. Clonaslee College and
4. St. Fergal’s College Rathdowney.

The Programme is being delivered to over 30 teachers and 250 students across the nine LOETB schools who will work in Teams to compete across the following main areas:

- **VEX ROBOTICS and LEGO LEAGUE:** - For coding/robotics, each school will be equipped to participate in the internationally recognised Vex Robotics and First Lego League Competitions, with LOETB regional tournaments taking place in Tullamore and Portlaoise.
- **MINECRAFT :** - The hugely popular building design game Minecraft will see student teams competing to design virtual versions of their communities in the future.
- **PODCASTING :** - To help with digital storytelling, each school will be given high quality equipment to create a podcast studio, as well as professional podcast training. There will also be an LOETB wide competition focusing on telling the stories of our respective schools and their communities.

The programme competitions will be held early in the new year and a Show Case Event will take place in

Portlaoise College on Thursday 11th of April '24.

WiFi4EU

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

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



FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

HEAD OF FINANCE:

Gerry Murphy

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTANT:

Julie Bergin

The Finance Department is responsible for the following services:

- Motor Taxation,
- Accounts Payable,
- Revenue Collection(Rates,
- Fire charges,
- Rents,
- Loans,
- Development contributions),
- NPPR,
- Preparation of Annual Budgets and Financial Statements,
- Financial Management and all ancillary matters

Commercial Rates

The General Annual Rate on Valuation was .2217 (Budget 2024)

Prompt Payment of Accounts

The Council complies with the terms of the Prompt Payments Act as amended by the European Communities (Late Payment in Commercial Transactions) Regulations.

Total number of late payments in excess of €250: nil

National Performance Indicators 2022

5 Year summary of revenue account balance

2019	€5,009.00
2020	€70,614.00
2021	€145,274
2022	€222,625
2023	300,467.00

5 year summary of % collection levels for major revenue sources

The individual % figures for each of (a) Rates, (b) Rent and (c) Housing Loans in 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Rates	80	71	85	91	89
Rent & Annuities	96	93	96	97	95
Housing Loans	75	72	75	81	87

MOTOR TAXATION

The Council collects vehicle licence duties within its functional area on behalf of the Department of Transport including processing applications for conversions, trailer licences, registration books and trade plates. It also look after issues that cannot be dealt with online i.e. vehicle ownership enquiries, acquisition, cessation of exemptions and release of data as per legislative framework. This Section also manages the Cash Office for receipting of all monies for the local authority.

Customers are encouraged to tax online where possible but alternative options are available i.e. public counter access between 9.30am to 1pm Monday – Friday, via postal service and postbox at main Reception. The total number of transactions carried out by this office in 2023 is 23,551.

Vehicle Licences

Income in the Motor Tax Office for 2023 was €3,670,611 which represents a slight increase of 2.2% on the previous year.

Details	2023	2022	2021	2020
Income (€)	€3.7k	€3.6k	€2.6M	€3.4M
No of transactions	23.5K	22.4K	16.2K	21.8K

