

LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL
COMHAIRLE CHONTAE LAOISE



BUISÉID DRÉACHT 2021
DRAFT BUDGET 2021

LAOIS COUNTY COUNCIL - 2021 BUDGET

To: An Cathaoirleach and Each Member of Laois County Council

Dear Councillor,

In the relatively long history of local government, spanning over 120 years, it is fair to say that rarely has there been a time of such uncertainty in respect of budgetary planning.

BUDGET CONTEXT 2021

While the last number of Revenue Budgets were prepared against the backdrop and under the residual influence of the 2009/2010 recession, the Council now has a new set of pressures against which the 2021 budget must be considered.

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic the Members have been regularly updated regarding its impact on the finances of Laois County Council. It is clear that without Government support, the impact can be summarised as follows:-

	Rates Support Waiver (1)	Goods & Services Loss (2)	Covid-19 Existing Spending (3)	Total Estimated Impact (2+3)
2020	€6,000,000	€500,000	€400,000	€900,000
2021	??	€450,000	€150,000	€600,000
2022	??	€300,000	€100,000	€400,000
2023	??	€200,000	€50,000	€250,000

The above table is based on an assumption of a reasonable worst case scenario in relation to corona virus infections continuing throughout 2021 and that even in the event of improved treatments and/or the wide availability of an effective vaccine there will be impacts across all sectors of the economy and business world for a period extending into 2022 and perhaps 2023.

The impact of Covid-19 on small business, hospitality, entertainment and tourism is massive. Historical experience will tell us that a minimum reduction of 10% in GDP and a minimum increase of 10% in unemployment will translate straight to the bottom line of Laois County Council's Revenue Budget and will impair significantly the Council's capacity to provide services in a number of areas. In the current year 2020, we know that income streams via commercial rates, planning fees, parking charges and road opening fees will be negatively affected by about €500,000. In addition, the Council has incurred additional expenditure of about €400,000 in providing community supports, health protection measures, public messaging, retrofitting public offices and IT improvements in response to the public health threat.

Fortunately, in respect of 2020 the Government has put in place measures to;

- support local business through the Business Restart Grants, and
- assist Local Authorities by way of the Rates Waiver Support grant.

For Laois County Council this means that it will receive around €6 million in respect of loss of income from rates in 2020. In addition, it is expected that there will be support forthcoming in respect of income losses from goods and services and additional Covid-19 expenditure for 2020.

Looking ahead to the next 12 months, there is a reasonable expectation of further Government support for Laois County Council to cover expected losses under the income headings of commercial rates and Covid-19 costs. On the other less positive side it is expected that business vacancy rates will inevitably increase giving rise to further uncollectable income from this source in 2021.

In the final analysis, therefore, and in the midst of so much uncertainty, it remains the case that a balanced budget must be presented for the consideration of the Elected Members. On the assumption that Government supports will continue through 2021 together with a

critical examination of spending in certain service areas, the budgetary tables attaching to this report are presented in balance for 2021.

Members should note that in spite of the very difficult prevailing circumstances every effort has been made to ensure the Laois County Council Revenue Budget provides a business/community stimulus effort and more importantly that it protects the most vulnerable people in our community. At a summary level, therefore, the 2021 Revenue Budget aims to:-

- (i) Provide assistance and support to those most at risk of homelessness;
- (ii) Stimulate social and community recovery in collaboration with the community fora, the PPN and leveraging the various schemes sponsored by Central Government Departments
- (iii) Stimulate economic and business recovery through local development and investment and infrastructure;
- (iv) Promote County Laois as a location of preference for remote working and environmentally friendly tourism;
- (v) Promote a clean and pristine environment conducive to a good standard of public health and wellbeing, and;
- (vi) Make provision for the many challenges to be addressed under the Climate Action Plan

THE BUDGET PROCESS

The attached Budget for the financial year 2021 has been prepared in accordance with statutory format for consideration by the Elected Members. The Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government by Circular Fin 14/2020, dated 31/08/2020 determined the period November 2nd to November 30th as the prescribed period for County Councils to hold their 2021 Statutory Budget Meetings.

Laois County Council's statutory budget meeting is scheduled to take place on Monday, 9th November 2020 at 11.00am. The process of considering and adopting the Budget must be concluded before November 22nd 2021.

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.
- The consideration by the elected members of the impact of a variation of the Local Property Tax rate.
- 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.

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. In the current year the estimated income from such sources is based on less than certain assumptions. 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.

In addition to adopting the budget, the Elected Members must also determine the annual rate on valuation to be levied on commercial properties. Members are aware that an owner assisted revaluation process was completed by the Valuation Office in County Laois in 2018 and that some appeals to the VO remain to be determined.

RESERVED FUNCTIONS OF ELECTED MEMBERS

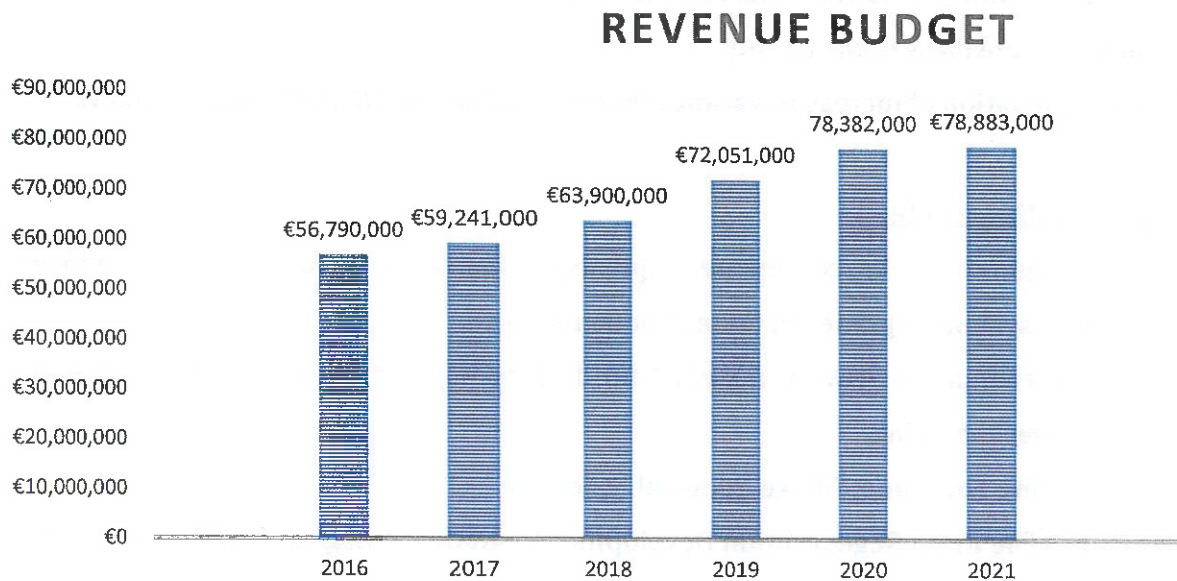
The members have a number of reserved functions in relation to the budgetary process as follows:

- (i) They have the power to vary the Local Property Tax Rate (LPT) by a factor of plus or minus 15%. At the September 4th Special Meeting of the Council the Elected Members made a decision not to change the LPT as it applied in 2020.
- (ii) The adoption of allocations at Municipal District Level.
- (iii) They 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 2021 MAIN POINTS

Over the past number of years there has been a steady increase in revenue expenditure and investment into services provided by the local authority in County Laois. Notwithstanding the difficult operating environment this trend is continued in 2021 and the revenue Budget for members' consideration now stands at €78.883 million, an increase of €501,000 over 2020 and €22,093,000 over the 2016 Budget.

REVENUE BUDGET 2016-2021



Laois County Council continues to exercise prudent budgetary oversight and sound financial management over all aspects of its spending. The anticipated credit going into 2021 will stand at approximately **€5,000**.

The main factors that shape the drafting of the 2021 budget have been detailed in the introduction to this report, other factors are listed below.

On the income side:

1. An assumption of continued financial support from Central Government to compensate for loss of commercial rates and Covid-19 costs
2. Retaining an increased income from the Local Property Tax, as in 2020, in the amount of €504,256.

