



# **Laois County Council**

## **Public Sector Duty Action Plan**

December 2024

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## 1. Public Sector Duty

Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, places a positive duty on public sector bodies to have regard for the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality, and protect human rights, in their daily work.

Under Section 42(1) of the Act, the Council “shall, in the performance of its functions, have regard to the need to:

- a) eliminate discrimination,
- b) promote equality of opportunity and treatment of its staff and the persons to whom it provides services, and
- c) protect the human rights of its members, staff and the persons to whom it provides services.”

The section requires public bodies to undertake three core steps:

1. In preparing strategic plans, public sector bodies must assess and identify the human rights and equality issues that are relevant to their functions.
2. Public bodies must then identify the policies and practices that they have in place or that they plan to put in place to address these issues.
3. In their annual reports, or equivalent documents, public bodies must report in a manner accessible to the public on their developments and achievement in that regard.

Therefore, the Council, in preparing strategic plans, must assess and identify the human rights and equality issues that are relevant to their functions. The Council must also identify the policies and practices that they have in place or that they plan to put in place to address these issues and must report on their developments and achievement in that regard.

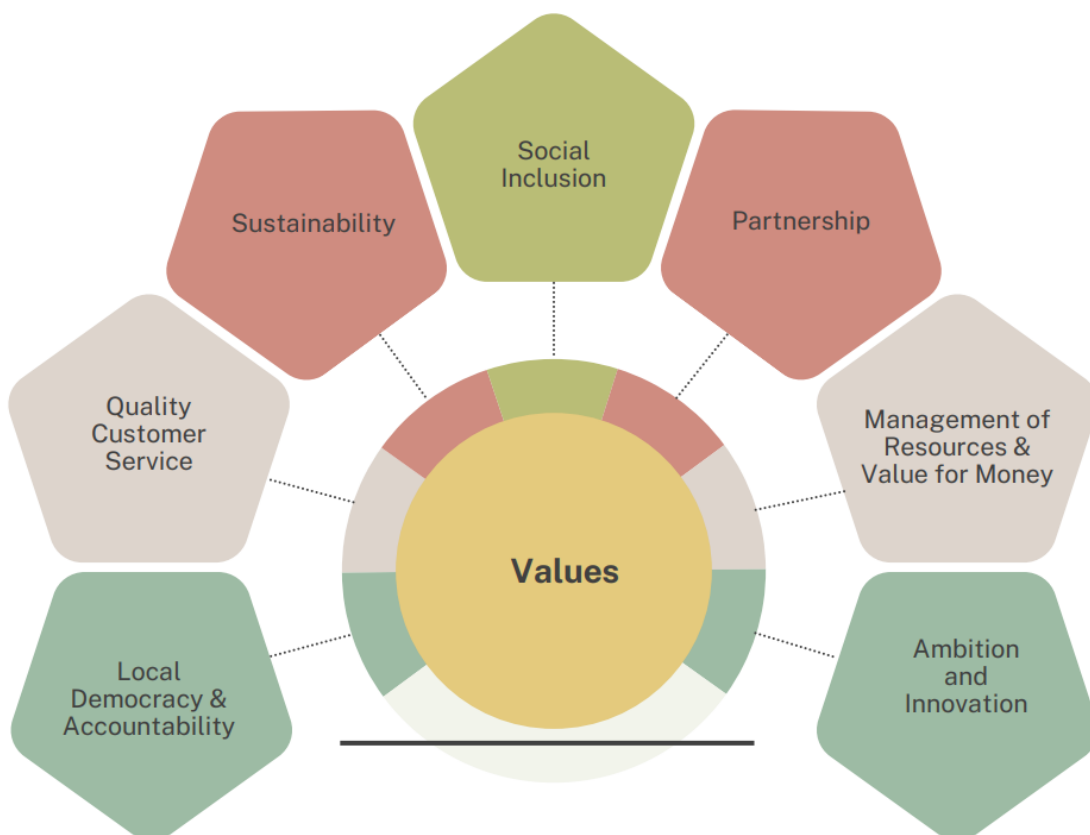
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## 2. Our Vision, Mission, and Values

As expressed in our Corporate Plan the Council’s Vision for Laois is “that Laois continues to be an excellent place to live in, to work in, to invest in and to enjoy”.

Deriving from that vision, the Mission Statement for the upcoming Corporate Plan period is that “The Council through strong civic leadership and innovation will lead the sustainable economic, social, cultural and community development of our County through the delivery of quality public services to the communities we serve”.

Deriving from the mission statement and vision, the Values that the Council seeks to espouse are summarized in the graphic below.