National Performance Indicators 2022

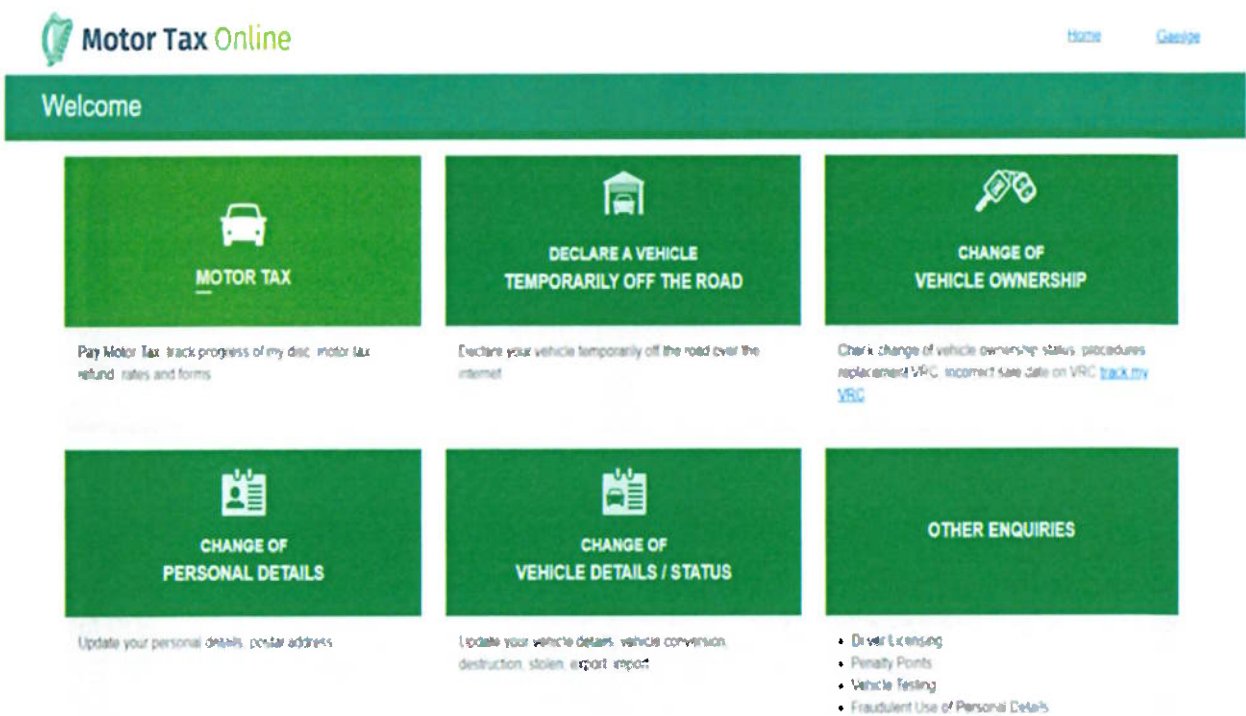
Indicator (original Tax Discs only)	Percentage/Amount
% Motor Tzx transactions dealt with at the public counter	18%
% Motor Tax transactions dealt with by post	4%
% Motor Tax transactions dealt with online	78%
Average number of public opening hours per week	16.5 hours

Number of Vehicle Licence postal applications /% of overall postal applications which were dealt wth

A) on the same day	99.40%
B) On the 3rd day or less	0.49%
C) Over 6 days	0.11%

PROPERTY MANAGEMENT SECTION

The Property Management Section continues to carry out the property management function of Laois County Council. This includes dealing with the purchase, sale and leasing of Laois County Council property assets. This section is also involved with lifting of charges from folios, rectification of boundaries, land registry queries, general queries and the administration of same. M.App Enterprise software is used to record all assets and disposals. Work is ongoing with regard to reconciling the Property Management Asset Register with the Fixed Asset Register in Agresso MS7.



Annual Report 2023

FINANCE, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM

Annual Financial Statement 2023

Revenue Account	Gross Expenditure 2023	Income 2023	Net Expenditure 2023
Expenditure by Division	€	€	€
Housing & Building	24,065,419	24,958,071	(892,652)
Roads Transportation & Safety	33,614,445	27,651,712	5,962,733
Water & Sewerage	4,733,888	4,745,859	(11,971)
Development Incentives & Controls	12,641,236	8,068,898	4,572,338
Environmental Protection	10,375,090	2,661,423	7,713,667
Recreation & Amenity	6,497,392	1,433,870	5,063,522
Agriculture, Education, Health & Welfare	1,046,496	478,336	568,160
Miscellaneous	<u>10,695,505</u>	<u>12,924,888</u>	(2,229,383)
Total Expenditure/Income	103,669,470	82,923,056	

Net cost of Programmes to be funded from Rates and the Local Government Fund	20,746,415
Rates	14,391,521
Pension Levy	-
Local Government Fund—General Purpose Grant	9,033,703
Surplus for Year before Transfers	2,678,810
Transfers from/(to) reserves	(2,600,968)
Overall Surplus for year	77,842
General Reserve@1st January 2023	222,625
General Reserve @ 31st December 20223	300,467

Capital Account

Balance at 01/01/2023	8,650,533
Grants	56,993,669
Other Income	7,983,862
Transfer from/to Revenue	1,894,117
Expenditure	(63,395,461)
Balance at 31/12/2023	12,126,721

ENTERPRISE, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM STRATEGIC POLICY COMMITTEE

HEAD OF FINANCE/DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:

Gerry Murphy

HEAD OF LOCAL ENTERPRISE (Local Enterprise Office):