3. An increase of €500,000 from rents on Council owned houses.
4. Broadly similar allocations to Laois County Council under the non-national roads programme as compared with 2020
5. Some buoyancy in commercial rates income, particularly from large utility providers and new business in the county.
6. An expectation of increased vacancy levels in certain retail and business sectors

On the expenditure side

1. The requirement to commence a planned maintenance programme to address heating system upgrades in Council housing stock.
2. A requirement to provide matched funding to support a number of projects and initiatives including,
 - a. the Town and Village Renewal Schemes
 - b. The Rural Regeneration Development and Urban Regeneration Fund projects
 - c. the Fáilte Ireland Tourism Destination Towns scheme
 - d. CLAR programmes
3. The requirement to meet targets and develop actions to comply with Public Sector obligations in the Climate Action Plan 2019.
4. The requirement to ensure resilience and community wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic
5. The requirement to provide support to business and tourism recovery in the county.
6. To provide improvements in quality of life in the County's main towns and villages.

The Annual Budget for 2021 provides for a significant and continued level of investment in the social, cultural and economic wellbeing of County Laois. The gross revenue expenditure required to run public services in Laois on a day to day basis is €78,883 million representing an increase of 0.6% in comparison with 2020.

The following areas of expenditure are of particular note:

- **€125,000** is provided to progress a planned maintenance programme aimed specifically at upgrading heating systems in Council owned houses. This represents a shift in direction towards a more systematic approach to address heating needs and to prepare for a possible future Government led scheme under the Climate Action Plan and the just transition programme for the midlands area.
- An additional sum of **€40,000** to resource work on housing relets.
- A sum of **€210,000** towards the restart of activities at Council owned Leisure Centres
- A provision of **€67,000** towards matched funding for TVRS schemes at Ballyroan, Rathdowney, Durrow, Killeslin, Donaghmore, Clough, Stradbally, Abbeyleigh, Portarlinton and Mountmellick.
- Funding of an additional **€60,000** for footpath improvements,
- Provision of **€120,000** towards matched funding for urban renewal in Portlaoise and Portarlinton,
- Additional funding of **€32,000** towards heritage projects on churches and graveyards, Tinnakill Heritage House and heritage works in Donaghmore and Rathdowney.
- An increase of **€35,000** in respect of preparations for the world ploughing championship, and a paint enhancement schemes for Portarlinton,
- Provision of an **€48,000** in respect of Rathdowney playground,
- A book fund of **€25,000** in respect of the new County Library.
- Provision of an additional sum of **€28,000** for community projects to be decided at Municipal District level,
- Continued support for small businesses through the rates incentive and vacant property incentive schemes.

THE FUNDING OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN LAOIS

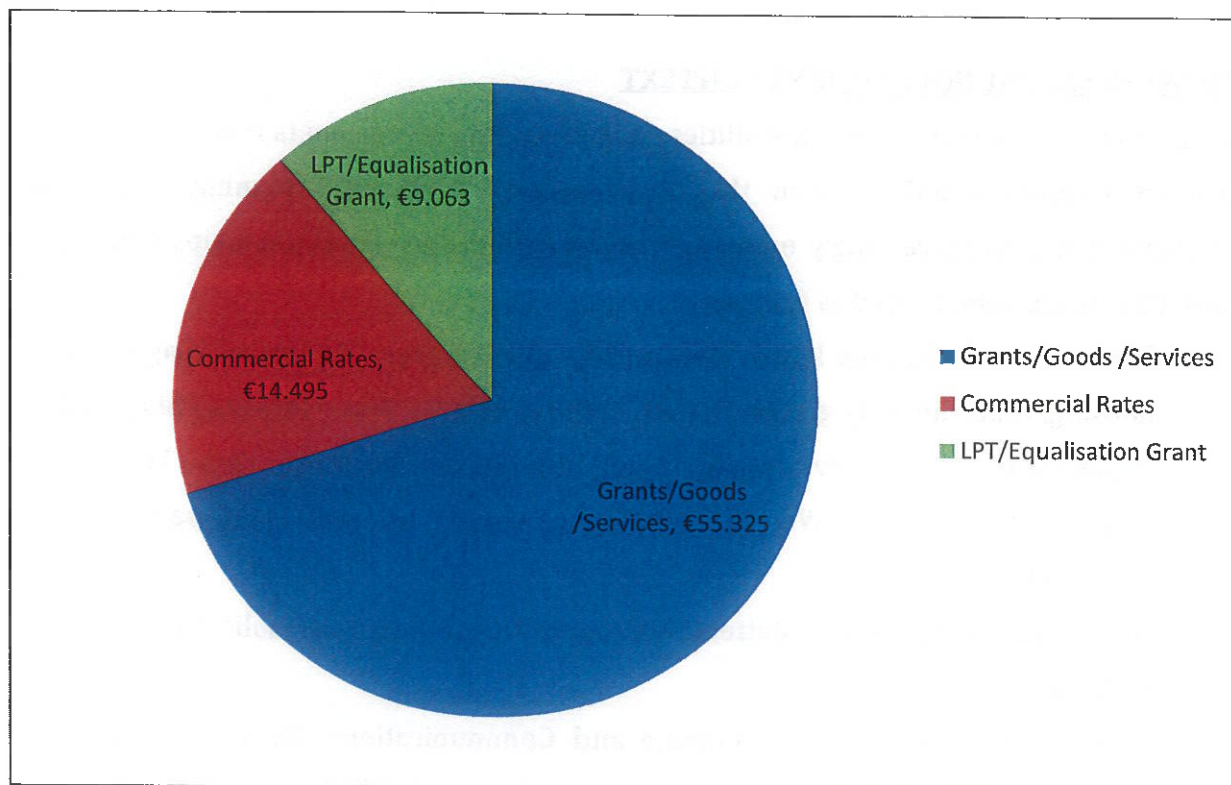
The combination of the retained Local Property Tax and the distribution of the Equalization fund amount to €9,063,079 for Laois County Council in 2021.

Members at municipal level have decided the detail of General Municipal Allocation apportionment in the 2021 municipal works schedule and a sum of €437,000 has been included between the three districts. A sum of €75,000 has been included for specific municipal works (€25k per district), to be decided at each municipal district. Members also have a role in the discretionary maintenance of non- national roads and the amount under this heading will be made known by the Department of Transport and Transport Infrastructure Ireland early next year.

Commercial rates remain the Council's most important source of locally generated income and are budgeted at **€14,495,092** for 2021. The increase in rates income, at €399,716 for 2021, is due mainly to a rates liability to large utilities and the occupation and valuation of new properties in the past 12 months. It is critical to the budget arithmetic for the year ahead and will be of significant support in the provision of essential public services.

Sources of Funding for 2021

The following chart shows the principal sources of funding in the 2021 Budget.



COMMERCIAL RATES AND SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESS

There is no change to the commercial rate for 2021. In an effort to continue this Council's support to small business and in order to incentivise the revitalisation of town centres I am recommending the following to the Elected Members:

- The continuation of the rates payment incentive scheme introduced in 2016 and further agreed in 2018 so that all rate payers, operating viable business during the pandemic, are liable for an annual rate payment of €10,000 or less will receive a benefit of a 4% rebate in 2021 where rate bills are paid promptly and in full. Small business accounts for around 80% of rate payers throughout the county,
- The retention of the incentive scheme, in designated areas, 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 gradual realignment of responsibilities and reporting arrangements relating to certain local government functions from the Department of Housing, Planning, and Local Government is now increasingly evident. 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

Laois County Council has taken these changes in hand seamlessly and the Council has adapted well to the current multi reporting and accounting structure. It must also be borne in mind that in addition to Government Departments, the Council operates service level agreements with:

- Irish Water
- 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, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Sustainable Energy Agency Ireland and the Heritage Council of Ireland. The Council also acts as a Financial Partner to Laois Partnership in relation to the 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 2021 Budget.

There are well documented challenges facing the local and national economy. In less than two month's time Ireland's most important trading partner will leave the European Customs Area and free trade arrangements for something as yet undefined. This major unknown in addition to currency exchange rate movements has the potential to adversely impact some of our key economic clusters in County Laois, namely, the agri-food sector, manufacturing, technology and services.

It is apparent therefore that ongoing policy vigilance and agility is required in the current environment. It is also 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 preparing for a "no deal Brexit" and in equipping business to embrace on line opportunities in the Covid-19 Pandemic world.

BUDGET 2021 ... 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

The provision of new social housing and accommodation remains a top priority for Laois County Council for 2021 and thereafter.