*Values underlying the work of Laois County Council*

These values inform how we work and how we seek to develop initiatives to deliver on our strategic objectives; these objectives will be delivered in partnership with the state, the private sector, the community and our workforce. This approach to partnership is underlined in the motto of the Council is “i bpáirt leis an bpobal” -in partnership with the Community.

### 3. Assessing the Public Sector Duty in our Operations

The Public Sector Human Rights and Equality Duty involves much more than a once-off report or action plan. The aim is to embed this duty in the way that the local authority operates. This requirement of embedment is even more important in the area of assessments in relation to the public sector duty. Within this action plan is a commitment to carry out a review of the Public Sector Duty Action plan by mid-2027 – this time being chosen to coincide with any mid-term review of the Council’s Corporate Plan.

However ahead of the review of this document, the action plan commits to a review of the assessment process in 2026, preceded by enhanced training in 2025 for staff and Councillors. This sequence of actions will aid not just the formal assessment process but will help staff build their awareness of the public sector duty into everyday actions of the council.

The issues that Laois County Council faces in relation to the public sector duty are similar to many other public sector bodies. In particular, we can learn from the approaches by other local authorities. It must be remembered that Councillors are elected by the widest franchise base in the country- residents of the county over 18 years of age irrespective of nationality. The Executive of the council is responsible to elected Council and is answerable monthly in public open sessions – something that does not happen with most other public sector bodies. The ability of the councillors to represent issues affecting individuals is something that serves to maintain the quality of the service to the public.

In Section 4.1 of this document are listed some examples of how the work of the Council acts to support the public sector duty- either in the routine work of the Council or in specific examples of initiatives taken. Management recognises the need to deepen formal awareness of the public sector duty among staff. Similarly, there is a need to better publicise what the Council does (and does not) do; for example the 2022 Local Government Customer Services Report by the LGMA highlighted gaps in the public knowledge about local authority services generally. The very fact of ignorance, or lack of full awareness, about our services can impact the ability of the Council to properly fulfil our duties (including the public sector duty) to the public.

*Some aspects to consider in developing the Actions under this plan*

*Having respect and showing respect*

*Supporting a sense of community*

*Maintaining confidence in our council structures*

*Developing structures for participation*

*Awareness and openness to the individual's situation*

*Promoting design for all*

*Sense of security and welcome*

*Supporting work-life balance*

*Equalising gender pay gaps*

*Avoiding disrespect and biases*

*Avoiding silos of segregation*

*Preventing distrust in institutions*

*Reducing a "one size fits all" approach*

*Rather than design for the average*

*Reducing fear and isolation*

## 4. Embedding the Public Sector Duty in our Operations

Under Section 42(1) of the Act, the Council in the performance of its functions is required to “have regard to the need to:

- a) eliminate discrimination,
- b) promote equality of opportunity and treatment of its staff and the persons to whom it provides services, and
- c) protect the human rights of its members, staff and the persons to whom it provides services.”

Across the breadth of its work- both in its traditional roles and its expanded roles over the past twenty years- the Council, as part of the normal execution of its functions, operates to improve equality of opportunity and to reduce adverse discrimination. Listed below in Section 3.1 are just some examples of how the day-to-day work of the Council seeks to improve the lives of people and equitable access to services. Through the normal work of the Council, we seek to support our public sector equality and human rights duty.

## 4.1 Selected Examples of the Public Sector Duty within the Normal Operations of Laois County Council

- **Active Travel Programme**
  - The retrofitting by narrowing of junctions under the Active Travel Programme makes it easier for pedestrians to cross certain road junctions (including in particular people with reduced mobility or with buggies etc).
- **Recruitment**
  - The provision of online courses prior to Clerical Officer competition on how to fill out public sector job applications and how to handle competency-based interviews; Details of this course were circulated to Laois Integration Network and other community groups in an effort to broaden the recruitment pool into Laois County Council.
- **PPN**
  - The Council supports the effective operation of the Laois Public Participation Network (PPN). The PPN has special representation for local community groups with a social inclusion focus, including groups involving or representing people with disabilities. The PPN plays a vital role at community level in giving people a greater say in local government decisions which affect their own communities. A key role of the PPNs is representing people who are socially excluded and whose voices are not as well heard in our society. The Council regularly provides notifications of grants/events which are distributed through Laois PPN to over 650 members groups
- **SICAP**
  - The Council, through the Local Community Development Committee oversees the implementation of the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) in the county. The SICAP programme seeks to address high and persistent levels of deprivation through targeted and innovative, locally-led approaches. It supports in need groups and communities and individuals including unemployed people, people living in deprived areas, people with disabilities, single parent families, people on a low income, members of the Traveller and Roma community.