Evelyn Reddin

<u>Members</u>	<u>Sectoral</u>
<i>Cllr. Conor Bergin (Chair)</i>	<i>Pat Hennessy (Agriculture/Farming Sector)</i>
<i>Cllr. Aisling Moran</i>	<i>Pat Culleton (Development/Construction)</i>
<i>Cllr. Seamus McDonald</i>	<i>Jackie Carroll (Business/Commercial)</i>
<i>Cllr. Aidan Mullins</i>	<i>P.J. Phelan (Community Voluntary)</i>
	<i>Deirdre O'Connell Hopkins (Trade Union)</i>

The Business Support Unit of Laois County Council, comprising the Local Enterprise Office and Economic Development, forms a central point of contact for existing and prospective businesses. Its aim is to nurture a pro-business environment which supports enterprise and promotes Laois nationally and globally as a location of choice for business and investment.

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.

Financial Assistance

During the year, grant assistance was awarded to eligible Laois businesses to help fund start-up costs, business expansion plans, entry into new markets and job growth.

€427,351 was approved in grant aid to 16 companies with potential to create 35 additional full-time jobs. A further €65,817 was approved in Trading Online Vouchers to help 32 business trade online. 2 companies were approved €60,000 under the Gradstart Programme to support the creation of two new graduate positions.

Training

75 training courses were delivered with a total of 1,137 participants, of which 99 potential start-ups participated in Start Your Own Business Courses.

Mentoring

280 businesses availed of mentoring with a total of 419 mentoring sessions delivered in specific areas such as finance, human resources, business development, social media and web development.

Lean for Micro Programme

10 companies participated in the Lean for Micro Programme, designed to encourage clients to adopt lean business principles in their organisations to increase competitiveness.

Green For Micro Programme

18 companies took part in the Green for Business programme, designed to assist businesses in lowering their carbon footprint, reducing costs and improving the environmental profile of their business in the marketplace. €15,000 was approved in grant aid to 3 companies under the Energy Efficiency Programme as a result of actions identified following their participating in the Green for Micro Programme.

Digital Start Programme

5 businesses took part in the Digital Start Programme designed to assist LEO clients in the Micro sector to prepare and implement a plan for the adoption of digital tools and techniques across their business.

Export Ready Programme

10 businesses participated in the first phase of our Export Ready Programme. This programme was developed to support businesses looking at developing an export strategy.

Management Development Programme

10 businesses completed this programme designed to enable companies to become stabilised, ready for growth and to further improve competitive advantage.

Start Your Own Food Business Programme

15 participants with a food idea or within the first 24 months of trading took part in our Start Your Own Food Business workshops. Participants were provided with knowledge and understanding of the necessary steps to start food manufacturing business or wider food businesses like food trucks and foodservice operations.

Local Enterprise Week

Local Enterprise week took place from 6th – 10th March, 2023 with 100 entrepreneurs/potential entrepreneurs taking part in a series of workshops and mentoring clinics through the week.

National Enterprise Awards

Ballykilcavan Brewing Company represented Laois at the 24th National Enterprise Awards held at the Mansion House, Dublin in June 2023. Ballykilcavan Brewing Company is the only brewery in Ireland using barley that is 100% sourced from their own farm.



National Women's Enterprise Day 2023

Over 100 female entrepreneurs from Laois, Offaly, Westmeath & Longford attended National Women's Enterprise Day in Castle Duroo on the 19th of October. Organised by LEO Laois, in partnership with LEO Offaly, LEO Westmeath & LEO Longford, the event offered an exciting opportunity for participants to learn key tips from the experiences and journeys of guest speakers. The keynote speaker for the event was Terry Prone, founder of The Communications Clinic. Participants were treated to a cookery demonstration by Darina Allen of Ballymaloe Cookery School which showcased food from the four Midlands counties, Anna May McHugh, National Ploughing Association Managing Director, spoke about some of her experiences, while Kelly Ging, the founder of Kelly Lou Cakes in Laois, was the event ambassador.



Student Enterprise Programmes 2023

Over 500 students from 7 second level schools took part in the 2022/2023 programme which encourages students to research, set up and run their own business. Heywood Community School were amongst this year's National Final award winners taking 3rd prize in the Senior category which took place in Croke Park in May.

Working with Co-working Hubs

LEO continued to work with the co-working hubs to develop collaborations and hosted a number of training programmes in the hubs with a view to increasing awareness of the facilities.

Midlands "Engenuity" Engineering Cluster Programme

This is an ongoing collaborative initiative of the Midlands LEOs to develop engineering standards and to encourage shared learning and cooperation amongst engineering focused firms in the Midlands. To-date 9 engineering firms from Laois have become members of this group.