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 five pillars of "Rebuilding Ireland" 2018 to 2021.

The Council's housing programme is on course to deliver over 875 homes in the period 2018 to 2021. This is well in excess of the target of 627 homes set by the Dept of Housing, Planning and Local Government over the same period. The resources available to the Council's housing department have been increased significantly in the past 3 years and the task in hand is to deliver much needed housing through a blend of direct build, leasing, turnkey, Housing Assistance Payment, RAS, Part V and direct acquisitions. The Council continues to make steady progress under this programme and is on course to provide homes to 266 families in the current year (*this figure includes 37 long term leases*) thereby exceeding the target of 76 units set by DHPLG for 2020. We are now the three quarter stage in the Rebuilding Ireland programme 2018 to 2021. It may be beneficial in the context of the consideration of the 2021 Revenue Budget to gauge delivery for each of the past 5 years and to note proposals for delivery of housing and accommodation to the end of 2021.

The table below refers.

Year	No of homes provided
2016	142
2017	206
2018	197
2019	136
2020	266 (est)
Total for last 5 years	947
<i>2021 planned</i>	<i>276</i>
Over period 2016 to 2021	1223

(Home provided in this table through a mix of direct build by LA, voids, relets, turnkey, partV, leases, AHB and acquisitions.)

In addition, the Council will have assisted over 1,350 applicants, cumulatively, to source and secure accommodation through HAP by the end of the year. Accordingly, the Local Authority is on course to provide solutions to the housing needs of **2,297 families** in the 5 year period to the end of 2020.

Members should also note that the Council has used its powers under Compulsory Purchase on 22 occasions to secure abandoned or derelict homes.

The housing authority will continue to operate at a high level of activity in the next twelve months to achieve further progress over the following selected areas:

- Purchase of sites and lands in high demand locations through the use of Compulsory Purchase if and where appropriate.
- Provision of more homes to accommodate smaller family units and single person applicants reflecting the fact that nearly 80% of those on our housing list are in that category
- Acquisition by agreement or through Compulsory purchase of derelict residential units suitable for the delivery of social housing through the Vacant Homes Office

- Work closely with Approved Housing bodies in the delivery of more homes with particular emphasis on the former Convent site Portlaoise, CBS Lands, (both of which have statutory planning consents) O' Moore Place and Knockmay / Hepburn Court.
- Prepare a number of scheme layout plans/master plans for consideration by the members in advance of the statutory public consultation process.

In the area of preventing homelessness, the Council continues to prioritise this matter and expenditure of €801,500 is provided for this purpose in 2021.

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 2021 Revenue Budget provides €2,880,500 for the maintenance and improvement of its approximately 2,300 housing units. This represents an increase of €662,500 over the past 5 years.

CLIMATE ACTION, ENVIRONMENT AND FLOOD RELIEF

The Climate Action Plan 2019 sets out a clear ambition to deliver a step change in this country's greenhouse gas emissions performance over the coming decade so that we can meet our EU targets for 2030 and also be well placed to meet our mid-century decarbonisation objectives. The plan sets out a number of actions to be taken on by the Local Authority sector including leadership in climate action but also uniquely identifies the development of *"Portlaoise as a low carbon town using a suite of initiatives and a range of technologies deployed to serve as a demonstrator for other towns"*.

To date Laois County Council has:

- set up a climate adaptation team
- prepared and approved a Climate Adaptation Plan
- appointed an Energy Performance Officer

- established a low carbon implementation team for Portlaoise and come to the final stages of estimating a carbon footprint for the Town,
- taken the lead role as Midland Energy Agency, and
- prepared local biodiversity plans.

The Council has also performed strongly in the area of public sector energy efficiency achieving a 44% reduction in energy use in 2019 in comparison to 2009 and ahead of the sectoral target of 33% set for 2020.

The establishment of four Climate Action Regional offices in 2018 marked the beginning of a new approach to the preparation of Climate Adaptation and Mitigation planning by Local Authorities in the State.

In this regard it follows that Laois County Council must play its part in achieving statutory targets set under various international agreements, national law and the Climate Action Plan.

A programme of work to be undertaken in the short term and for which a budget of €109,000 is provided includes;

- ❖ The replacement of the existing stock of street lights with efficient LED lighting , at this point nearly 4,500 lights(50% of total) have been replaced in the County,
- ❖ The roll out of additional e-charging points in Portlaoise in collaboration with SEAI
- ❖ The ongoing planning and implementation of flood relief works in Mountmellick, Portarlinton and Clonaslee
- ❖ The planning of a town bus service for Portlaoise using energy efficient transport and the planning of a cycle path network for Portlaoise
- ❖ 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.

River Basin District Management offices were put in place throughout the country in 2018 with additional scientific staff assigned towards meeting the requirements of the Water Framework Directive and achieving good ecological status in our rivers and water bodies. 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 current year. In addition, the Environment Department of LCC will continue to provide advice as to the necessary programme of measures necessary for good nutrient management and environmental protection.

Members should note the retention of €3,000 in the Budget in respect of the Cathaoirleach's Award for good environmental practice in the farming community.

ECONOMIC AND ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT IN LAOIS

Laois County Council carries out important economic development functions in its own right and on behalf of Enterprise Ireland under a service level agreement. The Council will continue to collaborate with IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland in Laois so that the County can realise its full employment and investment potential.

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 foreign direct investment into the County. The operational cost of the LEO continues as a contra item in the 2021 budget and a sum of **€1,190,000** is allocated to support enterprise, training and business innovation in Co Laois

The ongoing development and promotion of the J17 Enterprise Park provides a clear opportunity for Laois to set its own direction for increased employment and economic activity at one of the prime locations on the M7 inter urban motorway.

It is currently predicted that the new Glanbia EU Cheese manufacturing plant will be operational in early 2021 and that the new road and services infrastructure will also be fully in place at the turn of the year. It is expected that during the course of next year there will be further development activity on the site bringing more investment and employment to the area.

When positioned against new development on the IDA site on the Mountrath Road (Greenfield Global) , new digital hubs in Mountmellick (the Webmill), Mountrath (Bloom HQ), Clonminan (Vision 85) and Portarlinton and Portlaoise Enterprise Centres it can be seen that steady progress is being made in the county in attracting talent and economic activity. The marketing and promotion of Laois in collaboration with the newly established Laois Chamber of Commerce, the IDA, EI and the business community will continue to be one of the Council's main goals in 2021. In this regard it is planned to promote remote working in the County as a more sustainable form of work and that the quality of life and environmental gains will be highlighted.

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). It is responsible for the delivery the LEADER programme in Co Laois in partnership with Laois Partnership Company and Laois County Council as financial partner.

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. 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 therefore occupies a significant and pivotal role in economic development locally and must structure itself to respond to new demands on Local Government, 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.

THE REGENERATION OF OUR TOWNS AND VILLAGES

Over the past number of years Laois County Council, with significant support from the Department of Rural and Community Development, has invested heavily in rural regeneration through such programmes as the Town and Village Renewal Scheme (TVRS), CLÁR, ORIS, Tidy Towns Grants, Community Enhancement Scheme, Tourism Grants, Better Energy Communities, Sports and Recreational Grants, Cemetery Grants etc to the order of €4.5 million. In the current year for example Laois County Council has benefited from funding in the amount of €418,540 for works in Abbeyleix, Ballylinan, Durrow, Donaghmore, Cullahill, Mountrath, Mountmellick, Portarlinton, Shanahoe, Stradbally, Portlaoise and Woodenbridge. There is also grant aid for Laois Tourism & Slieve Bloom Mountain signage.

Following Government approval under the Urban Regeneration Development Fund for “The Low Carbon Town” and “The Cultural Quarter” in 2019 works have commenced in Portlaoise on many fronts. In early summer the Council received financial support for smarter travel schemes in both Portarlinton and Portlaoise in amounts of €544,000 and €375,000 respectively. Earlier in 2020 the Council was allocated €674, 437 in respect of Portlaoise destination Town project. All things considered it is clear the Council is in a strong position to proceed with regeneration projects at the above locations and to engage with the local communities through the implementation phases.

In relation to the Rural Regeneration Development Fund members will be aware that the Council is currently preparing applications for assistance for projects in Portarlinton, Borris in Ossory.

