

LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL

COMHAIRLE CHONTAE LAOISE



BUISÉID 2024

BUDGET 2024

Adopted on the 13th of November 2023

LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL - 2024 BUDGET

To: *An Cathaoirleach and Each Member of Laois County Council*

Dear Councillor,

The attached Draft Budget for the financial year 2024 has been prepared in accordance with statutory format for consideration by the Elected Members. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage by Circular Fin 06/2023 dated 23rd August, 2023, determined the period November 1st to December 8th as the prescribed period for County Councils to hold their 2024 Statutory Budget Meetings.

Laois County Council's statutory budget meeting is scheduled to take place on Monday, 13th November 2023 at 11.00am. The process of considering and adopting the Budget must be concluded before November 22nd 2023.

The process of compiling the Budget involves a number of stages including:

- Consultation with the Corporate Policy Group to consider budget strategy, local property tax rate and high-level budget considerations. (*Meeting of 16th October, 2023 refers.*)
- Decision by the elected members on the adjustment factor to the Local Property Tax rate following public consultation. (*Meeting of 25th September, 2023 refers.*)
- Detailed review of all aspects of the Budget with Directors of Services, Head of Finance and all budget holders.
- The consideration and adoption of General Municipal Allocations by the three Municipal District memberships at their recent Municipal District meetings.

The final stage of the budget process is the consideration by the Elected Members at the statutory Annual Budget meeting at which the Members will make a decision to adopt the Budget, with or without amendment, and make a decision to determine the Annual Rate on Valuation (ARV).

Laois County Council is required by law to adopt a budget that is sufficient to meet the proposed expenditure for the year ahead. Total expenditure must be matched by total estimated income from commercial rates, local property tax, government grants and charges for goods and services. The estimated income from such sources is based on less than certain assumptions notwithstanding that due diligence has been integral to the preparation of the Budget figures. Furthermore, Section 16 of the Local Government Act 2001 requires the Council in discharging its functions to have regard to the resources available to it, the need to maintain essential services and to ensure that a reasonable balance is achieved across its functional priorities and service areas.

The 2024 Draft Revenue Budget provides for an expenditure of **€113,881,000**.

RESERVED FUNCTIONS OF ELECTED MEMBERS

The members have a number of reserved functions in relation to the budgetary process as follows:

- (i) Members have the power to vary the Local Property Tax Rate (LPT) by a factor of plus or minus 15%. At the September 25th Monthly Meeting of the Council the Elected Members made a decision not to change the LPT as it applied for the past number of years, i.e, that it remain varied at plus 10%.
- (ii) The adoption of allocations at Municipal District Level.
- (iii) Members may adopt the Laois County Council budget with or without amendment and approve the amounts provided for in the Revenue Budget for transfer to the Council's Capital Account.
- (iv) The determination of the Annual Rate on Variation (ARV) must be decided by the Elected Members at the Annual Budget Meeting.
- (v) In accordance with the provisions of Section 31 of the Local Government Reform Act 2014, the Members have the power to set the proportions of rates refunds applicable on vacant commercial premises.

BUDGET CONTEXT 2024

Last year's Budget was prepared against the background of a major conflict in Ukraine that, inter alia, resulted in increased costs across the board, mainly in the energy sector. The impact of the ongoing conflict is still being felt in the Irish Economy. Inflation for 2023 is predicted to level out at 5.0% for the year having peaked at 9.6% in June. A slightly lower rate of 3.0% is predicted for 2024. While there was welcome moderation in the rate of increase in energy cost inflation in 2023 it remains the case that price inflation will give rise to ongoing pressures on the roll out of services across all service delivery areas of this Local Authority. In general, the costs for 2024 are expected to be 16.1% higher than those for provision of services in 2020. This upward cost pressure will continue to be felt for the foreseeable future and will erode cost savings and efficiency efforts on the expenditure side and the benefit of increased receipts and grants on the income side.

In September this Council was notified by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage of an increase in the Local Property Tax Baseline allocation in the sum of €3.061 million. When taken together with an adopted 10% increase in the Local Property Tax, Laois County Council will receive an income of €12.144 million from this source for the year ahead. This is very welcome and represents a net increase of nearly €2 million in comparison to 2023.

Early this year we noted the population of County Laois had increased to nearly 92,000 people, representing an 8% increase over 2016, and that Portlaoise is home to over 24,500 people. Increased population brings increased demand for local and public services and the Draft Budget has been prepared with a view towards maintaining a satisfactory level of service to an ever growing population.

The support and responsiveness of Government in increasing the baseline funding to Laois County Council is therefore acknowledged.

As in previous budgets it remains the case that a balanced budget must be presented for the consideration of the Elected Members and that for prudential financial management reasons

there is no deviation from this practice. On the assumption that Government will further assist local authorities in the matter of public sector pay costs for the year ahead it has been possible to present a balanced Revenue Budget for 2024. Members should be mindful there has been a comprehensive examination of spending and value for money considerations in all service areas in order to provide balanced budget arithmetic.

The last number of Budgets have been prepared with a view towards providing a business/community stimulus effect in the local economy. The 2024 Budget adopts the same approach and remains focussed on that effort but is also very much a regenerative and consolidation statement given the turbulence in the business sector over the last number of years.

The main objectives of Budget 2024 are set out hereunder.

❖ **Housing and Regeneration of Vacant Buildings**

- *Continue to meet and exceed the targets set out under “Housing for All”, specifically; social housing construction, affordable and cost rental supply, the use of the “Croí Cónaithe Fund” for vacant and derelict buildings and sites for self builders.*
- *Maximizing Housing Adaptation Grants.*
- *Maintain resources and standards in estate management and enforcement of tenancy conditions.*
- *Continue to improve public housing stock condition through planned maintenance and energy efficiency upgrades.*

❖ **Economic Development**

- *Continue to deliver the Local Enterprise Office programme of supports.*
- *Continue to stimulate economic and business development in collaboration with the Laois Chamber Alliance, the Cube Innovation Centre and the Council’s Business Support Unit.*
- *Maximize drawdown and use of the EU Just Transition Fund (2022-2027) so as to create jobs in Co. Laois and to align with climate action and energy efficiency policies.*
- *Enhance the growing reputation of County Laois as an events and business location.*

❖ **Place Making and Environment**

- *Ensure increased focus on place making in the delivery of the Council's Capital Programme.*
- *Continue to work towards our 2030 climate action targets and meet the objective of the Water Framework Directive.*
- *Protect the natural and built environment and heritage of Co. Laois.*
- *Promote a clean and pristine environment conducive to a high standard of public health and wellbeing.*

❖ **Community and Rural Development**

- *Continue to engage with and offer advice to communities on grant schemes and other supports.*
- *Continue to provide supports for festivals and events.*
- *Support culture and arts programmes in County Laois.*
- *Support the community wide role of our libraries in enhancing the quality of life for citizens.*
- *Provide continued support to refugees and set up a new integration support service.*

❖ **Transportation and Mobility**

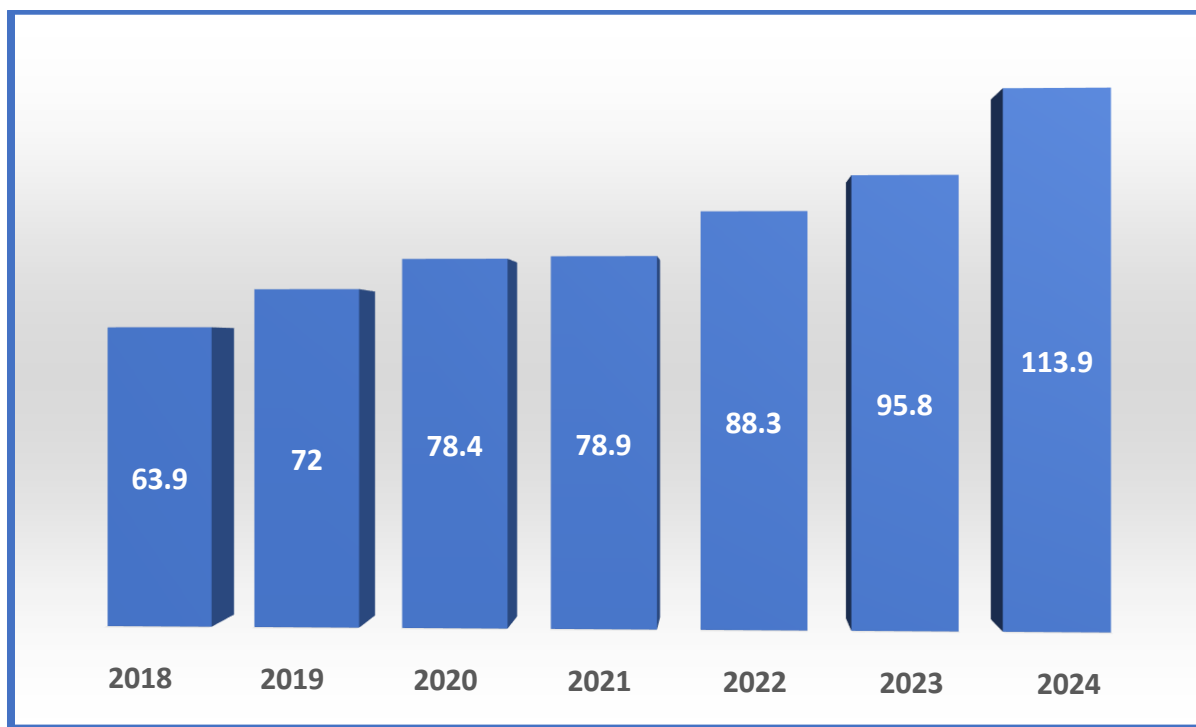
- *Continue to invest in rural and urban infrastructure through the delivery of the 2024 Road Works Scheme and the municipal district works schedules.*
- *Delivery of sustainable and active travel projects in collaboration with the National Transport Authority.*
- *Provide a good standard of car parking, bicycle facilities and bus shelters at key locations.*
- *Provide and maintain public street lighting to a satisfactory standard.*

❖ **Shared Services Centre**

- *Continue to lead and host the national shared service on pay and superannuation.*

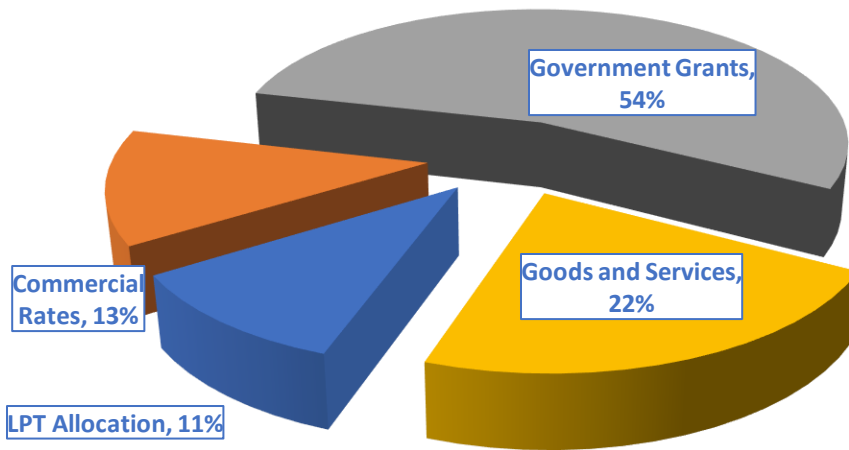
BUDGET 2024 MAIN POINTS

The past number of years have witnessed a steady increase in revenue expenditure committed to services provided by the local authority in County Laois. The Draft Revenue Budget put forward for consideration by the elected members now stands at €113.881 million. This represents an increase of €18.08 million or 18.8% over 2023. The sizeable increase is mainly accounted for by way of significantly increased expenditure in the housing and fire service divisions, the detail of which is set out in the following paragraphs. By way of comparison the 2024 draft Budget represents a doubling of that approved by the members in 2016.