Business Incentives Schemes & Shop Front Improvement

14 businesses from around the county applied for the Shopfront Grant Scheme which gives businesses the opportunity to improve/repair their shop façade. A further 5 businesses applied for the Business Incentive Scheme which provides grant relief on commercial rates for eligible vacant properties. The business incentive scheme was extended to Killenard in 2023.

Town and Village Renewal Schemes

In 2022, a grant of €500,000 was awarded to Killeshin Community Group by the Department of Rural &

Community Development under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme for an extension to the existing community centre in Killeshin. This project commenced in 2023 and is due to be completed by March 2024.

Abbeyleix Town and Village Streetscape Enhancement Scheme

The focus of this Scheme was to support the upgrade and enhancement of shopfronts facades and residential facades within Abbeyleix Town Centre. A total of 32 grants were approved to the value of €68,956.50 in 2023.

Vacant Commercial Property Incentive Scheme

The Vacant Commercial Property Incentive Scheme was extended to Portarlinton, Mountrath, Mountmellick & Rathdowney in 2023. The aim of the scheme is to reduce vacancy and dereliction in the town Centre by offering a package of incentives to businesses who rent/lease an empty building which has been vacant for 6 months or more.

Laois Taste

The BSU received funding from the Department of Agriculture Tourism and the Marine for a project to work with Laois Taste in 2023. This project was co-funded by Laois County Council to:

- Update of the Laois Taste Food and Drink Producers Directory
- Support of Laois Taste at several high-profile events
- Develop new marketing materials.

Christmas Market

Towards the end of 2023, the BSU were involved in organising a Christmas Market in collaboration with Laois TASTE. The market was held in the underground car park on JFL Avenue and ran from the 14th - 23rd December.

Portlaoise Town Team

During the year the BSU continued to work collaboratively with Portlaoise Town Team and the other major stakeholders to support and promote Laois businesses. The various sub-committees of the Town Team worked hard on various projects including attractive new signage on the approach roads and waste bins.

National Performance Indicator 2022

No of jobs created with assistance from the LEO during the period 01/01/2022 to 31/12/2022 per 100,000 of population	No of trading online voucher applications approved by the LEO in 2022 per 100,000 of population	No of those trading online vouchers that were drawn down in 2022 per 100,000 of population	No of participants who received mentoring during the period 01/01/2022 to 31/12/2022 per 100,000 of population
86.19	40.37	18.55	295.67

TOURISM

In 2023, Laois County Council continued to promote Laois by supporting a range of initiatives and by working with state agencies. The Council continued to support Laois Chamber Alliance with their work. Jailbird Marketing Consultants were appointed by Laois Chamber Alliance to market and promote the County. A strong online presence exists through the Tourism Website and Social Media channels actively promoting what the County has to offer. The Council also continued to work with Fáilte Ireland promoting Laois as a destination in Ireland's Ancient East Region.

Tourism Grants

Financial support in the sum of €70,000 for festivals and events was provided in 2023. These included The Old Forte Festival Portlaoise, Scarecrow Festival Durrow, National Steam Rally Stradbally, Twin Trees Festival Ballinakill, Shine in Emo, the Gordon Bennett Classic Car Festival, the Leinster Fleadh, Laois Pride, as well as providing support for several Christmas festival events around the County.

Glenbarrow Carpark

An additional 60 car parking spaces have been provided immediately adjacent to the existing carpark which has 35 spaces.

National Ploughing Championships 2023

This year Laois County Council provided a marquee which accommodated 33 exhibitors. These included food and drink producers, craft producers, service and information providers as well as Tourism operators.

Ras na mBan International Ladies Cycle Race

For the fourth year in a row, Rás na mBan, the International Ladies Cycle Race, returned to Laois. On 8th September, following a ceremonial start at Aras An Chontae, Portlaoise over 100 national and international cyclists raced through Stradbally, Emo, Mountmellick, Clonaslee, The Cut, Mountrath, Ballacolla and Abbeyleix before finishing in Mountrath. This was the first time that Rás na mBan had a town finish in the County. Laois Sports Partnership, Laois Tourism and Healthy Ireland came together with the Council to organise cycling workshops for school children in the area prior to the race finish. Highlights of the race were broadcast on RTE and Eurosport.



Barrow Blueway:

Work on the Barrow Blueway continued in 2023. The Laois section is complete apart from the M7 underpass and snagging of areas. Tandem Design are working for the Project Partners on the design of interpretation signage.