Provision has been made in the Revenue Budget for matched funding in respect of the above listed projects. In addition, while the Council awaits the outcome of the applications for RRDF it is considered prudent to provide a matching sum of €3.391 million in the Capital Budget for 2021 to 2023.

While 2020 has been a year of reduced activity at ground level for community groups and volunteers, nonetheless there has been a great deal of work in the various towns and villages in maintaining the existing high standard of place making all so evident in previous years. It is very heartening for example to see the continuous strides being made by the many tidy towns groupings and to note the great achievement by Portlaoise in the IBAL litter league. The 2021 Budget makes provision to support on an ongoing basis this voluntary effort. In addition, the community grant aid scheme, so important to local community groups, tidy towns grants and community projects are to be funded in the amount of €196,000 in 2021.

TOURISM AND HERITAGE

The Tourism Development Plan for Laois was launched in early 2018. One of its main objectives is to develop the visitor attractions of Emo House and Gardens, the Rock of Dunamase and the Portlaoise Fort Protector under the Ireland Ancient East branding. The Council will continue to provide significant support to the Laois Chamber of Commerce/Laois Tourism organization in the county. The 2021 budget provides a sum of €238,000 to assist and support the further development of the tourism product and to improve tourist information facilities and online information for visitors to the County.

Construction work is well advanced the Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail (100km total length) and work has commenced on the Barrow Blueway south of Vicarstown. On completion both will be blue ribbon 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 most of the trail available to visitors by the middle of the 2021. Matched funding of €380,000 is provided in the capital budget for 2021 to 2023.

The Council will continue to support festivals and community events and will work closely with the Laois Leader Partnership to assist community groups to promote festivals and events of a larger scale to attract bigger national attendances.

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 €81,400 is provided in respect of Donaghmore Workhouse, the Fintan Lalor Homestead and heritage work on the County's Churches and Cemeteries.

A sum of €758,000 has been provided in the budget for street cleaning, parks, landscaping and maintenance of open spaces. This is a critically important function for the local Authority particularly as we try to attract more visitors and economic activity to all parts of the county.

CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2021 TO 2023

The elected members are obliged to consider an indicative three year capital programme at the statutory Budget meeting of the Council. The revenue budget 2021 makes provision for repayment of portion of capital deficit balance incurred on a number of capital projects over the past number of years. The total value of capital works included in the revised programme amounts to an estimated €145 million but the delivery of such works is entirely contingent on funding becoming available to the Council through state grants, development levy income and contributions from other sources.

Development Contributions

At this point in 2020 just over €944,000 in development charges has been collected. The scheme was revised and approved by the Members in late 2017 and further extended in October 2019 so that added stimulus could be provided to the private housing construction sector. The workings of the new scheme will be monitored on a continuous basis. It may be necessary to review the Development Levy Scheme in 2021 to take account of its impact on the supply of housing and to consider the recreational and amenity needs of the county.

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 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.

Strategic Policy Committees

The Council's four Strategic Policy committees have addressed policy issues and challenges facing the County under the Chairs of Councillors Thomasina Connell, John King, Paddy Bracken and Conor Bergin 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 are also embarking on a new programme 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 Seamus McDonald, Thomasina Connell and Aisling Moran, 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, environmental improvement and service issues for their localities in 2020.

Conclusion

I wish to thank all the members of the Council, Cathaoirleach Councillor Catherine Fitzgerald and her predecessor Councillor Willie Aird for their continuing work in advancing the development and interests of the County.

The members through their actions have ensured that significant positive development will take place in the county and that every community in Laois will further benefit in the period ahead.

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 2020 and to thank them for their outstanding public service to the people of Laois. I also wish to remember all those associated with the Council who have sadly passed away in the last year.

In this exceptional year for the whole country and our local community I wish to convey my compliments to the many staff of this Council who have acted as first responders during the pandemic. I especially wish to mention all those in our community who have given voluntary service in difficult times and to congratulate our own staff who continue to provide assistance and support to the more vulnerable in our community through the Community Helpline and the Community Forum framework.

I wish to record my particular appreciation to Gerry Murphy, Head of Finance, Donal Brennan, Simon Walton, Joe Delaney, Directors of Services for their work in preparing the 2021 Budget and for their unstinting commitment and hard work over the past year. I wish to acknowledge the ongoing work and management of the MYPAY shared service centre under John Forde, Director of Services. I also wish to acknowledge the work of all the staff of Laois County Council over the past twelve months in a year that has presented so many challenges in a personal and workplace context.

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 2021.

Mise le Meas,



John Mulholland
Chief Executive

5th November 2020

SERVICE DIVISION – HOUSING, REGENERATION & PLANNING

Introduction

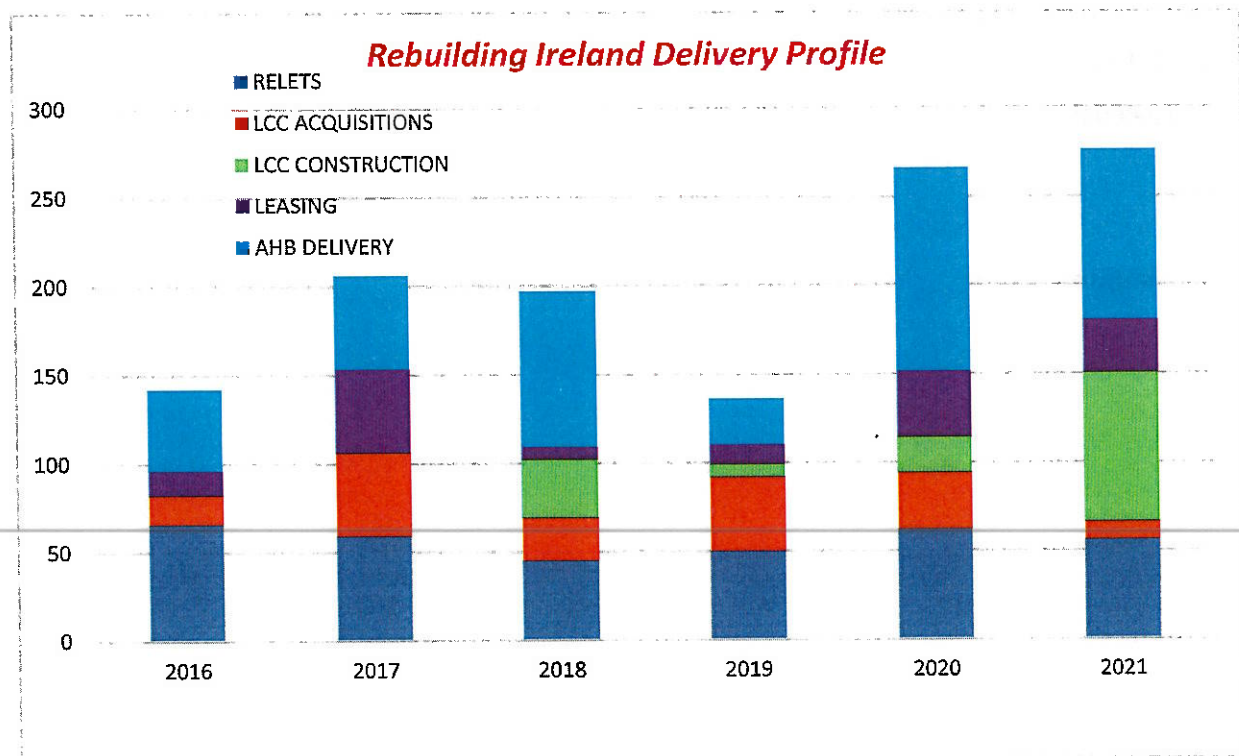
This Directorate's primary functions are:

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

Housing

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 5 years.