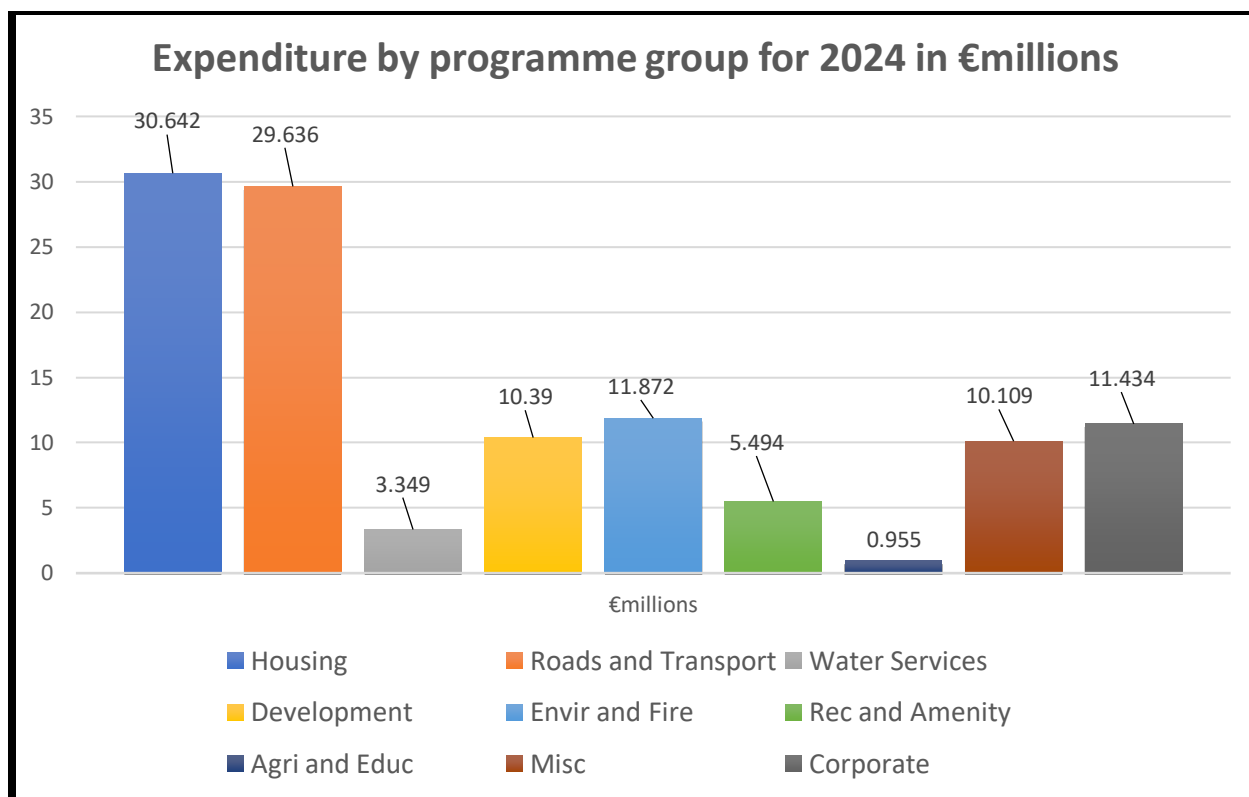


Laois County Council Revenue Expenditure by year in € millions.

SOURCES OF INCOME FOR REVENUE BUDGET 2024



- Local Property Tax Allocation : €12,144,712 (11%)
- Commercial Rates : €14,578,963 (13%)
- Government Grants : €61,662,000 (54%)
- Goods and Services : €25,490,000 (22%)



Laois County Council continues to exercise diligent budgetary oversight and sound financial management over all aspects of its spending. It is anticipated that there will be little or no credit or debit balance going into 2024, i.e. expenditure will match income for 2023.

The main factors that shape the drafting of the 2024 budget have been outlined in the introduction to this report, other factors are listed below.

On the income side:

1. An assumption of a steady state business environment with little or no additional yield or loss from commercial rates
2. An increased income from the Local Property Tax baseline allocation in the amount of €3.061 million.
3. An increase of €730,000 from rents on 2,380 Council owned houses,
4. An assumption that Laois County Council will benefit from State Grants for road upkeep and roads improvements in line with previous years.

5. An expectation of movement in vacancy levels in certain retail and business sectors
6. An expectation that the costs of recent agreements with trades unions including Fire Services (estimated at €2.5 million for 2024) will be met fully by central government.

On the expenditure side

1. To continue to progress deep retrofitting work in 62 Council owned houses in 2024 and to continue with a planned maintenance programme to address heating systems and other upgrades in Council housing stock.
2. To provide physical improvements in the County's main towns and villages including a continued use of the CPO process to acquire derelict buildings.
3. A requirement to provide matched funding to support a number of projects and programmes including,
 - a. the Town and Village Renewal Schemes
 - b. The Rural Regeneration Development and Urban Regeneration Fund projects
 - c. Outdoor recreational improvement schemes
 - d. CLAR programmes
4. The requirement to meet targets and develop actions to comply with Public Sector obligations in the Climate Action Plan 2021 and the draft Local Authority Climate Action Plan.
5. The requirement to provide support to business and tourism in the county.

The following areas of additional expenditure and expenditure in new areas over 2023 are of particular note:

- A sum of **€3.56 million** for payment and processing of grants to owners of vacant and derelict sites (Croí Cónaithe)
- An additional sum of **€4.635 million** is provided towards payment and availability of social housing through approved housing bodies

- **€150,000** additional expenditure over 2023 on the maintenance of Council housing units and an additional sum of **€37,000** is included for increased tenant engagement activity
- **€100,000** additional expenditure is included for relets of Council houses
- **€200,000** additional expenditure in a new programme to replace kitchen units and work tops in Council houses
- The provision of **€158,000** towards retrofitting of Local Authority houses,
- Inclusion of **€133,750** as a contribution of LCC towards the affordable homes subsidy
- The budget includes a new provision of **€325,000** towards the role to be taken by Laois County Council in providing integration support services;
- An increased allocation **€165,000** towards the ongoing Ukrainian Refugee accommodation crisis.
- Provision of **€455,000** for footpath improvements and repair at municipal level;
- Provision of **€750,000** towards street cleaning services representing an increase of **€206,500** over 2023,
- An additional sum of **€145,500** towards the maintenance of burial grounds
- An increased allocation of **€15,000** towards refurbishment of new Civil Defence HQ *(this is a contribution to a capital fund of c €150,000)*
- An additional **€2.34 million** towards the cost of providing the county Fire Service following agreement with Government in 2023
- Additional funding of **€35,000** towards the running and operation of the Dunamaise Arts Centre,
- Provision of an additional **€30,000** towards the purchase of new library book stock,
- A provision of an additional **€80,500** towards tidy towns and community groups
- Provision of an additional sum of **€101,500** for voluntary groups providing community and social services in the County
- An additional **€152,500** for new IT applications and cyber security;

- An allocation of **€35,000** in respect of STEM, DREAMBIG and Dreamspace programmes in the youth educational sector,
- Continued support for small businesses through the rates incentive and vacant property incentive schemes.

COMMERCIAL RATES AND SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESS

For the past several years Laois County Council has provided much support to local business primarily through the rates waiver and business restart grant schemes. Laois County Council and the Local Enterprise Office have successfully administered the Rates and Business continuity grants during the global pandemic as well as the Ukraine Enterprise Crisis Scheme.

Elected members are aware that the national Budget 2024 introduced measures to assist with the increased costs of running businesses (Increased Costs of Business Scheme). Under this measure there will be tiered grants of up to 50% of the commercial rate in 2023 for all businesses up to €20,000 per annum. Laois County Council will process the grant payments to approximately 1,550 business accounts in 2024. The Council has yet to be notified in respect of a start date and criteria governing the scheme.

The table below shows there are 1,687 rate paying businesses in the County. Given the large scale disruption witnessed over the past four years it is encouraging that so many business remain in a position to trade.

Rate Band	Number of Accounts	Value €
Less €1,000	319	207,752.00
€1,000 - €2,000	423	614,781.00
€2,000 - €5,000	555	1,821,558.00
€5,000 - €10,000	204	1,425,039.00
€10,000 - €25,000	111	1,638,061.00
€25,000 plus	75	8,876,876.00
	1,687	14,584,067.00

Commercial Rates Categories by Rate Band

There is no change to the commercial rate for 2024.

In an effort to continue this Council's support to small business and in order to further incentivise the revitalisation of town centres I am recommending retention of the following incentives already agreed by the Members in previous Budgets:

- The continuation of the rates payment incentive scheme so that all rate payers, operating viable business, that are liable for an annual rate payment of €10,000 or less will receive a benefit of a 4% rebate in 2024 where rate bills are paid promptly and in full. Small business accounts for around 89% of rate payers throughout the county,
- The retention and extension of the incentive scheme, to cover all areas of the County, for business start ups in vacant properties where vacant units lie idle for six months or more and whereby the owner can avail of a rate rebate of 75% down to 25% over three years.
- The retention of the "Shop Front" scheme whereby property owners can avail of a €750 grant.