Parking Facilities at The Rock of Dunamase

Agreement was reached regarding the purchase of a site adjacent to the Rock of Dunamase. The Part VIII for the work was approved by the Elected Members and an application for funding under the EU Just Transition Fund is being prepared. It is expected that work will commence in 2024.

Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail

In 2023 planning permission was granted to Coillte for the construction of a Trailhead Building at Baunreagh. It is hoped to go to tender early in Q1 2024 with construction starting on site in March 2024. 3km of trail construction was carried out in 2023.

Tourism Destination Towns Fund

Work continued on the Tourism Destination Town Project for Portlaoise. Wayfinding, interpretation signage and interpretation panels were installed.

Timahoe Heritage Centre

Conservation and upgrading works on the Heritage Centre in the former Church of Ireland in Timahoe were completed. The building is managed by the Tigh Mochua Cheile Committee.

EU Just Transition Fund – Failte Ireland

On 29th August 2023, Failte Ireland launched an open call for Expressions of Interest for its Investment Grant-Aid Scheme for Private and Community SMEs. Following an interview process in late 2023, the Tourism Activator role was filled. She will have the key responsibility of raising awareness and understanding of how the Just Transition Funding and Support scheme works, providing a liaison between tourism businesses and JTF schemes while eliciting and supporting the development of quality project proposals leading to grant applications.

MY PAY, LOCAL GOVERNMENT SHARED SERVICES CENTRE/PAYROLL & SUPERANNUATION

DIRECTOR OF SERVICES:

Dermot O’Loughlin

The project is currently running on schedule and within budget. There are currently 88 employees based in the Shared Services Centre. Waves 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 have been completed on schedule with Laois, Offaly, Longford, Roscommon, Westmeath, Leitrim, Galway, Carlow, Monaghan, Cavan, Kildare, Meath, Kilkenny, Louth, South Dublin, Tipperary, Kerry, Wicklow, Sligo, Mayo, Clare, Fingal, Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown, Donegal, Cork and Wexford County Councils along with Limerick and Waterford County and City Councils, Cork and Galway City Councils and the LGMA are now live.

Work is ongoing with Dublin City Council with a view to bringing them onboard in 2025.

The Superannuation element of the project is ongoing:

- There are currently 22 Local authorities live for pension services. South Dublin County Council and Wicklow County Council were onboarded for Superannuation administration in 2023. There is a plan to bring the remaining Local Authorities on board by the end of 2025.
- MyPay is now administering the new Single Public Service Pension Scheme for the Local Authority Sector.

MyPay successfully maintained the ISAE 3402 standard, which is an internationally recognised standard for service organisations that must be renewed annually.

**TITLE, PURPOSE AND NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF EACH COMMITTEE AND JOINT COMMITTEE AND
THE NUMBER OF MEETINGS OF EACH COMMITTEE, JOINT COMMITTEE AND JOINT POLICING
COMMITTEE HELD DURING THE PERIOD JANUARY TO DECEMBER 2023**

Name of Committee	Members Elected	Number of Meetings
Local Community Development Committee	Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor John King Councillor Conor Bergin	11
Joint Policing Committee	Councillor Padraig Fleming Councillor Paddy Bracken Councillor Seamus McDonald Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald Councillor James Kelly Councillor Ben Brennan Councillor Caroline Dwane Stanley Councillor John King Councillor P J Kelly Councillor Thomasina Connell Councillor Aisling Moran Councillor Conor Bergin	4
Heritage Forum	Councillor Padraig Fleming Councillor William Aird	2
Naming Committee	Councillor Paddy Bracken Councillor Noel Tuohy up to 04/02/2023) Councillor Marie Tuohy (from March 2023) Councillor John King Councillor PJ Kelly Councillor William Aird Coun cillor Catherine Fitzgerald Councillor James Kelly Councillor Padraig Fleming Councillor Ben Brennan	5
Audit Committee	Councillor Padraig Fleming Councillor Aisling Moran	3
Local Traveller Accommodation Consulta- tive Committee	Councillor B Walsh Councillor John King Councillor P J Kelly Councillor Paddy Bracken Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald Councillor James Kelly	2

**TITLE, PURPOSE AND NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF EACH COMMITTEE AND JOINT COMMITTEE AND
THE NUMBER OF MEETINGS OF EACH COMMITTEE, JOINT COMMITTEE AND JOINT POLICING
COMMITTEE HELD DURING THE PERIOD JANUARY TO DECEMBER 2023**