Figure 1



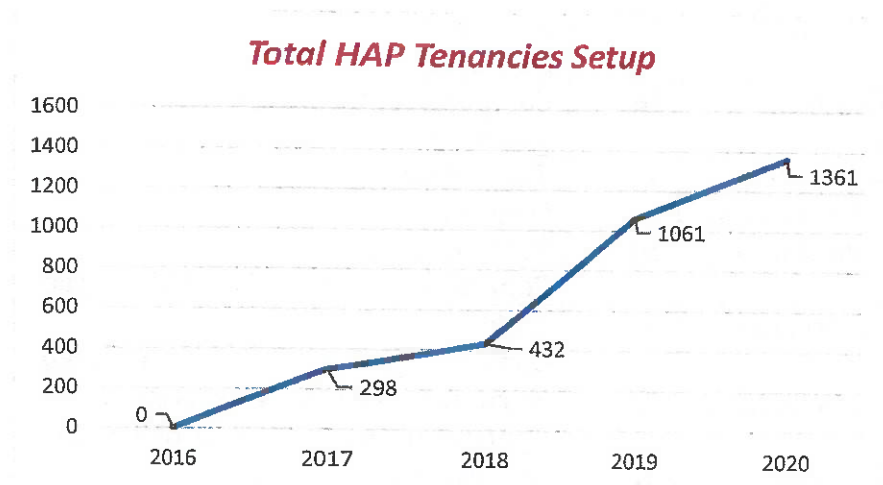


Figure 2: Housing Assistance Payment Tenancies Setup in Co. Laois

Figure 2 above demonstrates the progress in the creation of tenancies under the Housing Assistance Payment programme.

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
The Orchard, Stradbally	6	Direct Build. Delivered.
Ballymorris, Portarlinton	22	Direct Build. Contractor on site
54 A&B, Hillview, Portlaoise	2	Direct Build. Contractor on site
Shannon Street, Mountrath	6	Direct Build. Contractor on site
Moore Street, Rathdowney	6	Direct Build. Contractor on site
Glenn na Glaise, Ballyraon	10	Direct Build. Contractor on site
Pattison Estate, Mountmellick	10	Direct Build. Contractor on site
Sean Doire, Durrow	22	Direct Build. Contractor due on site in November 2020
Coolore, Ballybrittas	1	Direct Build. Contractor due on site in November 2020
Borris-In-Ossary	11	Turnkey Contractor on site

Main Street, Stradbally	16	North & East Housing Association. Delivered
The Glen, Kilnacourt, Portarlington	18	Co-operative Housing Ireland Delivered
Knockmay Mews, Old Knockmay Rd, Portlaoise	3	Tuath Housing Association Delivered
Borris Road, Portlaoise	36	Tuath Housing Association Contractor on site. 17 of 36 delivered
Bellingham, Portlaoise	30	Cluid Contractor on site. 15 of 30 delivered
Doirin Alainn, Ballylinan	12	North & East Housing Association Contractor on site. 6 of 12 delivered.
Ballickmoyler Road, Graiguecullen	20	Co-operative Housing Ireland Contractor on site.
Lake Drive, Kilminchy, Portlaoise	10	Co-operative Housing Association Contractor on site.
Holdbrook, Portlaoise	10	Cluid Housing Association Contractor on site.
The Glen, Kilnacourt, Portarlington (Phase 2)	18	Co-operative Housing Ireland Contractor on site.
Wilton Lawns, Portarlington	2	Respond Housing Association Contractor on site.

Table 1: Social & Voluntary Housing Sites currently under construction in Co. Laois

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 housing units in accordance with the 2017 and 2019 regulations is a core objective of this Council. To date in 2020 (up to 31/10/20), 2985 repair requests have been requested of the Council (Figure 3) and 2722 have been completed.

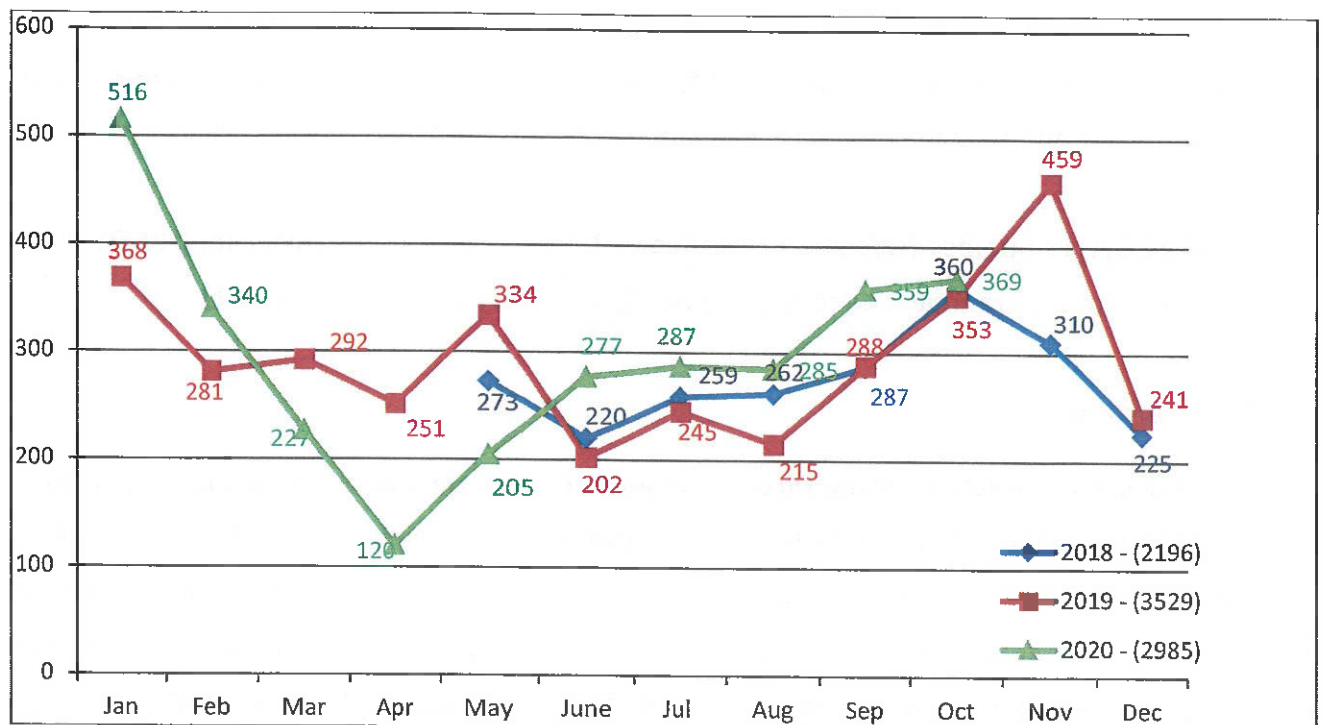


Figure 3: Completed repairs to Laois County Council housing units.

The proposed budget includes an allocation towards a planned maintenance programme with an emphasis on heating. This provides the seed funding to enable the Council progress to the first stage of surveying and assessment.

Separately under Just Transition, inspections have commenced on 160 houses as part of the energy retrofit programme. These will move to construction stage in 2021.

In other areas of housing, 17 Rebuilding Ireland Home Loans and nearly 200 housing grants have been approved. The Council will progress in quarter 1 of 2021 grants for local authority tenants that have not been funded under the 2020 allocation.

The Housing Assessment staff continue to access housing applications in accordance with the 2011 regulations in an efficient and effective manner. There are currently 1771 approved applicants on the Council's housing list but this includes 968 accommodated through the Housing Assistance Programme (HAP)

The number of homeless presentations has increased in 2020 and this remains a very challenging area. However, Laois County Council is responding to this challenge and currently our numbers in emergency accommodation are at their lowest level in 2020.

21 of 22 Syrian families have been resettled in Laois as part of the Government's Refugee Resettlement programme. The remaining family will be resettled in early 2021.

Regeneration

This is a critical function for the Directorate and 2020 marked an important milestone with the formal planning approval for the redevelopment of Convent and CBS sites in Portlaoise. These developments will yield almost 120 housing units between them but will also play an important role in supporting the vitality of our town centre. Construction will commence in 2021. It is the objective of this service that Doran's Field and Hepburn Court also progress through the formal planning stage in 2021. The Council will in 2021 acquire further sites with a view to their regeneration.

Furthermore, identified areas of land have now been confirmed by An Bord Pleanála under the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act as vacant sites. Levies will be applied in 2021.

The Council has been active in addressing the effects of vacant and underutilised/derelict houses/sites through its derelict site and compulsory acquisition powers. This coordinated action across the Directorate will be strengthened in 2021.

Planning

The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern Midlands Regional Assembly region was adopted in June 2019. Following on from this the County Development Plan for County Laois commenced its review process in 2020 and will be continued through 2021 for adoption by the Council. Strategies which are being reviewed and prepared as part of the County Development Plan process include: -

- Strategic Environmental Assessment / Appropriate Assessment/ Strategic Flood Risk Assessment;
- Housing Strategy;

It is proposed to prepare a Local Authority Renewable Energy Strategy in 2021 to identify the needs of the county in terms of Climate Action measures.