THE WIDER LOCAL GOVERNMENT CONTEXT

The realignment of responsibilities and reporting arrangements relating to certain local government functions from the Department of Housing, Planning, and Local Government has been evident for a number of years. The current reporting relationships with State Departments are summarised as follows;

1. Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; Matters relating to social housing, rents, housing grants, County and Local Area Plans, Planning Policy, Urban Regeneration, Local Government Fund, Emergency Planning , Rural Water and Register of Electors and Workforce Planning Natural and built landscape, structures at risk funding.
2. Department of Transport: Matters relating to Rural Roads and public transport, Non National Roads Funding,
3. Department of Environment Climate and Communications. All matters involving reporting on broadband, waste management, energy efficiency, waste and litter grants and the performance of tasks set out under the National Climate Action Plan of 2019.

4. Department of Rural and Community Development. Matters relating to Towns and Village renewal, Clár, Library Development and funding, Rural Regeneration
5. Department of Justice and Equality: Matters relating to the Coroners Service and Community CCTV and integration,
6. Department of Finance: Matters relating to flood relief and flood defence capital projects, historical buildings,
7. Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht; Matters relating to Biodiversity, Creative Ireland, Arts, Sports Capital,
8. Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation: Matters relating to the LEO and enterprise support
9. Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine; Matters relating to animal welfare and veterinary inspections
10. Department of Defence relating to Civil Defence
11. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in respect of refugee matters.

It is also of note that in addition to Government Departments, the Council operates service level agreements with:

- Uisce Eireann (*Laois Co Council has no water services function since July 2023.*)
- The Food Safety Authority of Ireland
- The Local Authority Sector in relation to MY PAY
- Enterprise Ireland, in relation to the Local Enterprise Office
- The Sports Council

and works in very close collaboration with Transport Infrastructural Ireland (National Primary & Secondary Roads, Motorways) the Office of Public Works, Failte Ireland, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Sustainable Energy Agency Ireland, the Arts Council and the Heritage Council of Ireland. The Council also acts as a Financial Partner to Laois Partnership in relation to the outgoing LEADER and SICAP programmes.

The evolving changes in government programmes and shift in national priorities as well as the further development of the Council's role in leading local economic and social development have been thoroughly considered and are provided for in so far as practicable in the Council's Annual Service Delivery Plans and in turn in the 2024 Budget.

BUDGET 2024 ... MAIN DELIVERY PRIORITIES FOR LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL

Having regard to the views of the Elected Members, central government policy direction and statutory obligations the headings below indicate the focus of the Council's delivery efforts in the year ahead.

HOUSING SUPPLY AND ACCOMMODATION

While the capital investment in the provision of social housing is contained in the Council's Capital Programme, the revenue budget plays a significant part in the delivery and support of social housing under the seven pathways of "Housing for All" 2022 to 2026.

The Council's housing programme as set out in the "*Laois County Council, Housing Delivery Action Plan*" is on course to deliver **over 900 new homes** in the period 2022 to end of 2026. This is well in excess of the targets **(534)** set by the Dept of Housing, Planning and Local Government over the same period.

The Council continues to make steady progress under this programme and is on course to provide homes to **415** families/applicants in the current year. In addition, the Council will have processed **200** HAP applications this year thereby providing **615 applicants with accommodation in the current year**.

In the context of the consideration of the 2024 Revenue Budget it is helpful to review delivery for each of the past 5 years and to note progress towards delivery of housing and accommodation to the end of 2023.

The table below indicates that **1,335 homes** have been allocated to social housing applicants over the five year period 2019 to 2023 . **804** of that number are new builds provided by either the LA, Part V or through approved housing bodies. **508** new social homes have been built in the last 2 years and **292** of that number will have been completed in 2023, the latter a record number in a calendar year.

	Re-lets	LCC & CAS Acquisitions	LCC Construction/ Turnkey /Part V	Voids	AHB New build	Leasing	Totals
2019	50	42	7	5	26	8	138
2020	62	20	20	5	95	15	217
2021	56	14	46	0	102	34	252
2022	74	5	59	0	157	18	313
2023	73	34	70	0	222	16	415

**Total number of homes provided
over past five years**

1,335

In addition, over the period 2019 to 2023, the Council will have assisted over **1,670** applicants, cumulatively, to source and secure accommodation through HAP by the end of this year.

Accordingly, the Local Authority is on course to attend to the housing needs of over **3,000** families/applicants in the 5 year period to the end of 2023.

By reference to the current programme it is expected that the Council will oversee the delivery of **288 homes** to housing applicants in the next year through the various mechanisms set out below.

	Relets	LCC Acquisitions	LCC Construct	AHB delivery	Leasing	Total
2024	70	20	85	103	10	288

LCC target for social homes to be delivered for 2024

The resources available to the Council's housing department have expanded in the past number of years. This was necessary in order to deliver much needed housing through a blend of direct build, leasing, turnkey, Housing Assistance Payment, RAS, Part V (10 percent social, 10 percent affordable). It is the Council's intention to deliver up to 40 affordable houses in 2024 and provision has been made in the Budget for a contribution to the affordable housing subsidy to this end.

The vacant homes unit of Laois County Council has concluded a first pass survey of over 850 vacant or derelict homes throughout the County. The resultant action plan is to engage with owners to encourage refurbishment with support from Croí Cónaithe fund, to acquire properties by agreement or CPO and to maximize the uptake of such homes for social, affordable or private housing.

In the area of preventing homelessness, the Council continues to prioritise this matter and expenditure of €888,500 is provided for this purpose in 2024. This represents an increase of over 2023 and will ensure that the Council can work with service providers, provide out of hours services and make available more capacity for emergency short term accommodation locally.

The Rental Accommodation Scheme, the HAP Scheme and Long-Term Leases remain important sources of housing provision with expenditure recoupable from the Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government.

The 2024 Revenue Budget provides **€4,819,000** for the maintenance and improvement of its approximately 2,370 housing units. This represents an increase of €354,000 over last year.

THE UKRAINIAN REFUGEE CRISIS AND INTEGRATION SERVICES

Ireland along with European partners is playing its role under the Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC) to provide shelter and accommodation to Ukrainian citizens fleeing their war torn country. Members will be aware that this Council has set up a temporary department to work hand in hand with the Department of Housing and local Government, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the International Protection Accommodation Service the Irish Red Cross and other stakeholders in an effort to coordinate action on the ground. Laois County Council leads on the business of the Ukrainian Community Response Forum, a forum that was set up in early 2022 to bring stakeholders together in managing a local response.

It is anticipated that the Forum and the temporary internal department will be in place at least until the end of 2024 and that funding will continue to be forthcoming to enable this Council to fulfil the role. At the time of writing there are 1,240 Ukrainian refugees accommodated in several towns and villages in the County by way of hotels, guesthouses, private host families or specific purpose accommodation operating under a contract between property owners and IPAS.

In the year ahead it is envisaged that Laois County Council will:

- Continue to engage with DCEDIY and Department of Housing in the identification of suitable accommodation options including the activation and refurbishment of vacant homes and properties
- Continue to lead and coordinate the business of the Ukrainian Community Response Forum with a view to streamlining the delivery of services to and facilitating the integration of Ukrainian citizens into our Laois community.
- Establish a Local Authority Integration team later this year to be located in the Treo Nua Centre in Portlaoise,
- Prepare for the planned arrival of refugees from Syria and stepping up a resettlement interagency group for that purpose.

ECONOMIC AND ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT IN LAOIS

Local business and manufacturing are quite stable and unemployment rates are low in a very welcome turnaround from 10 years ago. It is, however, very much the case that foreign direct investment remains at a very low ebb in County Laois. Even though a lot of effort has been applied to acquiring and servicing enterprise and industrial lands Laois still occupies the bottom position of all counties on the national scale for FDI. The Council will continue to collaborate with IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland in Laois in order to reverse that position. It is clear on the evidence of the business of the LEO and of progress at J17 Enterprise Park that the County is in a good position to expand its enterprise and employment base and create an environment for sustainable job creation in the County.

Members will be aware that a number of companies have either completed development or are in the construction phase of new business projects at J17 National Enterprise Park. The ongoing work being carried out by the Council at this location involves the construction of the final phase (900metre) of link road and services to honour commitments to purchasers and to complete the park in accordance with the Masterplan for the area. These works will be completed in early 2024. It is also noted that IDA Ireland completed the purchase of 45 acres on the Mountrath Road in a further signal of confidence in Laois.

The refurbishment of the CUBE building on Tower Hill, Portlaoise opened for business in March 2023 and now provides space for two companies as well as providing services in the low carbon economy. The marketing and promotion of Laois in collaboration with the Laois Chamber Alliance, the IDA, EI, Laois Tourism, Midlands.ie and the business community will continue to be one of the Council's main goals in 2024.

The Council will also apply for funding support under the EU Just Transition Fund, 2023-2027, valued at €169 million. The Council will endeavour to draw maximum support under the Tourism and Economic Development headings to create employment and deliver on climate change and

energy efficiency goals in accordance with the Laois Local Economic Development Plan and the Midlands Enterprise Plan.

The Council's Business Support Unit and the Local Enterprise Office work hand in hand from their shared base at County Hall in promoting business activity in the County. The BSU and LEO will continue to provide support for micro enterprise, SME's and economic and tourism development generally as well as exploring and pursuing opportunities for investment into the County. The operational cost of the LEO continues as a contra item in the 2024 budget and a sum of **€1,600,000** is allocated to support enterprise, training, marketing and business innovation in Co Laois. It is to be noted that our Local Enterprise Office and Business Support Unit have been to the fore in providing training and awareness to the business community in recent years and in equipping business to embrace on line opportunities as they arise.

The Local Community Development Committee (an independent committee of the Council) was established in mid- 2014 and from 2016 was also designated as the Local Action Group (LAG) for the outgoing LEADER programme. No decision has, as yet, been made by the Department of Rural and Community Development in relation to LAG status for the new round of LEADER.

The committee is statutorily responsible for the planning and co-ordination of local and community development programmes, in accordance with the 5 year Local Economic and Community Plan that was adopted by Laois County Council in early 2016. Anew LECP is imminent. The LCDC also works in an oversight and partnership role with the Laois Partnership Company in delivering the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) in the County.