Name of Committee	Members Elected	Number of Meetings
Kyletalesha Monitoring Committee	Councillor Paddy Bracken Councillor Thomasina Connell Councillor Aisling Moran	1
Rural Water Monitoring Committee	Councillor Pdraig Fleming Councillor P J Kelly Councillor Conor Bergin	1
Public Events Committee	Councillor Ben Brennan Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor James Kelly Councillor Thomasina Connell Councillor Aisling Moran	1
Twinning Committee	Councillor Pdraig Fleming Councillor James Kelly Councillor Conor Bergin Councillor Thomasina Connell	0

OUTSIDE BODIES—JANUARY TO DECEMBER 2023

Name of Committee

Members Elected

Association of Irish Local Government	Councillor John Joe Fennelly Councillor John King Councillor Aisling Moran
Laois & Offaly Education & Training Board	Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald Councillor Pdraig Fleming Councillor Barry Walsh Councillor Willie Aird Councillor John King Councillor Caroline Dwane Stanley
Laois Arts Theatre Company Ltd	Councillor Barry Walsh Councillor Thomasina Connell Councillor Noel Tuohy (up to 04/02/2023) Councillor Marie Tuohy (from March 2023)
Board of Abbeyleix Heritage Trust	Councillor John Joe Fennelly
Local Authority Members Association	Councillor Seamus McDonald
Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly	Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald Councillor Aisling Moran
Laois Partnership Company Ltd	Councillor Pdraig Fleming Councillor P J Kelly
Laois Leisure Limited	Councillor Aidan Mullins (Resigned on 14/12/2023) Councillor Noel Tuohy (up to 04/02/2023) Councillor Marie Tuohy (from March 2023)
Portlaoise Enterprise Centre	Councillor John Joe Fennelly Councillor William Aird Councillor Barry Walsh
Portarlinton Enterprise Centre	Councillor Aidan Mullins Councillor P J Kelly
Board of Treo Nua Limited	Councillor Noel Tuohy (up to 04/02/2023) Councillor Marie Tuohy (from March 2023)
Dublin Mid-Leinster Regional Forum	Councillor Pdraig Fleming Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor Thomasina Connell
Midland Regional Drugs Task Force	Councillor Thomasina Connell
Portlaoise Innovation Centre	Councillor Thomasina Connell Councillor Caroline Dwane Stanley Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald
Eirgrid Laois Kilkenny Reinforcement Project Community Forum	Councillor Paschal McEvoy Councillor Thomasina Connell

MEMBERS EXPENSES SUMMARY**JANUARY – DECEMBER 2023**

	€
Conferences	7,199.95
Training	43,721.34
Monthly Expenses	105,677.79
SPC Chair Allowance	20,136.88
Representational Allowance	534,333.84
Cathaoirleach's Allowance	19,930.56
Leas-Chathaoirleach's Allowance	3,986.06
Municipal District Chair Allowance	17,960.65
OVERALL	€752,947.07

TRAINING ATTENDED IN 2023 BY LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL MEMBERS

<u>Training</u>	<u>Venue</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Delegates</u>	<u>Expend</u>
AILG				
AILG – Module 1	Out of Region Limerick	25th February 2023	5	
AILG—Module 1	Tullamore	23rd February 2023	2	€2,050.91
AILG—Annual Training	Kilkenny	19th—20th April 2023	5	€1,300.10
AILG – Module 2	Out of Region	23rd March 2023	2	
AILG—Module 2	Dundalk	25th March 2023	5	€2,622.44
AILG—Module 3	Mullingar	15th June 2023	8	€1,705.73
AILG—Module 4	Cork & Sligo	20th & 22nd July 2023	11	€5,293.95
AILG—Autumn Training	Sligo	13th & 14th September 2023	11	€8,020.68
AILG—Module 5	Tralee & Cavan	19th & 21st of October 2023	11	€4,082.57
AILG—Module 6	Waterford & Galway	16th & 18th November 2023	4	€987.52
Air	Louth	7th & 9th February 2023	6	€3,507.15
ICSH	Wexford	18th & 19th October 2023	1	€777.82
LAMA Spring	Cork	2nd—4th March 2023	12	€8,281.71
LAMA Autumn	Galway	25th & 26th October 2023	10	€5,089.80
Overall Total:				€43,720.38