Planning is also leading with the support of external consultants the development of the following urban masterplans:

- Tyrrells Land Portlaoise
- Portarlinton Regeneration Strategy

It is expected that 3 estates will have been taken in charge by the end of 2020 and it is anticipated that the Council will bring forward further estates in 2021 for taking in charge. A taking in charge policy is currently being prepared by the Housing Regeneration and Planning Strategic Policy Committee.

While the overall number of planning applications has reduced slightly in 2020, the service has successfully adapted to challenges posed by the pandemic. It is therefore well placed to move to a digital service in 2021 and 2022 in line with the Council's recently adopted Digital Strategy.

The Heritage service had a successful year in 2020 and planned projects for 2021 are the Heritage Awareness programme (including Heritage Week and Science week events), phase II of a book on the Rock of Dunamase and developing the new Laois Heritage Plan.

The proposed budget provides for the following:

- Preparation of a New Heritage Plan for the period 2020-2025
- Further works with Communities with respect to local graveyards
- Works on the Borris in Ossory Courthouse
- Works on the Fintan Lalor Homestead

- 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

The Digital Strategy was adopted by Council in October. Planning have as part of the Budget, included a number of actions for implementation including the roll out of Broadband Connection Points in various locations throughout the county and the development of Free Wifi Zones in Urban areas in conjunction with the European WIFI4EU programme. Other actions include the aforementioned digital planning service, public awareness, skills development , etc also will be pursued.

SERVICE DIVISION – ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM SUPPORT

Economic Development

The Business Support Unit/Local Enterprise Office is currently working on the following:-

- Facade Enhancement Scheme in Portarlington
- Business Incentive Scheme
- Shopfront Grant Scheme
- Ongoing marketing of Laois through the Connect2laois Website.
- Ongoing work with Portlaoise/Stradbally Farmers Markets
- Ongoing work with Downtown Portlaoise through Portlaoise Town Team
- Ongoing Marketing of Junction 17 National Enterprise Park
- Ongoing collaboration with Enterprise Centres in the County
- Ongoing collaboration with Laois TASTE to develop the food & drink sector in Co. Laois.
- Ongoing Collaboration with Laois Chamber
- Ongoing engagement with companies in relation to Brexit

Highlights to date include:

- €333,390 approved in grant aid with potential to create 55 new jobs
- 130 Trading Online Vouchers approved to the value of €304,417
- 183 Business Continuity Vouchers approved to the value of €241,497
- €507,159 paid out in financial support to-date
- 57 training courses delivered with 907 participants
- Over 300 mentoring sessions assigned to date
- 6 companies participating in the Lean for Micro Programme

- Owner Managers from 10 Laois Companies taking part in Management Development Programmes
- Over 200 one-to-one business advice sessions delivered
- 8 Laois Schools participating in the Student Enterprise Awards
- Facilitation of Midlands Food Strategy under the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan
- Facilitation of Midlands Food & Drink Programme (20 companies participating from the Region)
- Over 100 companies availed of Brexit supports

**SERVICE DIVISION – CLIMATE & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, HUMAN RESOURCES,
CORPORATE AFFAIRS**

Community Development

With the onset of Covid-19 restrictions this year Laois County Council set up a Community Call Helpline and a Community Response Forum to provide help to those who need it. It is appropriate to acknowledge the contributions of partner bodies, sporting organisations and volunteer groups who contributed so much to the community response to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 restrictions.

The Laois Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) distributed a Covid-19 emergency grant fund of €66,897 in 76 grant payments to a range of voluntary and community groups involved in local response measures.

In addition, the LCDC distributed €58,297 to 37 groups under the Community Enhancement Programme (CEP) as well as €128,195 to 20 groups under the CEP Community Centres and Buildings Scheme.

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

The Committee also continues to monitor the community element of the Local Economic and Community Plan.

Under the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme, Laois LCDC monitored the implementation of actions in the 2020 Annual Plan with a budget of €604,226.

Under the LEADER Programme, Laois LCDC (operating as the Local Action Group) has to date approved 49 project applications this year to a value of € 3,460,160.78

This year has proved the importance and value of Laois PPN. Laois PPN were involved in the Laois Community Response Forum creating an Interactive Map, available on the Laois PPN Website, of Community Groups offering supports during COVID-19 to vulnerable persons in the County. There are currently 98 groups offering support with a Community Group available in every locality throughout the County. The number of registered PPN groups has once again grown. There are currently 581 groups registered. This network

remains extremely valuable in disseminating information to communities and receiving feedback from those communities. Laois PPN also organised several online training and small outdoor events. These were very popular with member groups and received positive media coverage which promoted and highlighted the work of Laois PPN.

Under the Town & Village Renewal Scheme (TVRS) a new stream, 'Accelerated Measures' was announced in response to Covid-19; Approval was secured for 14 projects countywide. A further nine Applications are still under consideration by the DRCD under TVRS Main Scheme 2020. We await a decision on these.

A Work Plan for 2020-21 was agreed by the Age Friendly Alliance. This plan identified 5 priority areas for the Age Friendly Programme to focus on. The new Laois Age Friendly website was launched in June this year. The challenges faced by the current pandemic has impacted this programme, but the Alliance remain positive; one initiative jointly with Laois, Offaly and Westmeath Age Friendly Programmes is a radio slot on Midlands 103 called 'Chatters and Matters'. Activator Poles were purchased for distribution to older people that have an interest in the classes being provided by Laois Local Sports Partnership. This will allow people to continue to reap the benefits of this activity in their own time.

Coordinated by Foroige, in association with Laois County Council, the members of Laois Comhairle na nÓg remained active in 2020 and were involved in consultations with the Planning Section, and in relation to Broadband, Climate Change, and Cycling Project.

Laois County Council supported one entry -Mountmellick- in the 2020 IPB All-Island Pride of Place competition. Judging took place in August and results will be announced in November.

Laois Connects

Laois Connects Week 2020 which ran from the 10th - 17th October, was coordinated by the Council and revolved around World Mental Health Day. There was a mix of online and face to face events organised, both indoor and some outdoor. While unfortunately, some of these events were impacted by Governments Level 3 restrictions, nevertheless an eight day calendar of 43 events was successfully delivered to the public. Financial assistance was also made available to the ten secondary schools in Laois to organise a Mental Health focused project during this week. This included speakers from Teac Tom and initiatives that involved 'random acts of kindness' activities.

Healthy Ireland

The Healthy Ireland Fund (Round 3) of €246,000 is a two-year programme running from June 2019-June 2021, with the Council working with agency partners to implement health and well-being initiatives in the county.

This year has been a challenging year for all groups and organisations involved in the delivery of the Healthy Ireland programme.

The project partners are Laois Sports Partnership, Laois Partnership Company, Sport and Recreation Office LCC, and Youth Work Ireland Laois. In addition, a Community Mental Health Small Grants Scheme of €30,000 is currently being administered via the LCDC.

The "Skills at Work" Programme with Portlaoise College students took place during 2019/2020 and was completed just prior the Covid-19 lockdown. Sessions in the Skills @ Work programme involved a site visit to the Fire Station, CV writing skills, mock interviews, and concluded with class presentations.

An online Laois Community and Voluntary Awards Ceremony will take place later this year, acknowledging the significant achievements of Community and Voluntary organisations throughout 2020.

As part of its response to Covid-19 Laois County Council launched the Laois Youth Volunteers and Youth Creatives in association with LOETB and Laois Partnership to provide additional volunteering outlets for young adults during summer 2020.

The Council will also be taking a significant role in the Governments "Keep Well" campaign over Winter 2020 and Spring 2021 utilising initiatives based on Creative Ireland, Healthy Ireland, Get Active campaigns and our Library services. This campaign is aimed at showing people of all ages how we can mind our own physical and mental health and wellbeing by adding healthy and helpful habits to our daily and weekly routines. It will provide guidelines, information, and tips on how we can make a plan to do things that are good for us every day such as:

- Keeping active and being outdoors - even during the winter, it is important to help physical and mental health and wellbeing.
- Staying connected - staying connected with people and addressing isolation as person-to-person connection is important to our wellbeing
- Managing your mood – equipping people with information on where to go if they need support
- Eating well - by nourishing your body and mind we can positively impact our physical and mental wellbeing
- Switching off and being creative - switching off and being creative or learning something new, getting back to nature and finding ways to relax can help our general wellbeing.