Laois County Council will therefore continue to play a significant and pivotal role in economic development locally and must maintain its structures to respond to new demands on Local Government. The Council must work in partnership with IDA and Enterprise Ireland and must identify opportunities as they arise to stimulate economic development and create the environment for job creation.

CLIMATE ACTION, ENVIRONMENT AND FLOOD RELIEF

The recently published report 2022 SEAI Public Sector Annual Report shows that for 2022 Laois County Council performed ahead of target for power consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. The measured reduction was 59% and 40% respectively in comparison to the baseline year of 2009. This compares very favourably with other public bodies. Members will be aware however, that a lot of progress is required in the mainstream areas of building insulation, energy production and transport. Laois County Council endeavors to take a leadership role in the community and to influence whenever way it can the behaviour and practices of citizens and businesses in our County.

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 places Ireland on a legally binding path to net-zero emissions no later than 2050 and to a 51% reduction in emissions by 2030. The Act provides the framework for Ireland to meet its international and EU climate commitments and to become a leader in addressing climate change.

The 2024 Budget provides for the continuation of actions already begun and the consolidation of the climate action team. €308,000 is provided in this regard.

To date Laois County Council has:

- prepared and approved a Climate Adaptation Plan
- prepared a draft Local Climate Action Plan
- appointed an Energy Performance Officer
- established a low carbon implementation team for Portlaoise
- taken the lead role as Midland Energy Agency, and
- prepared local biodiversity plans.

With the ongoing benefit of support from the Urban Regeneration Development Fund (€2.71 million) the following actions have been delivered to date in Portlaoise;

- Provision of solar powered litter bins
- Replacement of 2,500 street lights with energy efficient LED lighting
- Completed work on the first phase of the Triogue Blueway to assist school going children

- The provision of on street electric car charging points noting that a further 10 have been this week provided at the new car park on the former in Portlaoise.

The Council has also made progress on;

- ❖ An application for assistance under the EUJTF to provide charge points for electric vehicles at a number of locations around the county.
- ❖ In collaboration with the NTA, the planning of a town bus service for Portlaoise using energy efficient transport ,
- ❖ the planning of cycle path networks for Portlaoise and Portarlington
- ❖ The roll out of further better energy community projects in collaboration with SEAI
- ❖ The planting of additional tree stock in the county's towns and villages.

The Council successfully completed deep retrofitting and energy efficiency work on 188 Council houses in 2023 and will start or complete works on a further 63 houses in 2024. The objective is to bring homes to a minimum A2 BER standard.

In relation to flood relief works and drainage works members are well aware of the many studies required to be undertaken prior to works taking place in channel or on river banks. This is often the cause of frustration at community level. Notwithstanding, the following schemes are proceeding throughout 2024;

- ❖ The ongoing planning and implementation of flood relief works in Mountmellick, Portarlington and Clonaslee with a view towards making applications to An Bord Pleanala late this year (Mountmellick) and next year (Portarlington).
- ❖ The 2024 Budget provides €483,000 for River Drainage Maintenance, including anticipated income of €124,000 from the OPW for drainage works outside of the LCC-managed Drainage Districts. Unspent allocations from previous years are capitalised and carried forward as the Multi Annual approach gathers momentum.

The Local Authority Water Consultation Offices together with Teagasc, Department of Agriculture and major dairies will continue to target high priority water bodies in the county. In addition, the Environment Department of LCC will continue to carry out inspections under the Good Agricultural Practice Regulations and will provide advice as to the necessary programme of measures necessary for good nutrient management and environmental protection.

TOURISM, HERITAGE AND RURAL REGENERATION

Funding secured since 2018 under the Urban Regeneration Development Fund, the Rural Regeneration Development Fund, the Town and Village Renewal Fund and Fáilte Ireland capital funding has provided a major boost to the development of tourism and urban regeneration projects in the county. Over the past 5 years the following projects have been delivered to support the development of tourism, hospitality and recreation.

Emo House and Demesne
Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail
The Barrow Bluway
The Market House and Town Park in Portarlinton
The County Library in Portlaoise
The Laois School of Music
Fitzmaurice Square and St Peter's Graveyard restoration Portlaoise
Transport Hub at Portlaoise Railway Station
Design work on Borris in Ossory Courthouse
Portlaoise Destination Town Improvements
Visitor car parking facilities at Glenbarrow.

Laois County Council in partnership with Fáilte Ireland will draw down funding from the EU Just Transition Fund, 2023 to 2027. A number of Tourism projects including the development of visitor

amenities at the Rock of Dunamaise and a tourism guided trail are set to be considered for funding and activation in 2024. There will be no requirement for matched funding by Laois Co Council

Over seventy-five rural regeneration projects in Laois have benefitted through funding in the order of €18 million since 2019. These funds have come from programmes such as the Town and Village Renewal Scheme (TVRS), CLÁR, ORIS and the RRDF as mentioned above. The availability of such financial resources, aided by matched funding by Laois County Council, has progressed the tourism and recreational capacity of the county and will continue to enhance the attractiveness of Laois as a tourism and events destination. In addition, Laois County Council through its Revenue Budget will continue to support communities and volunteers by way of Tidy Towns Grants, Community Enhancement Scheme, Tourism Grants, Sports and Recreational Grants, Cemetery Grants etc to the order of **€1,251,000** in 2024.

It is gratifying to note that tourism and hospitality have been buoyant in 2023 with many events and festivals gaining support of the local, Irish and international market. The hosting of events such as the Electric Picnic, the National Ploughing Championship, the Stradbally Steam Festival and the Durrow Scarecrow Festival serve to demonstrate why Co Laois is a preferred venue for major events with the capacity to attract up to 500,000 people to our county on an annual basis.

The 2024 Budget includes a sum of **€35,000** in respect of support for the 2024 National Ploughing Championships to be held in Ratheniska.

The Council, having recently appointed a new Tourism Activator with Fáilte Ireland will continue to provide support to the Laois Chamber Alliance and will work collaboratively on developing the local tourism product. The 2024 budget provides a sum of **€238,000** to assist and support the further development of tourism and to improve tourist information facilities and online information for visitors to the County.

Construction work nearing completion the Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail (100km total length), the Baunreagh Trailhead building yet to commence, and work is well advanced on the Barrow

Blueway south of Vicarstown. On completion both will be top class amenities and will attract greater numbers of visitors to our county. The Slieve Bloom Trail is being undertaken by Coillte with a view towards having the full trail available to visitors by the middle of the 2024.

The protection of the natural and built heritage is an important function of Laois County Council, a countywide asset that is valuable in its own right but also to the tourism and visitor experience in the County. To this end and in acknowledging the value of built heritage to the tourism industry and local communities a sum of **€85,000** is provided in respect of Donaghmore Workhouse, the Fintan Lalor Homestead and heritage work at Barrowhouse and Kilbreedy graveyards.

CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2024 TO 2026

The elected members are obliged to consider an indicative three year capital programme. The revenue budget 2024 makes provision for repayment of portion of capital deficit balance incurred on a number of capital projects over the past number of years. The Capital Programme will be presented at the December meeting of Laois County Council for noting by the members.

Development Contributions

At this point in 2023 just over €727,000 in development charges has been collected. The revised and updated development levy contribution scheme was approved by the Members earlier this year.

LOCAL AUTHORITY GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

Audit Regime

It is fundamental to the management and operation of Laois County Council that a sufficient level of control and oversight is in place at all times. Good governance is a key factor in attracting new business to Laois as well as engendering trust and transparency for the people of Laois.

The Laois Internal Audit Committee was renewed following the local elections of 2019. I wish to thank the Chair and members of the Committee including Councillors Aisling Moran and Padraig Fleming for their work in this important area of local government scrutiny.

The Local Government Reform Act 2014 provided for the establishment of the National Oversight and Audit Commission to examine local government performance. The Council is also scrutinized by the Local Government Audit Service, by Transport Infrastructure Ireland, by the Department of Transport, by the Environmental Protection Agency, by the Department of Housing Planning, Community and Local Government and by the Health and Safety Authority. This level of oversight is essential in the delivery of a wide array of services provided by Laois County Council.

Members should note that Laois Co Council continues to report to the EU on a quarterly basis in relation to financial performance as it has done over the past 12 years.

Strategic Policy Committees

The Council's four Strategic Policy committees have addressed policy issues and challenges facing the County under the Chairs of Councillors Conor Bergin, Caroline Dwane-Stanley, Padraig Fleming and John Joe Fennelly in respect of; 1. Enterprise, Economic Development and Tourism, 2, Housing, Regeneration & Planning, 3, Climate Action and Community, 4. Transport, Environment and Emergency Services respectively and will continue their programmes of work and policy development for this Council in the year ahead.

Municipal District Committees

The Council's three district committees of Borris in Ossory/Mountmellick, Portlaoise and Graiguecullen/Portarlinton under the current Chairmanships of Councillors John King, Catherine Fitzgerald and Ben Brennan respectively, met to deal with issues relating to service delivery on an area basis and to agree programmes of works to be included in the new municipal works schedules. The municipal committees have addressed a range of road, traffic management, village renewal, community, housing, environmental improvement and service issues for their localities in 2023.

Conclusion

I wish to thank all the members of the Council, Cathaoirleach Councillor Paschal Mc Evoy and his predecessor Councillor Thomasina Connell for their continuing work in advancing the development and interests of the County .

I wish to include in my thanks the SPC chairs, and the chairs of the Municipal Districts.

I wish to acknowledge the members of staff who retired in 2023 and to thank them for their outstanding public service to the people of Laois.

I wish to convey my compliments to the many staff of this Council who have provided top class public service over an extensive range of services. I also wish to mention all those in our community who have given outstanding voluntary service throughout the year.

I wish to record my particular appreciation to Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance, to Julie Bergin, Financial Accountant, Donal Brennan, Simon Walton, Angela McEvoy, Directors of Services for their work in preparing the 2024 Budget and for their commitment and hard work over the past year. I wish to acknowledge the ongoing work and management of the MYPAY shared service centre under Dermot O Loughlin, Director of Services and to Carmel Mc Nicholl ,A/Director of Services in respect of dealing with the many issues arising from the Ukrainian crisis.

I recommend to the Council the formal adoption of the Budget and the General Annual Rate on Valuation of .2217 in respect of the financial year 2024.

Mise le Meas,

John Mulholland

Chief Executive

8th November 2023

SERVICE DIVISION – HOUSING, REGENERATION & PLANNING

HOUSING

Introduction

This Directorate's primary functions are:

- Guiding the sustainable development of our county
- Regenerating underutilized or derelict areas of the county
- Providing housing of varied tenures for those who cannot do so from their own resources.