CONFERENCES ATTENDED IN 2023 BY LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL MEMBERS

<u>Conference</u>	<u>Venue</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Delegates</u>	<u>Expend</u>
Celtic Conference	Carlingford	6th—8th January 2023	3	€1,764.82
Celtic Conference	Clonakilty	21st—23rd April 2023	1	€535.13
Magill Summer School	Glenties	16th—19th August 2023	7	€4,900.00
Overall Total				€7,199.95

STATEMENT OF INTERNAL FINANCIAL CONTROL (SIFC)

Introduction

I, Simon Walton, Interim Chief Executive of Laois County Council am responsible for the annual financial statement (AFS), prepared by the Head of Finance, in accordance with the accounting code of practice issued by the Minister under section 107 of the Local Government Act, 2001.

I certify that the financial statements of Laois County Council for the year ended 31 December 2023, agree with the books of account and have been prepared in accordance with the accounting requirements of the Minister of Housing Local Government and Heritage.

The AFS is subject to external audit, by an auditor of the Local Government Audit Service, whose purpose is to form an independent opinion of the accounts and state whether the annual financial statement presents *fairly the financial position* of the local authority and of its income and expenditure for the period in question, and whether the transactions of the local authority under which they purport to have been carried out. The AFS reports on the day-to-day activity of Laois County Council in the form of the Statement of Comprehensive Income & Expenditure, summarised by Division. The Statement of Financial Position outlines the Laois County Council overall financial position as of the 31st of December 2023.

The *Statement of Comprehensive Income* represents expenditure and income on the day-to-day running of the Laois County Council.

The key sources of income for Laois County Council are as follows:

	Current Year €	Previous Year €
Goods & Services	€22,484,266	€20,824,754
Grants & Subsidies	€55,040,792	€44,061,946
Other Contributions (as appropriate)		
Rates	€14,391,521	€14,103,225
Local Property Tax	€ 9,033,703	€ 9,065,148

Activity on the Income and Expenditure account for 2023 is as follows:

Income increased by 19% for 2023 which is mainly related to increased activity in housing, roads and community sections.

	Current Year €	Previous Year €
Income	€ 82,923,056	€69,813,595
Expenditure	€103,669,470	€91,123,323
Transfers to/from Capital	€ 2,600,968	€ 1,781,295
Exceptional Item		
Surplus/(Deficit) for	€ 77,842	€ 77,351
Prior Year Adjustment		
Opening Revenue Reserve	€ 222,625	€ 145,274
Closing Revenue Reserve	€ 300,467	€ 222,625

The increased activity after net transfers resulted in a surplus of €77,842 for the financial year and a closing revenue balance of €300,467.

The *Statement of Financial Position (Balance Sheet)* represents the total financial activity of the council for the year together with comparative year figures as appropriate.

The statement includes assets and liabilities as follows:

- Assets both recently constructed/purchased and historical assets.
- Work in progress and preliminary schemes- mainly roads and housing.
- Long Term Debtors – housing loans
- Current Assets- including Stock, Debtors, Cash at bank.
- Current and long-term liabilities- mortgage and non-mortgage loan borrowings
- Various Reserves/Balances

The Net Assets of Laois County Council at the end of 2023 total €2.15bn and are as follows:

	Current Year €	Previous Year €
Fixed Assets	€1,993,925,818	€1,971,003,226
Works in Progress	€ 29,509,743	€ 23,783,804
Long Term debtors	€ 108,770,029	€ 94,080,465
Current Assets	€ 35,554,196	€ 30,326,960
Current Liabilities	€ 17,449,106	€ 19,194,526

Net Current Assets/ (Liabilities)	€ 18,105,090	€ 11,132,434
Creditors (Amounts greater than 1 year)	€ 132,124,916	€ 115,995,105
Net Assets/(Liabilities)	€2,018,185,764	€1,984,004,825

A *Statement of Funds Flow* was introduced as part of AFS 2011. While the guidance of International Accounting Standard 7 Statement of Cash Flows has been followed, the business of local authorities is substantially different to most private sector organisations and therefore some minor changes to the format have been agreed to ensure the data displayed is meaningful and useful within the local government sector.