ARTS

From mid- March onwards, many of arts activities and events that the arts office had planned for 2020 were migrated online. While unfortunately, some such as the Bealtaine festival, had to be cancelled, nevertheless many other activities were able to proceed online; some of these events are outlined below.

Weekly youth theatre workshops continued online, via Zoom. Youth theatre members had an opportunity to participate in the devised online Creative Ireland sponsored Cruinnú na n-Óg, entitled A Sense of Place, that was broadcast on the Creative Ireland Laois and

national YouTube channel. In addition, members of Laois Youth Theatre participated, via Zoom, in the Kilkenny Drama Festival in early July.

Both the artists-in-schools and the Summer Series of art workshops were curtailed due to Covid-19 restrictions. However, with the support of Dunamaise Arts Centre, the arts office worked with portraiture artist, Blaise Smith RHA, in transferring his portraiture and still life classes online. This highly successful event was oversubscribed. Following on from this Blaise Smith painted portraits of two local Laois personalities, on the Dunamaise arts centre stage, and were live streamed for Culture Night.

During 2020 there continued to be utilisation of the Arthouse studios. Members of the recently formed Laois Artists collective arranged to 'meet' online, working diligently to produce a community engagement programme with the people of Stradbally for Culture Night.

Culture Night Laois took place on 18th September with a blend of live events and online events taking place throughout the county. One of many highlights was the projected screening of a short animated film, with wonderful sound track at Fitzmaurice Place Plaza, Portlaoise – 'In celebration of Helen Roe'; the work of artist Caroline Conway, that gave a fascinating insight into the life and work of Mountrath born, Helen Roe. At the Dunamaise Arts Centre, limited visitors enjoyed an exhibition entitled 'Children of the Free State' by Annie Holland and Live Portrait Painting with Blaise Smith; and in Mountmellick an outdoor performance by CCE Mountmellick took place on the steps of the Art Centre, Mountmellick. Multiple online events complemented the Culture Night programme.

Laois County Council partnered with local authority arts offices, in Offaly and Westmeath, on a Midland-wide research project investigating the range of arts and health activity taking place across the region (MAHAM). The research, funded by the Arts Council's Invitation to Collaboration scheme, is the first phase of an initiative to develop a more comprehensive and joined - up strategy for arts and health within the Midland region.

The Arts Office continues to support and promote the work of Laois School of Music (LSM) and Music Generation Laois (MGL) throughout 2020. Now under the management of LOETB, the Arts Office continues to collaborate with LSM and MGL to assist and work to promote all their activities and events online and otherwise.

Recreation, Play and Sport

Portlaoise and Portarlinton Leisure Centres continued to deliver an excellent service to the people of Laois until COVID-19 restrictions required a closure of both facilities in March 2020. Unfortunately, with limited cash reserves the company operating Portlaoise Leisure Centre experienced significant financial difficulties which resulted in the company going into voluntary liquidation in June 2020 and the building was handed back to Laois County Council. Significant upgrading works are currently being carried out on the building and it is hoped that the centre will be ready for re-opening in early 2021. Funding of €300,000 has been approved under Large Scale Sporting Infrastructure Programme for pool refurbishment works at Portarlinton Leisure Centre and it is anticipated that these works will commence in 2021. A new management structure leading to greater efficiencies and benefits to the users is proposed for both leisure centres, which would see both centres managed by a single management company in 2021. The Members will note that a sum has been included within the budget to assist the launch of the revised entity which it is proposed to manage the two leisure centres.

Twenty play facilities continue to be managed and maintained by Laois County Council. Accessibility and biodiversity upgrades are currently underway at playgrounds in Stradbally, Mountrath and Portlaoise and further upgrades are planned for Rathdowney Playground in spring of 2021, part-funded by a grant from Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Laois County Council are continuing to assist community groups in Borris-in-Ossory and Ballinakill to support the development of new play areas. Additionally, both Portlaoise and Portarlinton Parks retained their Green Flag Awards in August 2020.

Town and Village renewal projects were recently completed including the ongoing development of the People's Park Campus, Portarlinton, installation of lighting at St Fergal's Walking Track, Rathdowney and the construction of an amenity area and Slí na Sláinte in Borris-in-Ossory.

Under CLÁR 2020 Measure 2, funding was awarded in November 2020 to SVT Activity & Wellness Hub and Woodenbridge Paddlers to develop amenity areas adjacent to the Barrow and Erkina Blueways.

Due to COVID-19 programmes promoting physical activity through recreation were significantly curtailed by restrictions; however, working with Laois Partnership, the Sport & Leisure Section delivered over 400 Play, Grow & Create boxes to children in key target areas throughout county Laois, in line with the government's Let's Play Ireland initiative. Additionally, five events were delivered outdoors to celebrate National Play Day in July 2020. The delivery of National Bike Week was a significant challenge in 2020, however, over 1200 people took part in cycling events organised by community groups in September 2020.

Looking forward to 2021, while delivering on recreation, play and sporting programmes we will continue to focus on groups with lower participation levels in line with Laois County Council's Recreation Play and Sports Strategy 2018-2022, in addition to continuing to source funding for ongoing development of recreation, play and sport infrastructure in County Laois.

Climate

This year the Council awarded an innovative contract to measure the Carbon Footprint of Portlaoise town; work is well advanced

Human Resources

The level of recruitment activity during the year was significantly affected by Covid-19 although vacancies continued to arise from retirements, resignations and some centrally funded positions.

23 recruitment competitions have been held year to date in 2020. This resulted in a total of 184 applications received, with 172 candidates to date being called to interview (including shortlisting interviews). Further recruitment will continue to year end as required.

A total of 63 staff appointments have been made to date in 2020

Corporate Services

Receptions

The Members of Laois County Council accorded Receptions to the following during 2020:

Civic Receptions

16th January 2020 – Scoil Chríost Rí

5th February 2020 – Mr. Shane Ryan

Annual Service Delivery Plan

The Annual Service Delivery Plan for 2019 was adopted by the Members at their meeting held on the 27th January 2020. Work will commence on preparing the 2021 Plan in the coming weeks.

Library Services

The Library Service continues to play a pivotal role for all communities in Co. Laois. They offer an efficient frontline service for all members providing them with access to books, media, online services and internet/wi-fi.

Since March 2020 Library Services have adapted to restriction arising from Covid-19 and continue to operate with our online Library services supported by staff on a remote basis.

The Library Service now is supporting the public to access all of our online material. This includes -E-books, online newspapers, online magazines and language learning . The overall usage has seen increases with now over 1500 new remote users during this period and an increase of over 500% for this period.

Libraries re-opened to the public with reduced services from June –October 2020 offering a Contact and Collect Service with limited browsing in all service points.

Library staff have moved all of events and activities to an online programme- producing live videos and content featuring story time and crafts for younger users, literature and local history talks.

The Library continues to promote wellbeing, culture and positive mental health throughout all of our social media posting sharing links to HSE, Healthy Ireland, Culture, Heritage and Biodiversity and other local pages. On Facebook we have had an ongoing audience reach for our posts of 40,000 for the period of COVID-19.

The Library Service has assisted the Community Response in facilitating book delivery to those persons who are cocooning due to COVID-19. in partnership with Laois Volunteer and Laois Partnership.

Summer Reading Challenge-Summer Stars

Despite the Covid-19 restrictions we once again held the Summer Stars Reading Challenge this year. This year's programme offered an online offering with selected online books for young readers, quizzes, book readings and competitions. Laois Libraries designed and coordinated packs of Summer Reading books and craft materials for our young readers that could be collected in branch during the summer months . In Laois over 430 children took part in the online reading challenge for 2020 and over 400 children were awarded their Reading Certificate in September 2020.

Sensory Libraries

Libraries are continuing with the introduction of sensory friendly library services co funded by the Dormant Accounts Fund.

This includes as sensory room and sensory garden space in Mountmellick library, sensory toys collections in Portarlinton, and Mountmellick libraries which can be borrowed. New interactive/magic tables have been purchased for Abbeyleix, Mountmellick and Portarlinton Libraries which can be used by children/adults with additional sensory needs.