- **Public Libraries**

- Assistive Technologies in public libraries such as C-Pens readers
- Portlaoise library was the first public library in Ireland accredited as a “Library of Sanctuary” by *Places of Sanctuary Ireland*; Library services are committed to creating a culture of welcome and inclusion, especially for people in International Protection (refugees and asylum seekers) and all newcomers to the area.
- Provision of library stock in accessible formats both in branch and online such as audiobooks , tactile books for younger children , large print readers , dyslexia friendly books, books in different languages .
- Laois Libraries provide a free online service TTRS – Touch, Type, Read, Spell which is available to schools, groups, special needs groups and organisations, home-schoolers and non-national groups (where English is not their first language.) in the community.
- Large and Diverse Range of events at the library
  - Right to read programme is a free literacy and reading initiative provided in all branch libraries . As part of the programme public libraries offer free reading and literacy events such as Spring into Storytime, Summer stars at your Library, Childrens book festival and Family Time at your Library . Free Book bags are distributed to children in the county starting school each September. Libraries work directly with Direct provision centres and family resource centers and schools to roll out this programme
  - Adult Literacy programmes -Form filling classes at public library etc – A weekly drop in clinic is hosted in Portlaoise library for those with literacy difficulties in the areas of form filling and or understanding public services forms and applications in collaboration with the LOETB .
  - Adult book clubs targeting reluctant readers for both adult and children are held in selected libraries
- Ciorcail na Gaeilge sessions are held in selected libraries for those who seek opportunities to use conversational Irish
- Sensory Libraries services are provided such as sensory room in Mountmellick and Portlaoise Libraries. Interactive “magic tables are provided for the public in Portarlington, Portlaoise , Abbeyleix and Mountmellick Libraries



- **Procurement:**
  - Through standard Terms & Conditions of Contract requesting Suppliers/Service Provider/Contractors to ensure that they and their sub-contractors comply with all Irish Equality legislation.
  
- **Laois Connects programme**
  - The aim of this annual initiative is to organise and deliver a varied and wide range of interesting events across the county, that seeks to inform and challenge the way people think about and respond to mental health in families, communities, and places of work. Laois Connects strive to reduce the stigma often associated with the concept of mental health, so that there is increased acceptance, awareness, and willingness to give and receive support at an individual, community and services level.
  
- **Housing Programmes**
  - 31% of all current housing supports provided by LCC are to applicants with a disability. Laois County Council's Housing Strategy for People with Disabilities reflects the vision of the National Strategy – a 5 year strategy that promotes a whole of community approach to housing for disabled people when planning the provision of housing.
  - All social housing application and assessments take account of medical conditions and specific needs of a household/individual.
  - The Council operates Housing Adaptation Grants for private Homes for persons with disability, match funding national government grants to assist people to adapt their homes so they can live there longer.
  - The Council carries out works to its own social housing stock under the Disabled Persons Grants scheme, to provide supports to those local authority tenants who are older and/or have a disability, and who wish to remain in their home where possible.
  - Laois County Council's Tenants' Handbook reminds tenants of the range of services available to them and takes account of the inability due to infirmity of certain tenants to carry out normal maintenance and assists those tenants where possible.
  - The Age Friendly Healthy Homes Coordinator liaises with Housing in relation to the needs of older people in terms of their day to day lives, including adaptations required, tenancy management, rent reviews, housing applications.

- The Tenant Liaison service ensures that tenants live safely in their local authority home, ensures that no tenant causes a nuisance to others and encourages tenants to become actively involved in their community.
- **Sightless Cinema**
  - Sightless Cinema events were held in the Dunamais Theatre supported by the Arts Office and the Creative Ireland Programme from the Library.
- **Burial Grounds**
  - Development of spaces at Portlaoise Cemetery with an alignment to suit burials in the Muslim tradition.
- **Business Training**
  - Local Enterprise Office courses for Women in Business to help address gender imbalances in business.
- **Integration Supports and Services:**
  - The Council chairs the Community Integration Forum, an established interagency forum for the coordinated delivery of services to refugees, and the development of additional supports where needs are identified. Through the Integration Office engagement with specific service providers, the Council supports the delivery of targeted services to specific clients/client groups.
- **Age Friendly**
  - Laois County Council chairs the Laois Age Friendly Alliance which is a cross agency board who seek to develop and put in place age friendly strategies and the Age Friendly Cities and Counties Programmes.
  - Laois County Council supports the Laois Older People's Council which represents the views of older people, promotes inclusion of older people in communities, works to prevent age related isolation and loneliness, and promotes fitness and active ageing.
- **Website**
  - Website Accessibility
    - Our newly enhanced website [LAOIS.ie](http://LAOIS.ie) currently has an accessibility score of 93.3% when assessed against WCAG Level A and AA criteria (for errors) and is regularly reviewed and remedial action taken.
  - Website Accessibility Solution
    - The LAOIS.ie website uses the ReachDeck Toolbar solution by TextHelp to give an inclusive experience for people with visual impairments and hidden disabilities.
  - Writing in plain English training
    - PlainEnglish Ireland provided training for 15 staff in writing for the web during our website upgrade to ensure content is clear, concise and accessible.