System of Internal Financial Controls

As Interim Chief Executive of Laois County Council, I acknowledge my responsibility for ensuring that an effective system of internal financial control is maintained and operated by Laois County Council. This responsibility is exercised in the context of the resources available to Laois County Council. Also, any system of internal financial control can provide only reasonable and not absolute assurance that assets are safeguarded, transactions authorised and properly recorded, and that material errors or irregularities are either prevented or would be detected in a timely manner. Maintaining the system of internal financial controls is a continuous process and the system and its effectiveness are kept under ongoing review.

Financial control environment

As Interim Chief Executive of Laois County Council, I confirm that a financial control environment containing the following elements is in place:

- Financial responsibilities have been assigned at management level with corresponding accountability.
- Reporting arrangements have been established at all levels where responsibility for financial management has been assigned.
- Formal procedures have been established for reporting significant control failures and ensuring appropriate corrective action.
- There is an Audit Committee which as part of its work programme regularly review the internal financial control system.
- Procedures for all key business processes have been documented
- There are systems in place to safeguard the assets.

Administrative Controls and Management Reporting

As Interim Chief Executive of Laois County Council, I confirm that a framework of administrative procedures and regular management reporting is in place including segregation of duties and a system of delegation and accountability and that:

- procedures for key business processes have been documented
- there are systems aimed at ensuring the security of the ICT systems
- there are systems in place to safeguard the assets of the local authority and

- there are appropriate capital investment control guidelines and formal project management disciplines in operation.

Procurement compliance

Laois County Council ensures that there is an appropriate and ongoing focus on good practice in tendering and purchasing and that procedures are in place to ensure compliance with all relevant procurement guidelines.

Internal audit and Audit Committee

As Interim Chief Executive, I can confirm that Laois County Council has an internal audit function with appropriately trained personnel, which operates in accordance with a written charter. Its work is informed by analysis of the financial risks to which Laois County Council is exposed and its annual internal audit plans are based on this analysis. I am satisfied that there are procedures in place to ensure that the reports of the internal audit function are followed up.

I can confirm that Laois County Council has an effective audit committee which carries out an annual effectiveness review of their activities. I can also confirm that an Audit Committee is in place in accordance with the requirements of Section 122 of the Local Government Act 2001 (as amended).

The statutory functions of audit committees as set out in section 59 and 60 of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 are as follows:

- I. to review financial and budgetary reporting practices and procedures within the local authority that has established it.
- II. to foster the development of best practice in the performance by the local authority of its internal audit function.
- III. to review any audited financial statement, auditor's report or auditor's special report in relation to the local authority and assess any actions taken within that authority by its chief executive in response to such a statement or report and to report to that authority on its findings.
- IV. to assess and promote efficiency and value for money with respect to the local authority's performance of its functions; and
- V. to review systems that are operated by the local authority for the management of risks.

I recognise that the audit committee plays a crucial role in the governance framework of local authorities, particularly in the context of increased public sector accountability. They have an independent role in advising the Council on financial reporting processes,

internal control, risk management and audit matters as part of the systematic review of the control environment and governance procedures of the local authority

I acknowledge the Audit Committee's role in the risk management process and in the continuing review of the control environment and governance procedures in Laois County Council.

Risk and control framework

Laois County Council has implemented a risk management system which identifies and reports key risks and the management actions being taken to address and, to the extent possible, mitigate those risks

A corporate risk register is in place which identifies the key risks and evaluates and grades them according to their significance. The register is reviewed and updated by the Management Team on a regular basis. There is also a risk register in place for each service division and these are also reviewed and updated on a regular basis


The outcome of these assessments is used to plan and allocate resources to ensure risks are managed to an acceptable level. The risk register details the controls and actions needed to mitigate risks and responsibilities for the operation of controls are assigned to specific staff.

As Interim Chief Executive, I confirm that key risks and related controls have been identified and processes have been put in place to monitor the operation of those key controls and report any identified deficiencies.

The Statement of Internal Financial Control will be included in the draft Annual Report submitted to Council members on 21st October 2024 and thereafter included in the published Annual Report prepared and adopted by the Council on 16th December 2024.

Signed by:

Dated


Interim Chief Executive

15/10/2024.

www.laois.ie

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Environment, Áras an Chontae	Tel : (057) 8689315
Housing, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8689329
Human Resources, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8989335
Landfill Site, Kyletalesha, Portlaoise	Tel: (057) 8620653
Library Headquarters, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8689338
Motor Tax Office, Block 2, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664009
Planning, Block 1, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664039
Register of Electors, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664105
Roads, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8689349
Sports & Leisure, Áras an Chontae	Tel: (057) 8664058
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