Historian in Residence

Laois County library sections are continuing with the Historian in residence scheme for 2020. Funded by Decade of Centenaries/Commemorations funding the residency will continue to focus on the role of Laois women during this time. The women who have been identified for further research with a planned publication are Lucy Franks, Ann Jellico and Helen Roe

Capital Development

Work continues on the construction of the new Portlaoise Library. The new library will provide over 1500square meters of public space and will include children's library, adult and local history sections, study areas, community meeting spaces, digital suite and exhibition space.

Laois County Library were approved a grant of €100,000 towards repairing the roof of Rathdowney library as part of a recent national Small scale Capital call for grants programme funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development. A contractor is now due for appointment following a procurement competition.

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

Roads/Transportation

Local expenditure funds allocated to Roads and Transportation are in line with 2020 levels.

An income reduction of €200,000 for car parking income is also provided in circumstances indicative of town centre parking patterns over recent months, such parking patterns considered likely to continue into 2021.

The Roadworks Programme for 2021 will be presented to Elected Members in March 2021 following notification of Department of Transport and Transport Infrastructure Ireland grants.

Additionally, various roads/transportation related projects throughout County Laois, notified to Laois County Council further to the July 2019 Covid-19 Stimulus Package, including Active Travel Measures, Accelerated Measures for Town and Village Renewal and Climate Change Adaptation Measures will be delivered in Q1 2021.

Schemes listed in the 2020 Roadworks Programme, requiring design and/or planning and procurement will carry forward funding allocations to 2021 and include;

- N80 JFL Avenue to Ballymacken Road Reconstruction Scheme €3.4 million
- N77 Abbeyleix Road Road Enhancement Scheme €900,000

Public lighting provision is similar to recent years and covers maintenance and energy supply costs to the ever expanding network of public lights. Spare parts for much of the existing network will no longer be available in the short term and Laois County Council will continue with the ongoing LED retrofit in 2021.

In 2020 Elected Members approved a multi annual approach to river drainage maintenance and the first phase of works have been undertaken. Environmental and planning consents now being developed with a view to the 2021 Programme of Works. In 2020 a sum of €409,000 was provided for river drainage maintenance including a €51,000 grant from the OPW. For 2020 it is proposed to provide €358,000 commensurate with local provision in 2020.

In pursuit of a more sustainable transport system for County Laois, Laois County Council will continue to engage with state bodies such as the National Transport Authority and Irish Rail with a view to supporting and enabling a more sustainable transport network across the County and, in 2020, there will be progress as regards;

- Installation of Electric Vehicle charging points,
- Triogue Blueway,
- Enhancements to Cycling Infrastructure,
- Portlaoise Town Bus Service

Environment

As part of the 2020 Revenue Budget Report Elected Members were advised that, following the expiration of service contracts for the operation of both the Portlaoise and Portarlinton Civic Amenity Sites, tenders for the operation of both facilities would be required during 2020.

In Q1 2020 Laois County Council advertised a tender for the operation of both Civic Amenity Sites. One tender was received and the annual cost to Laois County Council for the operation of the Civic Amenity Sites further to that tender process was;

- €240,000 per annum for Portlaoise (service provider retains gate fees)
- €60,000 per annum for Portarlinton (service provider retains gate fees)

No contracts were signed subsequent to the tender process.

Notice was served on Laois County Council that the current operator would cease operating the Portlaoise CAS on Saturday 8th August 2020.

Since Monday 10th August 2020 Laois County Council has operated the Portlaoise Civic Amenity Site directly and the 2021 Budget includes provision for the continued operation of that Site with the following 2021 budget provisions;

- 2021 Portlaoise CAS Expenditure €233,000
- 2021 Portlaoise CAS Income €100,000

Income figures above are based on a revised Schedule of Gate Fees for the Portlaoise Civic Amenity Site. There are currently 1250 vehicles visiting the Portlaoise CAS per month, 1090 (87%) of which are cars. The revised gate fees reflect;

- the polluter pays principle (i.e. a commercial van towing a trailer incurring the same charge as a small family car is a totally unsustainable charging structure),
- charges in similar CASs throughout the Region (including Portarlington CAS),
- a depressed market for recyclables,
- increased waste storage, handing, management and disposal costs,
- regularisation of other charges at Portlaoise CAS.

The 2020 Revenue Budget also includes provision of €76,000 for the day to day operation of the Portarlington Civic Amenity Site. Laois County Council is under notice that the existing operator will cease day to day management of the Site on 31st December. A review of the Portarlington CAS will be presented to Laois County Council in Q1/Q2 2020.

Laois County Council operates **43 Bring Bank Centres** for the recycling of glass, metal, food and drink packaging. These Centres are free to use and encourage sustainable waste management and disposal practices. This Budget includes additional expenditure of €12,000 for the servicing of the Bring Centres noting that the existing service contract has expired together with the fact that Covid-19 has brought about an upsurge in the use of Bring Bank Centres.

This budget also supports the investigation and resolution of multiple environmental complaints and the provision of support to a large range of community groups whose efforts support ongoing enhancements throughout County Laois.

The **Recommended Minimum Criteria for Environmental Inspections** provides the backdrop against which Laois County Council agrees an annual schedule of environmental audits, inspections and monitoring with the Environmental Protection Agency. The Plan provides for inspections of/under;

- Waste Management Facilities,
- Section 4 Discharge Licences to Waters,
- Domestic Waste Water Treatment Systems,
- River Catchments under the Water Framework Directive (WFD),
- Waste Management (Storage, Presentation and Segregation of Household and Commercial Waste) Bye Laws 2018 seeking to ensure that domestic waste is retained, presented and collected in an authorised and legitimate manner,
- Various other inspections under Paints, Varnishes, Vehicle, Refinishing Products, Organic Solvents and Air Pollution Regulations.

Preparations are underway for the next River Basin Management Plan 2022-2027. Laois County Council in consultation with the Local Authorities Waters Programme have identified various catchments as Prioritised Areas for Action to either improve or protect the quality of watercourses. In parallel the National Federation of Group Water Schemes has agreed to lead other Areas for Action including the Owveg River (Attanagh GWS and Ballypickas GWS) and the Dunrally Stream (The Heath GWS). Funds are provided in the 2020 Budget to enable Laois County Council to divert appropriate resources to the support the objectives of the Water Framework Directive.

Water Services

Laois County Council provides public water and wastewater services, in collaboration with Irish Water who, since 2013, are the statutory Water Services Authority. These services are provided via an Irish Water/LCC Service Level Agreement (SLA) and an agreed Annual Service Plan (ASP). In line with the SLA/ASP annual costs incurred by Laois County Council are recouped by the Council from Irish Water.

Resilience issues associated with the Portlaoise and Portarlinton water supplies are the subject of ongoing dialogue between Laois County Council and Irish Water. Proposals are under development that, subject to funding from Irish Water, will enhance resilience in the two supplies and enable an effective borehole maintenance programme to be put in place.

Laois County Council is the statutory authority overseeing Water Services Group Schemes, Small Private Supplies and 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 2021 retains 2020 funding levels for the Rural Water Programme.

Fire and Emergency Services

Fire & Emergency Services represents a very substantial service area for Laois County Council. The 2021 Budget outlines a net spend on day to day operations in the sum of €3.5 million.

The service is provided across 8 Fire Stations serving a growing population. In line with increasing call outs this Budget provides €2.25 for mobilisation costs incurred in response to Fire & Emergency events, an increase of €150,000 by comparison to 2020.

Notwithstanding interim interruptions related to Covid-19, Fire-Fighter training is continuously being enhanced in line with more stringent fire-fighter safety standards. A sum of €350,000 is provided for training in 2021.

In its role as a Principal Responder to Major Emergency Events this budget makes provision (€24,000) for the upgrading of Major Emergency Management facilities in County Hall which, in parallel, will also serve to support effective responses to severe weather events.

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 and this has been very much to the forefront over the course of 2020. Strategically, taking account of logistical and operational requirements, a centrally located facility in Portlaoise will enable Laois Civil Defence to locate all assets in one centrally located facility and to thereby deliver consistent, centralised training, to expand recruitment and deliver an enhanced service to the people of County Laois. Significant advances have been made in this regard in 2020 and it is hoped to bring forward specific proposals for a Portlaoise based Civil Defence HQ over the course of 2021.