## **Consultations for this document.**

Laois County Council sought the views of the public on the Laois County Council Corporate Plan 2024-2029 and the Laois County Council Public Sector Duty (under Section 42 of Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014), to help set the framework for action over the next 5 years. The council sought the views of the public via [consult.laois.ie](http://consult.laois.ie) for a 6 week period. For the purposes of the consultation, a number of questions were included for consideration to assist the public when making a submission. The consultation was advertised on our website and through our social media channels.

The council also consulted with Laois PPN who have a network of over 650 member groups. PPN members had the option to participate through their PPN Coordinator or direct to Laois County Council. In addition, the council sought the views of the Local Community Development Committee (LCDC).

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# Progressing Our Public Sector Duty

## Corporate Plan

The Council's Corporate Plan outlines a number of specific actions which support the commitments set out in the Public Sector Duty with regard to eliminating discrimination and promoting equality of opportunity, both customers and stakeholders, and to our employees. Laois County Council is committed to continue to deliver on our Public Sector Duty obligations.

Within the Corporate Plan, the Council commits to:

- Further embed the Public Sector Human Rights and Equality Duty into the everyday work of the Council
- Deliver sufficient and appropriate housing for disabled persons.
- Deliver on the Council's Traveller Accommodation Programme 2025-29
- Encourage and promote the participation of young people in the future development of the County.
- Support the delivery and implementation of the Laois Age Friendly Strategy and Action Plan.
- To enable the public to take an active formal role in policy making and in relevant committees of the local authority.
- Through the Community Integration Forum to lead the coordination of delivery of supports and services to all refugee cohorts by relevant state agencies and voluntary bodies
- Position libraries as central community, civic, and cultural spaces engaging with the local communities.
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Example of Public Sector Duty within the Council's Local Economic and Community Plan

- Sustainable Objective 1.1 states: To increase the depth of community participation and civic engagement across the county.
- High Level Goal 5 states: Recognise and support diversity in the county, promoting equality, integration, and inclusiveness across all sectors.
- Sustainable Objective 5.1 states: To work to support equity in social participation and employment opportunities, particularly across areas of disability, disadvantage, diversity, and ethnic backgrounds.

## 5. Action Plan

	<b>Action</b>	<b>Action Owner(s)</b>
1.	Formalise the elements of Public Sector Duty within the induction training for new recruits into the Council.	Human Resources
2.	Complete a review of this document by June 2027	Equality Officer Corporate Services Section
3.	Carry out revised assessments of the implications for the Public Sector Duty on the work of the Council by November 2026.	Equality Officer Corporate Services Section
4.	Design and implement additional and revised training on the public sector duty, both generally and for key staff, during 2025	Human Resources Section
5.	Strengthen our interface with both the Older Persons Council, Comhairle na nÓg and the Public Participation Network as part of the process of increase opportunities for people to interface with the work of the Council.	Community Section
6.	Continue to deliver on the Laois Traveller Accommodation Programme.	Housing Section
7.	Widen the use of Universal Design approaches within the Council.	Road Section Housing Section
8.	Take actions to promote an inclusive culture within the Council.	Corporate Services
9.	Improve the knowledge of the public about our range of services and the standards expected from those services, with particular attention to target groups.	Corporate Services/ Each Directorate

10.	Expand the level of Disability Awareness Training across selected staff in the Council	Human Resources
11.	Work to improve compliance with the Official Languages Act	Corporate Services
12.	Take measures to promote employment in the Council to persons from underrepresented groups.	Human Resources
13.	Develop measures to sample compliance with the public sector duty amongst our contractors.	Procurement Unit
14.	Continue to facilitate a range of flexible working patterns for staff	Human Resources
15.	Through appropriate statistical analysis, to further develop an understanding of our changing population profile and their needs	Community Section
16.	Encourage initiatives within staffing units that enhance and demonstrate the commitment of the Council to the public sector duty.	Each Directorate
17	Integrate the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty into our Corporate Procurement Plan, promoting consideration of equality and human rights throughout Tendering processes	Procurement Unit





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