Social Housing delivery is still a challenge for this local authority despite the significant progress to date and the resources being applied to its provision. The graph in figure 1 below demonstrates the increasing delivery of social housing over the past 6 years and expected delivery in 2023 and 2024.

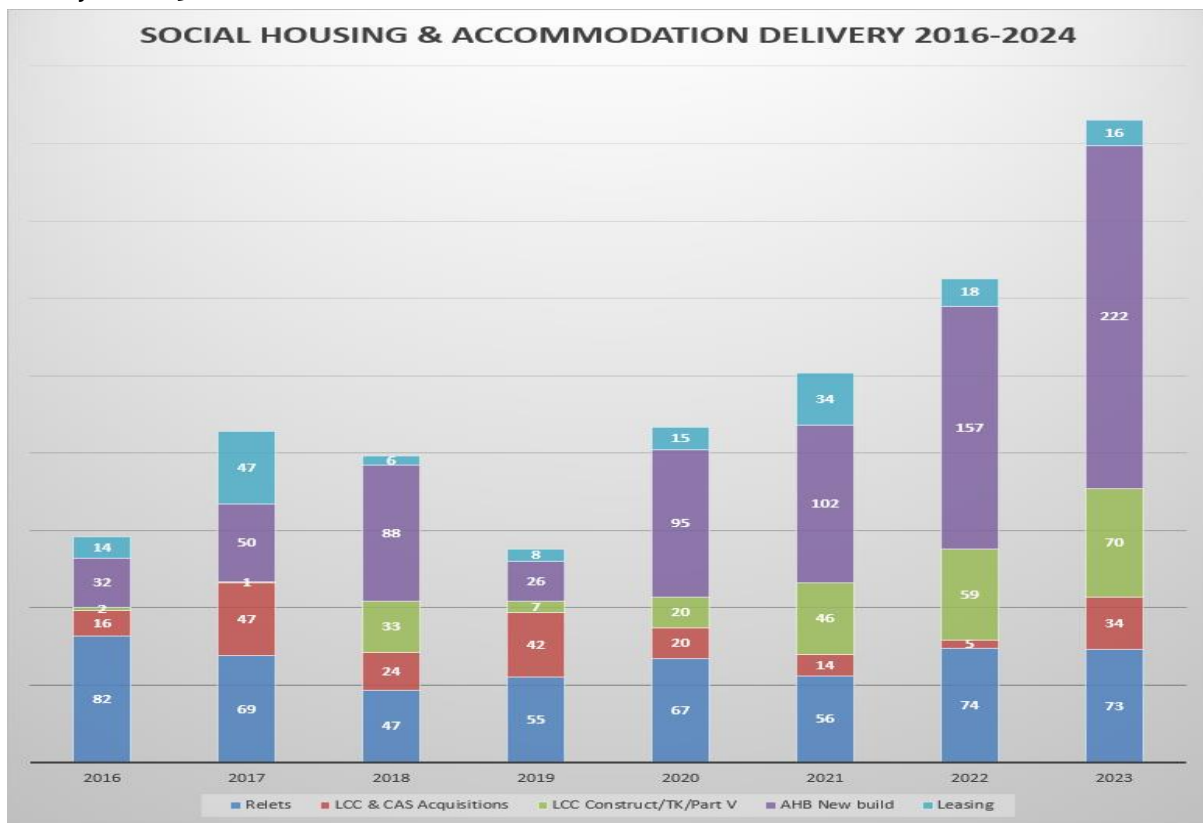


Figure 1. Social Housing Delivery 2016 - 2024

Figures below are the targets for social housing build delivery over the next 5 years as set out by the Dept of Housing. Also shown below is the programme of delivery as set out in the Laois Housing Delivery Action Plan 2022-2026 as defined under *Housing for All*.

Housing for All 2022-2026 Social Housing Build Delivery Target

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

Housing Delivery Action Plan 2022-2026- Social Housing Build Delivery Programme

Year	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	Total
Units	254	365	175	66	40	*900

Social Housing Build Delivery Programme – Expected Delivery 2023

Year	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	Total
Units	216	292				488

Table 1 below gives a summary of the social and voluntary housing projects that have either been completed this year or are currently at construction stage.

Scheme	Units	Progress
Completed		
Market Square, Portarlinton (Vignoles Gardens)	18	Turnkey – completed Q2 2023
Ballymorris Green, Portarlinton	34	Cluid – delivered Q1 2023
Dunamais View, Portlaoise	36	Cooperative Housing – delivered Q2 2023

Ashewood Walk, Portlaoise	4	Part V – delivered Q2 2023
Goldencroft, Portlaoise	24	Cluid – delivered Q3 2023
Harpur's Crescent, Portlaoise	44	Respond! – delivered Q3 2023
Harbour Court, Mountmellick	6	Direct Build – delivered Q4 2023
The Meadows, Portlaoise	48	Cluid – delivered Q4 2023
Mount Stewart, Portlaoise	4	Part V- delivered Q4 2023
Sruth na Gleanna, Killeslin	4	Part V – delivered Q4 2023
Under Construction		
Moore Street, Rathdowney	6	Direct Build , under construction
Bruach Na Habhainn, Killeen	1	Turnkey – Contractor on site
Church Avenue, Stradbally	31	Turnkey – Contractor on site
The Orchard, Ballylinan	1	Turnkey – Contractor on site
Oak Park Halting Site, Portlaoise	4	Direct Build, under construction
St. Kieran's, Errill	14	Direct Build, under construction
Mooreville, Rathdowney	7	Direct Build, under construction
Clonrooske Abbey, Portlaoise	18	Cluid – contractor on site
Ballymorris Green, Portarlinton	12	Cluid – contractor on site
Goldencroft, Portlaoise (Old CBS site)	30	3 Phases–on site. Ph 1 (13 units)expected delivery Q4 2022
Shannon St, Mountrath	20	Turnkey – contractor on site
Townparks, Borris-in-Ossory	26	Turnkey – contractor on site
Ard Branagh, Portlaoise	6	Circle Housing – contractor on site
Wallis St, Mountrath	11	Cooperative Housing – contractor on site

Table 1: Social & Voluntary Housing completed and currently under construction in 2023.

In addition to the above, there is a strong pipeline of projects currently going through the design, planning and procurement stages.

The management and maintenance of existing social housing units in accordance with the 2017 and 2019 Regulations is a core objective of this Council. To date in 2023 (up to 31st October 2023), 4,023 repair requests have been requested of the Council (Figure 3) and 3,780 have been completed.

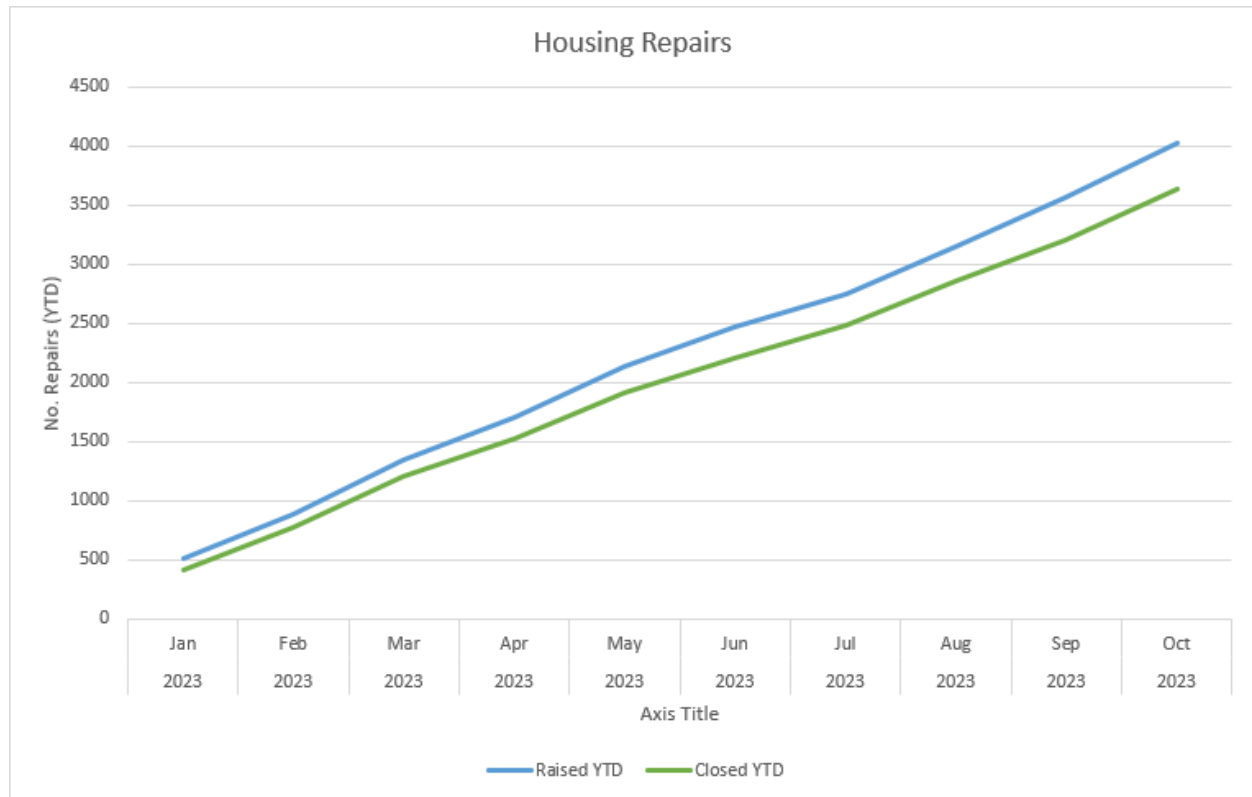


Figure 3: Repair requests to Laois County Council housing units

The management and repair of surrendered housing units is also a core objective of this Council. To date in 2023 (up to 30th Sept 2023), keys to 54 units (Figure 4) have been surrendered and re-let repairs to 56 units been completed.

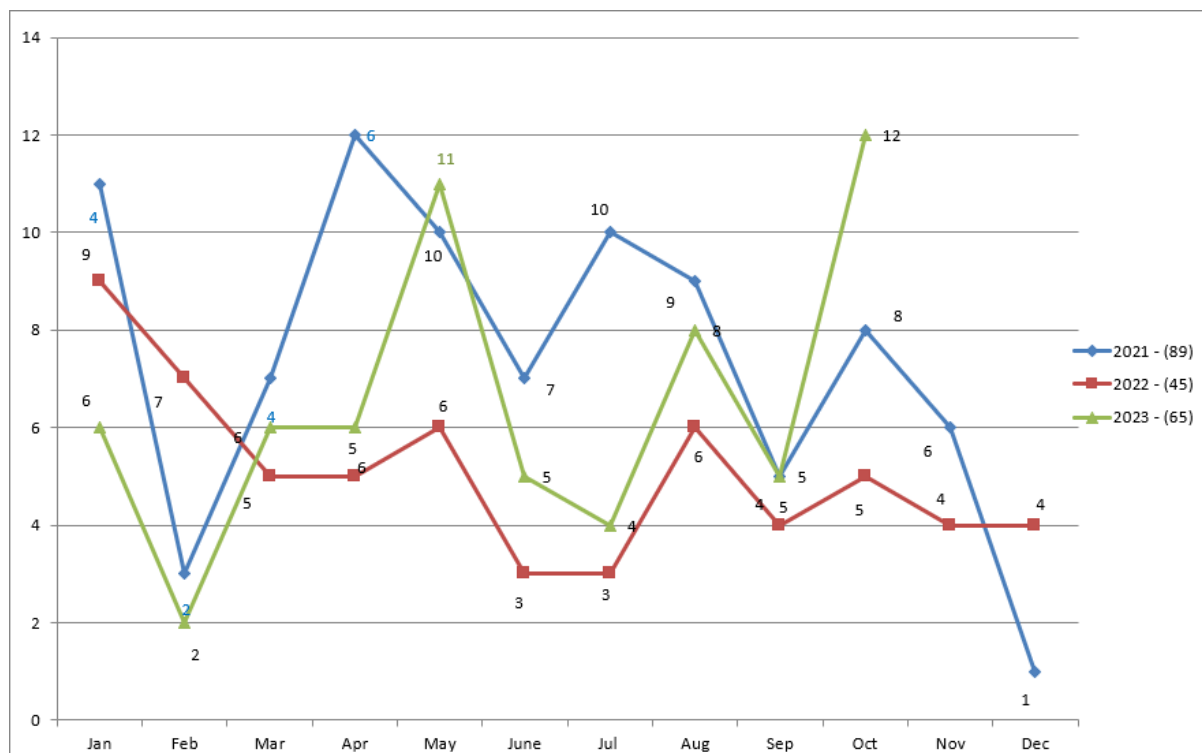


Figure 4: Surrender of Laois County Council housing units

Retrofitting of 159 houses was completed in 2023 and this is funded as part of the midlands energy retrofit pilot programme.

Retrofitting of 29 units was also completed in 2023 as part of the (EERP) energy retrofit programme.

Retrofitting work under 2022 EERP also approved for a further 62 properties in 2023.

- 1) Thornberry, Abbeyleix – 20 units (work commenced)
- 2) Church Avenue, Stradbally – 12 units (tender awarded)
- 3) Slieve Bloom Park, Clonaslee – 9 units (tender awarded)
- 4) St. John's Square, Portlaoise – 7 units (tender awarded)
- 5) Old School Road, Ballylinan – 7 units (tender awarded)
- 6) St. Fintan's Terrace, Mountrath – 6 units (tender awarded)

A survey under the 2023 EERP is underway for 53 properties.

1. St. Brigid's Place, Portlaoise
2. Fr. O'Connor Crescent, Mountrath
3. Erkindale Drive, Rathdowney
4. Rossmore View, Killeshin

In other areas of housing, so far in 2023:

- 40 loans have been approved under the new Local Authority Home Loan Scheme (since its introduction in Jan 2022);
- 39 works approved and underway in respect of the Disabled Persons Grant scheme for social houses and;
- 268 private housing grants have been approved, with 152 of those paid by 30th Sept 2023.

The Housing Assessment team continue to access housing applications in accordance with the 2011 Regulations in an efficient and effective manner. There are currently 1,580 approved applicants on the Council's housing list, a reduction of 215 since Sept 2022. This figure includes 790 accommodated through the Housing Assistance Programme (HAP). (As per SSC Limerick). 161 tenancies set up in 2023 to date.

The number of homeless presentations to date in 2023 is 242. Currently, there are 31 households in emergency accommodation, that is, 21 single persons and 10 family units.

The numbers presenting with Notices of Termination (NTQ's) continues to be a challenge and Laois County Council has commitments of €582,514.68 on emergency accommodation to date in 2023. The HAP Placement Finder has intervened in 52 cases to prevent homelessness. This will continue to be area of pressure in 2024.

Estate Management and Tenancy Management

An important function of the Housing section is community development through building the capacity of tenants to maintain their housing estates. Both the Estate Management Policy and Anti Social Behaviour policy are progressing through the SPC and will come into operation in 2024. It is vital that the tenants of estates are supported to maintain pride and a sense of ownership of their homes and within their estates.

A second Tenant Liaison Officer was employed in 2023 and both officers continue to work to support communities in dealing with issues as they may arise. A total of 544 visits to tenants were conducted in 2023 to date.

30 estates have received grants in 2023 totaling €26,660 to carry out maintenance and

improvement works. It is our intention for further estates to be supported in 2024 to continue this work.

Affordable Housing/ Cost Rental

Laois County Council continues in 2023 to assist those who wish to become homeowners to buy or rent through affordable purchase and cost rental schemes.

Minimum targets for Laois issued by Dept 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

To date in 2023, one Affordable Purchase scheme comprising 13 units has been approved by the Dept of Housing, with potential delivery in 2024. A further two applications comprising 27 units have been submitted for Dept approval.

Design has been finalised for a scheme on the Council's own landbank on the Stradbally Road, Portlaoise, on which it is envisaged over 40 affordable units will be constructed in a mixed tenure setting. Work has commenced on the mechanism for funding this scheme, which is yet to be determined.

Regeneration

The regeneration of towns and villages through addressing dereliction and vacancy continues to be a critical function for the Directorate going into 2024 , in order to ensure that all places maintain and improve their vitality and viability.

The Regeneration Team established by Laois County Council in 2022 to deal with this area is resourced through the Planning, Housing and Community Areas as follows :-

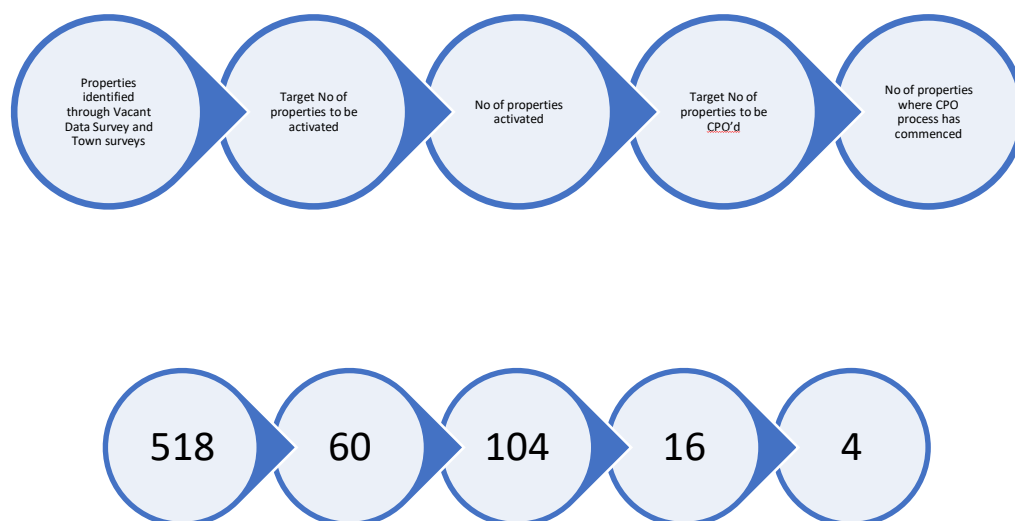
Vacant Homes Officer and supporting Housing and Planning Staff, Derelict Sites Technician and admin support and Town Regeneration Officer.

In 2023, the Vacant Homes Team surveyed properties identified as being vacant in data

supplied by GeoDirectory (via a Dept of Housing 2022 initiative). **865 properties have been surveyed** to date (residential and commercial), **518 properties were found to be vacant**, with 32 of those found to be derelict.

The Regeneration Team will endeavour to contact the owners of the vacant properties and outline the schemes available to return these properties to use for housing(both social and affordable) and/or commercial, community uses.

In 2023, Laois County Council have activated over 100 properties either through the vacant homes office or the derelict sites section, this is well in advance of the target set for the county of 60 properties. 30 of these properties to date have applied for the Croi Conaithe refurbishment Grant. The Council is in the process of CPO in relation to 4 properties and are purchasing through negotiation a number of sites and properties identified on both the Derelict sites register and Vacancy survey 2023.



It is the objective of this service to progress the following social housing projects in particular in 2024:-

- Iona , Portlaoise
- Hepburn Court and Clonrooske
- The Convent Site
- The County Hotel, Main Street Portlaoise;
- Maryborough School, Stradbally Road, Portlaoise;
- New Road, Portlaoise

The Council will in 2023 acquire further Derelict and Vacant sites with a view to their regeneration for both social, affordable and community use in a number of towns and villages throughout the county with a particular focus on the following towns in the first instance:-

- Portlaoise (under URDF 3)
- Portarlinton
- Rathdowney (identified TCF town)

Furthermore, under the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015, the implementation of the Vacant Site levy will continue until such time as the finalisation of the mapping for the Residential Zoned Land Tax (RZLT) has concluded in 2023-2024. The RZLT will not come into effect until 2025.

The Council will continue to work on addressing the effects of vacant and underutilised/ derelict houses/sites through its Regeneration Team. This co-ordinated action across the Directorate will be strengthened in 2024.

UKRAINIAN HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

RESPONDING TO THE REFUGEE CRISIS

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 resulted in one of the greatest displacements of people since the second World War. As the war continued to rage throughout 2023, Ireland along with its European partners performed its role under the Temporary Protection Directive to provide shelter and accommodation to Ukrainian citizens (Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection- BOTP's), fleeing their war-torn country. The Ukrainian Response Department working in hand with the Department of Housing and Local Government, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), the OPW, Irish Red Cross and other stakeholders, continues to coordinate service delivery and the response effort on the ground. Laois County Council leads on the business of the Community Response Forum, membership of which is drawn from 23 separate state and voluntary agencies, and 20 meetings have been convened to date.

Emergency arrangements implemented by DCEDIY from September 2023, resulted in the establishment of a Transitional Accommodation Centre (short stay duration) at the Cosby Estate in Stradbally, with a very supportive response from the local community. A new contract is now in place and the arrangement is expected to continue until June 2024. Numbers at this site, which remains under Department control, will fluctuate on a week to week basis.

During 2023, work progressed on the delivery of 42 Modular Homes in Rathdowney, with all anticipated to be occupied by Ukrainian families before year end. The ongoing management of this site is the responsibility of DCEDIY, with TUATH Voluntary Housing Association having been contracted for this purpose.

At the time of writing there are < 1241 TBC > Ukrainian refugees accommodated in several towns and villages in the County by way of hotels, guesthouses, private host families or specific purpose accommodation operating under a contract between property owners and DCEDIY.

With the extension of the EU Temporary Protection Directive up to March 2025 and the

continuing arrival of refugees from Ukraine, the support structures above, implemented by the Council, will remain in place for the duration of 2024.

Separately, during 2023, there was an unprecedented number of refugee arrivals to our shores from countries other than Ukraine, seeking International Protection. The government in response to this situation, and following on from commitments outlined in the White Paper on ending Direct Provision, approved the establishment of a permanent integration system (Local Authority Integration Teams) at local level that will provide support both to refugees (both resettlement programme refugees and BOTP's) and International Protection applicants. The new Laois Integration Support Service will commence operations by January 2024, from the Treo Nua Resource Centre, Portlaoise, where other community services and support programmes are already well established.

In the year ahead it is envisaged that Laois County Council will:

- Continue to lead and coordinate the business of the Community Response Forum with a view to streamlining the delivery of services to and facilitating the integration of refugees into our Laois community.
- Continue to engage with DCEDIY and Department of Housing in the identification of suitable additional accommodation options including the activation and refurbishment of vacant homes and properties
- Continue to engage with home owners in the activation of the Offer A Home Scheme;
- Liaise with the OPW and DCEDIY regarding the construction of modular homes at sites in the county
- Support newly arrived refugees and IP applicants and ensure their basic needs are met from the date of their arrival by
 - Linking them in with mainstream support services
 - Facilitating independent living and
 - Promoting social inclusion and encouraging integration

PLANNING

Laois County Council in conjunction with Carlow County Council have prepared a Draft Joint Urban Area Plan for Carlow Graiguecullen which will be on display before the end of 2023. This Plan provides a joint land use and policy framework for this key town within the Midlands and Southern Region. This will be supported by a Joint ABTA for the town also.

Local Area Plan and Local Transport Plans are being prepared for the towns of Portlaoise, and Portarlington during 2023. This will conclude in 2024.

The Draft Climate Action Plan has been prepared in 2023 (currently on display) and once adopted will inform the preparation of a Renewable Energy Strategy for Co Laois in 2024 to identify the needs of the county in terms of renewable energy targets and measures to be taken.

13 estates have been taken in charge to date in 2023 with a further 4 estates advertised to be taken in charge in early 2024. Further estates are currently being worked on and will be proposed for taking in charge by the end of 2024.

While the overall number of planning applications has decreased in 2023, there have been pre-planning meetings for a variety of developments which may come to fruition in 2024.

The Broadband office has included a number of actions for implementation of the Local Digital Strategy 2020-2024 including the public awareness in the community, skills development through delivery of the STEM Programme in conjunction with the LOETB and Technological University Of Shannon (TUS), etc., will continue to be pursued in 2024.

ARTS & HERITAGE

The Arts Office presented a wide ranging programme during 2023 including Bealtaine,

National Poetry Day, Seachtain na Gaeilge, Creative Ireland programme, artists in schools, and summer arts programme.

Laois Culture Night was a huge success with a packed programme of events taking place on Friday 22nd September 2023. Laois had a broad spectrum of events to enliven the county happening from 4pm until late. New venues came on board this year. The highlight of the evening was the official launch of ‘Resonance by David Beattie, a sculpture piece outside the new library on Main Street, Portlaoise . This artwork was commissioned under Open Competition by Laois County Council and funded by the Per Cent for Art scheme.

The Arts Office curated an evening of events in Stradbally; Viewing of Áille na Háille, Stone Sculpture by Benedict Byrne at Mc Keon Stone LTD, "Local Materials, My Vision" an Exhibition by Evgeny Chubatyy was held in The Gallery, Laois Arthouse Stradbally and a Night Creatures Parade. This outdoor parade with illuminations involved 200 participants in Court Square, Stradbally. 200 children and young people took part in the parade. Workshops to make props, were held during summer art camps and prop making, and movement workshops were held in the schools.

The evening in Stradbally concluded with a concert by ‘Hank Wangford and the Messages’, a country music concert in the Stradbally Library and it was filled to capacity.

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 2023. Summer Art Workshops were held in

- ▶ Rathdowney
- ▶ Rosenallis
- ▶ Stradbally
- ▶ Portarlinton

The Leaves Festival 2023 brings the best of Irish writing and music to Co Laois in November 2023 with events at a number of locations and with Aingeala Flannery's book 'The Amusements' as One-County-One-Book.

A New Arts Strategy will be developed in 2024.

The Heritage service had a productive year in 2023. Planned projects for 2024 include the 'Laois in 100 Objects' project, digital representation/ model of the Fort Protector site, and the annual heritage awareness programme (including Heritage Week and Science week events).

The proposed budget provides for the following:

- Work will assist in maximising drawdown of funding through the Community Monuments Fund on Sites such as **Barrowhouse Church & Graveyard** and **Kilbreedy Cemetery** in 2024.
- Just Transition project to address built and natural heritage in graveyards in partnership with Offaly County Council;
- National Biodiversity Action Plan initiatives;
- Works on Donaghmore Workhouse

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The Community Section manage a range of programmes including :

- Age Friendly programme
- Youth Programme (in association with Youth Work Ireland)
- Town and Village Renewal Scheme
- Community Recognition Fund
- Pride of Place All Island Competition
- Community Grants
- Community Awards (in association with Laois PPN)
- Laois Connects Mental and Physical Wellbeing programme

- Healthy Ireland Programme and Keep Well Programmes
- Recreation and Sport
- Burial Grounds
- Climate Action
- Energy Improvement

Some highlights from these areas are included below:

This year, Laois County Council supported two entries – Camross Community Association and Stradbally, Vicarstown, Timahoe Wellness Hub - for the 2023 IPB All-Island Pride of Place competition. Judging took place in July and results will be announced on the 10th November, 2023.

Laois Connects Mental Health and Wellbeing Awareness programme took place from the 9th to the 15th October, 2023, with free events taking place across the county for the week. This was a hugely successful event organised by a multi-agency working group to raise awareness for positive mental health.

The Council continued its positive and collaborative working relationship with Laois PPN. During 2023, with a large and diverse membership base of 653 Member Groups across the County.

The Laois Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) manage or provide oversight to the distribution of:

- Distribution of €291,487 (Current €142,828, Capital €145,473, Women's shed €2,915 & Administration €14,574) to 139 groups under the Community Support Fund
- The Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme with a budget of €715,706 and an additional Ukrainian allocation of €133,687 and a late Ukrainian Allocation of €5,750.

- The LEADER 2014-2020 Programme, operating through the auspices of the Laois Local Action Group (LAG), concluded on the 31st March 2021 having approved 134 projects to the value of €5,557, 492.21.
- The Transitional LEADER programme commenced on the 1st April 2021 with a project budget allocation of €1,092,976. To date, under the Transitional LEADER programme, 50 projects have been approved.
- 12 projects have been approved under the European Union Recovery Instrument Fund (EURI) with a project allocation of €485,767, through Laois LAG.

Other initiatives Laois LCDC has spearheaded during the year include successful applications under the Healthy Ireland Round 4 Fund, working with agency partners to implement health and wellbeing initiatives in the county.

The Council works closely with Laois Leisure who continue to operate both Portlaoise and Portarlington Leisure Centres, with an expanded voluntary board representative of both localities. The centres now operate as Laois Leisure Portlaoise and Laois Leisure Portarlington. The Council also provided on-going advice and financial support to Ballinakill Community

Development Association to successfully operate the outdoor swimming pool during the summer of 2023.

Twenty-one play facilities continue to be managed, maintained, and upgraded by Laois County Council. Laois County Council commenced the management of Borris-in-Ossory playground and multi-use games area (MUGA) following its completion in June 2023.

Work has been completed on Ballyfin Playground, funded under the CLÁR programme and it is expected to open at the end of November 2023. Trumera Community Hall Committee also received CLÁR funding for a community playground and work will commence on this project in January 2024.

Laois County Council again delivered a National Bike Week programme in May 2023, with over 2500 people taking part in over 50 cycling events organised by Laois County Council and our community partners. Laois County Council delivered a range of outdoors events to celebrate

National Play Day and National Recreation Week in July 2023 having received funding of €3,000 from DCEDIY to support events in the community.

Laois County Council has published its Draft Climate Action Plan which is currently at public consultation stage.

Work is currently underway on a Biodiversity Demonstration Garden at Laois Education Centre which will serve over 200 schools across County Laois and beyond.

Laois County Council has supported the establishment of several Sustainable Energy Communities (SECs) in the county including Durrow, Portarlinton, Abbeyleix and Portlaoise. Support is also provided by way of bridge funding for Energy Master Plans.

Laois County Council is the lead authority of the Midland Energy Agency (MEA) which comprises five local authorities working in collaboration to meet 2030 national targets. An MOU between SEAI and Laois County Council has been signed along with SLAs between Laois County Council and four other local authorities in the MEA. A Pathfinder Report has been prepared for all five local authorities and we are engaged with SEAI to progress Pathfinder process.

One to One Consultations were held with Laois Federation of Tidy Towns members with experienced Tidy Towns Adjudicators to advise groups on completion of national tidy towns application forms.

Laois Federation of Tidy Towns Awards a total of 17 entries and awards were presented across 9 categories.

Tidy Town Grants were paid to 21 groups to the value of €27,700.

Environmental Community Grant Scheme were paid to 94 groups to the value of €30,500.

Laois County Council appointed a town regeneration officer in April 2023 in line with the Government's Town Centre First policy. The town regeneration officer has established town teams in both Mountrath and Rathdowney and is working with both groups to identify

projects that will promote town centre recovery and regeneration. The town regeneration officer will also assist town teams to identify sources of funding that will enable them to advance projects that will make their towns better places to live work and visit.

HUMAN RESOURCES

The level of recruitment activity during the year has significantly increased as vacancies continued to arise from retirements, resignations and centrally funded positions. 33 recruitment competitions have been held year to date in 2023. This resulted in a total of 439 candidates being interviewed. Further recruitment will continue to year end as required. A total of 114 staff appointments have been made to date in 2023.

CORPORATE AFFAIRS

The Register of Electors continues to be updated and promoted in line with the provision of the Electoral Reform Act, 2022.

Work continues in relation to identifying measures to improve energy efficiencies in facilities management so as to the achieve targets set out in Laois County Council's Climate Adaptation Strategy.

Preparatory works have commenced in relation to holding of 2024 Local Elections.

LIBRARY SERVICE

Public Libraries continue to offer an efficient frontline service though the networks of eight branch libraries for all members providing them with free access to books, media, government and Council information, online services and internet/wifi/printing facilities.

Portlaoise New Library – The new library was officially opened on Monday the 17th July by Minister Heather Humphreys , Minister of Rural and Community Development .The

County Library facilitates the provision of educational and cultural information, provide free digital access to WIFI, PCs and a range of free events .The new library contains a wide range of materials for borrowing and provides many other services to both regular library users and those passing through. The library has an extensive selection of books, from best sellers and biographies, to travel guides, sports DIY and gardening books. A large range of CD's and DVDs are also provided and can be borrowed free of charge. Daily newspapers and local newspapers can be browsed, and a large selection of

magazines can be borrowed. Since opening in July the new library has welcomed a large number of visitors and locals- over 45,000 (18th July -18th October 2023)people visited the library and more than 35,000 items of stock have been issued for the same period.

The Laois Library **Summer Stars Programme** 2023 has had over 1500 children in the County sign up to the annual summer star reading programme. A county wide event programme hosting over 300 individual events were 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 1250 free craft bags were created and collected for young readers and families coming into the library

Free Little Library Bag Laois County Library Service provided a "My Little Library book bag to every child starting school in September for collection in the library, 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 in this age category. 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.

Dormant Accounts Funding And ICT Grant 2023 : The library service were awarded Dormant Account Funding towards sensory library services in Portlaoise New Library of €5019.77 -Sensory Library (Equipment and Resources) .Laois County Library Services were awarded grant aid of €40,399.35 to provide new computers, laptops and iPads in our public library networks.

As part of the Decade of Centenaries programme , Historian in residence Terry Dunne has compiled a podcast series on some of the stories and local history of Laois during this time , the podcasts can be found at Laois Local Studies website and for lots more detail on the various local history collections, materials and photographs available showcasing Laois History and Heritage, including the Colonel James Fitzmaurice Collection, the Helen Roe Collections and many more.

Free Lifelong learning skills in the library (in partnership with LOETB): The Library service continued our adult community learning in collaboration with the LOETB. Some of the subjects from the free learning initiatives-over 80 separate classes held in our libraries include, digital skills, photography, creative writing, art, wreath making and other seasonal crafts.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The IT section continued to invest in the modernisation and digitisation of services for the public, members, and staff.

In relation to Cyber Security, Laois County Council has invested in a Security Incident and Event Management (SIEM) system to correlate all digital activity and security related information into a single system to identify suspicious activity on the Council network and systems.

Laois County Council have employed an Information Security Officer and Cyber security practitioner, dedicated to the protection of citizens information. A Security Operations Centre (SOC) has also been put in place to ensure monitoring of the SIEM at evenings and weekend.

The Council has upgraded our online payments portal, adding the option of paying Commercial Rates online, in a further step in expanding digital services to citizens. Improved broadband connectivity and network infrastructure has been rolled out to Council Area offices and Libraries.

SERVICE DIVISION – ROADS/TRANSPORTATION, ENVIRONMENT, WATER SERVICES, FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES.

ROADS/TRANSPORTATION

The **County Laois Roadworks Scheme 2024** will be presented to Elected Members in March 2024, following notification of Department of Transport and Transport Infrastructure Ireland Grants for 2024. This Budget anticipates similar levels of grant funding to that provided in 2023.

LCC-provided expenditure, allocated to Roads and Transportation for 2024, is consistent with 2023 funding levels and provides for similar levels of service to those provided in 2023, noting that, should there be significant cost increases in 2024, there will be a commensurate reduction in service levels provided.

As previously advised to Members, there have been significant increases in energy supply costs to the **Public Lighting Network**. Similarly, the inventory of public lights has increased significantly because of estates taken in charge and through the provision of new public lights. Laois County Council's inventory of public lights is approaching 10,000 light units, 69% of which have now been retrofitted to LED. Without the retrofitting programme, increased energy costs, of circa €320,000 over that provided in the 2024 Budget, would be required. In that way, Budget 2024 provides for similar levels of service, noting the offsetting of increased energy supply and maintenance costs against significant additional lights being added to the inventory of public lights. The public lighting maintenance contract will be re-tendered in 2024.

In 2020 Elected Members approved a multi annual approach to **River Drainage Maintenance** and 4 years into the Programme there has been substantial progress made. In the main, drainage maintenance works are focussed on the 7 designated Drainage Districts in County Laois, for which Laois County Council has direct responsibility. Various consent applications are under consideration by An Bord Pleanála and other, local, consent applications are being prepared with a view to the 2024 Programme of Works. Notwithstanding a very wet 2023, significant river drainage maintenance works were completed, various properties and public infrastructure protected from the adverse impacts of flooding.

The 2024 Budget provides €483,000 for River Drainage Maintenance, including anticipated income of €124,000 from the OPW for drainage works outside of the LCC-managed Drainage Districts. Unspent allocations from previous years are capitalised and carried forward as the Multi Annual approach gathers momentum.

Following the establishment of the Active Travel Unit in 2022 Budget 2024 also provides for anticipated grant allocation of €3,000,000 from the National Transport Authority, to fund and deliver a **Smarter Travel** focussed Transportation Programme.

Street Cleaning and public realm maintenance form a critical part of Budget 2024. Increases in waste disposal costs, the expansion of the litter bin network throughout the County (228 litter bins), the excellent ‘blue-bag’ partnerships between Laois County Council and local Community Groups, all give rise to increased costs to the street cleaning budget. That noted, Laois County Council will introduce some, separate, efficiencies to the street cleaning service in early 2024, such that Mountmellick is provided with a more regular street cleaning service.

ENVIRONMENT

Recovery and Recycling Facilities Operations

This budget provides for the ongoing operation of both the Waste Transfer Station at Kyletelesha and Civic Amenity Sites (Kyletelesha and Portarlinton). To maintain current standards of service price increases will be introduced in January 2024. This is to offset increased waste disposal costs to Laois County Council and increases in the Landfill Levy.

The C&D waste disposal facility (Cell 15) is performing very well and represents a very significant source of income for Laois County Council (€500,000).

Budget 2024 continues to fund 43 Bring Bank facilities throughout County Laois. In May 2021, Laois County Council entered a regional contract with Longford, Offaly and Westmeath County Councils for the collection and treatment of glass and cans at the facility. This contract continues and the Budget provides funds to underpin Laois County Council’s part in the Contract.

Litter Management

Priority is given to litter management, the clean-up of illegal dumping and anti-dumping initiatives. Members are aware of multiple such initiatives and this Budget anticipates similar provision in 2024.

Each year community groups are supported through grants towards projects which promote anti-litter awareness and environmental education initiatives. The Council continues to work with communities, organising and supporting various clean-up campaigns.

This Budget supports the deployment of covert cameras etc. Such deployment is subject to the publication of a Code of Practice and Guidelines for Local Authorities, such that suitable, adequate, Data Protection Impact Assessments are in place prior to deployment.

Waste Regulations, Monitoring and Enforcement

The 2024 Budget funds a Waste Management and Compliance Unit which monitors compliance with the Waste Regulations, through the processing of Waste Permit Applications, Certificates of Registration, conducting inspections, monitoring/control of waste movements and enforcing legislation for producer responsibility (Packaging Waste Regulations etc).

In 2023, Enforcement Officers investigated numerous illegal dumping incidents, resulting in the removal of over 300 tonnes of waste across County Laois. The 2024 Budget enables a similar level of service.

Water Quality, Air and Noise Pollution

The Water Quality Framework requires local authorities to monitor water quality in rivers and lakes. In collaboration with the Local Authorities Waters Programme Office (LAWPRO), a number of river catchments are identified as Priority Areas for Action where measures and actions will be deployed to improve the water quality. This Budget provides for the resources to support the measures required for the Priority Areas for Action and further provides for assessment and monitoring of Water Pollution Act(s) Discharge Licences, assessment of nutrient management plans, domestic wastewater treatment systems and farm inspections, all in support of enhanced water quality.

Water Services

Laois County Council is the statutory authority overseeing the Rural Water Programme, Small Private Supplies and oversight of Domestic Wastewater Treatment Systems (Septic Tanks). Funding, in addition to technical and administrative supports, is provided annually by Laois County Council to support the Rural Water Programme. Budget 2024 retains funding levels appropriate to ongoing support for the Rural Water Programme.

In parallel, Budget 2024 provides for upwards of 50 Laois County Council staff who operate and maintain water treatment, water distribution, wastewater treatment and wastewater collection networks on behalf of Uisce Eireann. Laois County Council recovers all costs associated with this service provision.

Fire and Emergency Services and Civil Defence

Fire and Emergency Services represents a very substantial service area for Laois County Council.

Resolution of recent industrial action gives rise to significant additional requirement for recruitment of retained fire fighters (25 plus), introduction of new pay structures, funding of community fire safety measures. Additional recruitment gives rise to increased training and PPE costs. In financial terms the cost of fully implementing the recent agreement over €2 million in Year 1 and €1million per annum after that.

The 2024 Budget outlines expenditure for day-to-day operations in the sum of €6.82 million and increase of €2.36 million over and above the 2024 Budget (€4.46 million). Budget 2024 provides that all costs in implementing Workplace Relations Commission agreement will be recovered from Central Government.

To fund Laois County Council's role as a Principal Responder to Major Emergency Events this budget allocates €101,000 for Major Emergency Management in 2024.

Laois Civil Defence continues to support Laois County Council and the Principal Response Agencies. The Civil Defence also supports local communities and events on an ongoing basis. Budget 2024 commences an ongoing commitment of €15,000 per annum, to fund refurbishment works at the new County Laois Civil Defence Headquarters at Kea Lew, such that the facilities are in keeping with existing and future needs of Civil Defence.